

The Urn

Dracula of the Apes, #1

by G. Wells Taylor, 1962–

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This trilogy is dedicated to the authors
of the classic novels that inspired its creation.

Bram Stoker — Dracula
&
Edgar Rice Burroughs — Tarzan of the Apes

Preface

to the Journal of the Gypsy Horvat:

I am growing accustomed to the nauseating pitch of this ship upon the sea, and while it can distract me still, focusing on this journal gives me some respite.

I have finally found a place where I might take a moment to record the events that brought me to these bitter straits, and do so hoping that my master's soul might forgive me this betrayal of confidence. If there were any chance that I might find my way back to civilization I would not speak, but I have lost all hope for any safe return.

My journey began on that horrible night.

The horsemen had chased my master's leiter-wagon close to the road near the very castle walls, and there set upon him and his guard. The swords and knives of my comrades were no match for the repeating rifles that flashed in the hands of their foes.

It was over so quickly, and yet the final moments were drawn out. As the only living witness and that one commanded to silence, I felt like I was bleeding to death, and then...

Overcome with fear of the descending night, perhaps with the realization of what they had done; the westerners rushed through their infernal business, throwing holy wafers upon my dear master's remains to defile them.

They packed up their dead comrade, alighted upon nervous mounts and raced for the Borgo Pass with plans, no doubt, to pursue the sun into the west.

The foreign invaders had failed to see me in my hiding place above the road as they battled my Gypsy brothers. I had climbed the cliffs that girded the castle and watched from a rocky shelf as was my duty—as I had been commanded.

I cursed these interlopers for their treachery, and prayed that the time might come when my master could face them on his own terms.

In the meantime, I hoped they would enjoy the honor guard of wolves that howled in the woods to every side; the beasts eager to escort these bloody villains from this scene of slaughter. Should any of the English devils survive their retreat, they would rue the day they'd ever set foot in Transylvania.

And yet that hope was like the curved blade of a Cossack's saber and bore two sharp edges for only when the murderers had fled could I set my master's plans into action, and then such dangerous travel would I also have to endure for a time.

I would steal away to allies in the south, bearing what was left of the master as was written in his book. A long and dangerous journey awaited me, but I thrilled to contemplate its great design for in what better place to bring about his resurrection than on the Dark Continent?

Chapter 1

FROM THE GYPSY HORVAT'S JOURNAL

6th November, 1893. The Castle

The devils! They have done it. I was breathless for a fleeting moment, unable to comprehend the act, able only to watch. Aghast—I was pushed beyond feeling.

It was unthinkable, truly; it had seemed impossible until the sharp knives struck home and slashed his noble flesh.

Shock had stayed my hand in part.

But there it was. Done.

My master was dead. Dark blood described his final moments of agony in the snow, but nowhere did the scarlet scrawl my name.

A name. The name of one who had loved him so. One who would have given his life for the slightest acknowledgment.

That name did not appear there in the crimson carnage upon the snowy road.

And little wonder.

For I had watched. That was what had stricken me then, and struck me now—paralyzed. But as I had watched, I was torn, destroyed by my need to act but constrained to inaction. There had only been suffering for I had been commanded to wait. That was my duty! But duty had never been so strained.

I would have gladly given up all of my life in action, but my orders had been clear. I was to be the one step past the last line of defense. And so, here I stood, heartbroken, and despairing—waiting.

In me, in me alone, Master—hope!

At first, I had feared the worst as the murderous foreigners had spoken of fire and total cleansing. Part of my training involved education in several

languages with English but one among them, so I was able to understand their terrible intent. However, the westerners were eager to avoid the reprisals that would surely come after my brethren had regrouped, and so after some discussion about my master's dear remains, I breathed a sigh of relief when the oldest of their number spoke in halting English.

On he went about the most fine, loving, men of God who had brought true and pure revenge on him that was son of the devil. Slayers of he who would not rise again, being lowly dust and ash now, and so the souls of Lucy, and good strong Quincy could rest in peace, now that they had been avenged.

The old braggart's companions knew that Gypsy soldiers still lurked nearby in the dark forest and all could hear the ravening wolves gathering in the shadows and whining for blood.

So, as I watched these foreigners take to the western road, I ran over my master's instructions in my mind. Outlined years before and kept secret ever since, they were detailed and of such importance that I had written some of them on the sheet of vellum that I kept always, rolled and pressed tight over my heart.

The scroll held only a small fraction of the master's instructions, but was all that I was commanded to act upon at the outset. The rest had been put down in their entirety, inked in a book that the master kept hidden in a place I had been told, and had directions to, again, in the event the worst had happened.

Never had I wished to see that book again for only the direst circumstances would allow me near it. Circumstances like that which I had just witnessed. A slaughter of the one I loved, the lord of all these lands.

The thought brought fresh tears to my eyes, and I gazed up at the broken buttresses and crumbled walls overhead. Like bones of a dead god, the stony ruins of his castle soared high above me, black against the purple sky.

A gasp escaped me as the tears soaked into my beard, and I scowled after the murderers who raced for safety upon the western road. I cast the evil eye upon them, and cursed their families and their friends and their homes.

"Master!" I groaned, climbing from of my hiding place, and making my way across the tumbled ruins of the outer wall.

I had been given a task of vast importance, and yet it was a task that I could never foresee, so powerful had been my master, and so indomitable his history. But, I was to set his plans into action now by first collecting his remains. Afterwards I would climb the stair and retrieve his book, but there was no time to waste, and so as I crossed the road I carried the unworthy receptacle that happenstance had forced into my hands.

I'd heard the approaching confrontation while I was upon the castle wall awaiting my master's return. He had been calling out to me for days. In dreams and from shadows did his voice come, but it had arrived as a whisper, no more, a quiet utterance that he was on his way.

Almost had it sounded muffled, like some force had interfered with its sending.

So, I was startled to see the master approach at speed under a setting sun. In the distance his wagon had come hurtling toward the castle pulled by terrified horses and harried by enemies close behind. The scene unfolded so quickly I'd barely had time to find a place of concealment from which to watch.

After the deed was done, I had only an instant to retrieve a large metal bucket from an abandoned guard chamber at the main gate. It would have to do. I had no assurances that the westerners would not return and add my blood to that which covered the road, so time was of the essence.

There were other dangers too.

In what manner I collected the remains depended entirely upon the condition of my master's body after death. Being a creature of extreme power, there were few things that could bring him so low, yet some devilish methods remained and for each of those the master had wisely provided instructions.

Nausea gripped me as I replayed the thought of his voyage to the west. His plan had seemed reckless and extravagant to me, and I could not understand its purpose or justify the risks—though I would never have given voice to my apprehensions.

Had the master desired to extend his reach? Was his power here in the wooded lands not enough? Or had he grown bored with ruling ignorant peasants and now required some new challenge for his superior mind?

He had grown quiet in the decades before this journey, aging it seemed almost—impossibly, but his hair had gone white and thin without luster, while his back had bent and shoulders became stooped like an old man's. And his moods had trended ever more toward the black.

But as dangerous as his intentions had sounded to me, the master had not lived for centuries without having other plans in mind. Such was the intellect and ambition of so great a lord that it was not for a lowly Gypsy like me to judge or question.

Regardless, I still wished I had implored him to adopt some other plan.

In my mind the conversation I had never dared to provoke sounded like this: "Stay here, dear master, where you are feared, for that dread protects you like an obscuring fog, disguising your movements and intent. London is not Transylvania. Their ways are not our ways, and as I have read, science has come to replace religion and God, and dispels what remains of their fear of the night. If they do not fear you, then you are in danger when you are at your most vulnerable. Please reconsider..."

Of course, I did not say these things. I could not without risking his wrath, for he did not suffer fools or the words of lesser men, and to him I was both.

But I could not resist the notion of the fantastic conversation and in it, he honored me with a reply—something I could fashion from fragments of things he had said in the past.

"I have gold aplenty, and gold still glows even to the scientific mind, and also such minds are less inclined to think in terms of the super nature that abounds, and that itself will hide me from their eyes. Instead of fear, I can protect myself with facts and pragmatism that already blinds them to the truths of the natural world. And I will not be alone; there is one like yourself in place there that will guard me in the daylight hours. Nor have I set a simple plan in motion."

And there at my feet was the result of his plan.

I used a large leather pack to carry the things I needed if I were sent on errands, so that would have done for simple decapitation or dismemberment or other death that could reduce the master's body to pieces.

But the westerners had been efficient in their bloody way; the result had been grim, and destruction almost total.

A knife to the heart and decapitation had turned my dear master to dust.

But few who knew his power would lose all hope, for he had been lord of the mountainous lands that lay in each direction from his castle for almost five centuries now, and of life and death he had been the judge and jury.

I stood by the scene of slaughter with the old bucket tucked under my arm, and on a whim looked up to scan the sky for signs. The old traditions said that each man's death was heralded by a falling star, so I could not resist a little smile when I found that the only things that fell to earth were snowflakes.

I crouched in the bloody snow and scooped his remains from the box in which he had traveled, heedless of the fine black earth that had been intermixed by the violence of his end, pausing only to remove the crumbled pieces of holy wafer that his murderers had thrown upon the precious ash and dust.

As I worked, I contemplated my brother Gypsies.

Those who had survived the battle had done so by fleeing into the woods on their horses or surrendering to the barking Winchester rifles, but half of those had quickly rallied their spirits, and in their shame gone with the leiter-wagon to fetch other men and fresh horses from the garrison stable to give chase.

Any who had shown frailty or fear might never return to the castle grounds, and those of our brothers who had only yielded to impossible odds could exorcise their own cowardice by slaying their master's killers.

Still others who had been overwhelmed by the sight of their master in full fury, and defeat, would doubtless slay themselves in grief and shame for having failed at their sworn duty.

Unlike me, the Gypsy Horvat, they did not know that their failure might have only been a temporary end; that if things worked as the master had said his preparations might allow, then happiness could come again to this place.

I breathed deeply then to steady my heartbeat, and sought a more practical thought, for even the master could not be certain, with such powerful forces arrayed against him, and even now with him in the dark embrace of death.

Who could know with certainty what the future held?

I knelt by one of my dead brothers and positioned him so that he balanced upon his knees with his face slumped forward. I hoisted him again and drew the bucket with my master's remains under his chin so I could set the dead man's shoulder upon it.

Then with a quick slash of my knife I opened his throat, and massaged it vigorously until some thick spurts and dribbles of blood poured over the ashy remains. With my bare hands I kneaded this sticky fluid into the dry remnants until they had thickened and become a dark and ashy paste with the consistency of bread dough.

I pushed my dead brother aside, lifted the precious bucket and clutched it to my chest.

Another glance to the west and I saw a small group of Gypsy riders take to the road and gallop in pursuit of the master's killers.

I turned aside as they departed, and hurried to the castle.

Echoes upon the road and in the wood that grew to either side had frightened me during my recovery effort, and I'd started several times thinking the westerners had returned, or that the news of my master's demise had carried so quickly.

He had ruled his lands with the ferocity of a dragon, and once the villagers around became emboldened, they would travel to the castle to plunder his treasure and exact their vengeance.

Chapter 2

FROM THE GYPSY HORVAT'S JOURNAL
6th November, 1893. *A Master's Wisdom*

I passed the ruined chapel, my eyes locked upon the circle of amber light at my feet, spilled there by the lantern I'd lit while entering the enclosed grounds.

Around me, the darkness echoed, my lantern a mere mote of light in the utter blackness.

I followed the dim light for even the meager illumination was better than stumbling through the gloom. On every side there were pits dug in the floor, and heaps of earth had been piled where gravestones tilted out of the mounds.

This area had held secrets of my master's past and had promised eternal rest to those who had come before him. But now, in the dark, with only my lantern to guide me, the shadows that pressed in were total, and offered only the stench of the grave to show their presence.

Somewhere close at hand I heard stones clatter, as though someone had stumbled on the uneven earth. Then came a nearby sound like breath *whooshing* from a man's chest, and I halted in my passage to swing the lantern behind me.

The dim light colored distant heaps of sand and stone a dull rose color, and if I moved the lantern at all, shadows leapt and drifted over the tortured landscape like so many lost souls.

But there was no one following.

I hunched my shoulders as I turned the lantern and offered my back to the closing darkness, then followed the light to the tower wall and through a wide doorway that led to a circular stair. I quickly started climbing the turning steps, flinging myself upward, thumping against the rounded outer wall as I went.

And as I went, my senses were ever drawn to the darkness on the steps below for I had heard noises again: furtive footfalls on stone, the clatter of pebbles and the rustle of cloth against flesh.

But I would not look back again. Instead I fixed my thoughts on my mission and focused upon the stairs that turned so slowly underfoot.

I was ascending to the secret chamber where the master kept his treasure, a place in the castle where certain death once awaited anyone of flesh and blood who dared trespass, but where now resided the only hope for a new life for him that I yet served. If only I was not too late, and I prayed again that the master's

book truly contained the magic of which he had spoken, for there was nothing else a simple Gypsy could do.

Prayer was futile, I knew. I understood that in this case such appeals would offer no aid to his restoration, for the master had long ago parted with his church, and we Gypsies are not favored by the gods.

The master had taught me what to do, so I would put my faith in that.

I made my way up the winding steps of stone, carrying with me the old water bucket, sanctified now by its contents. I remembered the first time I had been taken to these heights and into the room that held the master's wealth.

For centuries had this been the place where his treasures were hidden. I would later find that many were related to his salvation and succor.

Only if such terrible necessity ever came to pass—should the worst...

But I was only shown this place after a great journey I undertook with fine young men of my tribe. For 300 years and more had the Szgany, my people, served the master, and were protected by this association.

Another sound echoed up close behind me, and with sweat standing out upon my brow I sought to distill my fears with thoughts of the time I had come into his service.

It was 33 years ago when I was all of 18.

We had traveled a great distance from our camps, for the Roma people as we are also called, are not stupid people, and while we gratefully served the master within his principality, we had no wish to serve our families to his appetites. We left that dubious honor to the Slovaks whose villages infested every crack and crevice in the Carpathian Mountain chain.

But so terrible were the stories about the master that they even held sway at such a distance, so the Gypsy chieftains made no secret of their allegiance, often delivered as a veiled threat to any non-Szgany neighbor.

I traveled with the many young Gypsy warriors who came to the castle to pledge fealty as tradition and treaty held with our master. His exploits were remembered for his strength and honor as much as they were for his savagery. He was of a noble line of ages past, renowned for longevity and cruelty. Many thought this status came from association with God, while others deemed it the work of His hellish opposite.

But as young men, we did not waste time with philosophy. We sought a powerful lord to whom we could pledge our swords and service. For generations had the Szgany sought such alliances out: protection for service. So many had come and gone, their lives spent defending this lord in the castle.

A group of 25 young Gypsy men came from four families in my camp, and it was that great number to whom I attributed our survival in the mountainous and dangerous lands that surrounded the master's castle.

There is a fierce individuality that keeps all Gypsy men in competition until their very graves, but that same independence was quickly united in a defense of our race should any foe come against us.

So they were bloodstained weapons we bore as we approached the castle gates; our starving bodies decorated by many scars.

We were met there by an old Szgany of a tribe that camped many leagues from our own, and it was he who held our master's sword as we swore our allegiance upon it.

As this old one described our duties, his milky eyes ever lingered upon mine, and his expression whispered secrets.

Finally, his gaze drifted to the notched blade at my side, and he stepped up to me to speak privately.

"Can you use that?" he asked, flicking a finger at the weapon.

"I can," I said, feeling my brothers' jealous eyes upon me. "I fought my way here."

It had not been easy. Slovak bandits had set upon us five times. The old blade I carried was my grandfather's father's and had been sorely tested. It had bent near the tip and no longer held an edge.

"Can you write?" he grumbled, tugging at his beard.

"Some, my lord," I said. "Hungarian, I know enough to read or write a tale..." And then I added: "My numbers, too. Romanian, I can speak... and some little English." The first tongue was essential when living in the master's mountains, and the second a necessity for tradesmen or bandits to know when doing business on the move.

"The master requires a special servant," the old Gypsy said. "We will school you in those things you know and in the other things our master needs. A new man is required—plague took the last." He nodded then before smiling grimly. "I could see the weight of language in your gaze, and it will be needed in this service."

From there I was taken to a special chamber where I was to live, a simple room with bed and desk, where I was met afterwards each day by another old man. Tall and thin he was, a teacher from a nearby Slovak village, and while his face bespoke a thousand terrors when within the master's walls, his smile at receipt of gold for service said much more about his soul.

A year after that, the teacher stopped coming and the master took my tutelage upon himself. Oh, what a rare gift that was, for how handsome he was to look upon, and how casual his strength and noble his bearing. His shoulder-length hair was iron gray when I first met him, and he wore a thick moustache over his full, sensual lips.

He was unassuming in his stature, but exuded a masculine aura, a scent almost, that demanded obedience—even submission—from the strongest of men.

His gaze was unassailable in its power and impossible to deny. He was beautiful in his might, but I came to learn that despite his gifts of great power and riches, the master was made unhappy by the isolation that accompanied them. He was alone, and had few pleasures that could lighten his often melancholy mood.

It became a constant sadness for me to view him thus, and so I would execute my duties with the greatest of professionalism so that no lack or oversight on my part would provoke any darker feeling in him. How I longed to share with him one of the rousing tales we Gypsies sing around our fires, surely that would have raised his spirits. But my master's feelings were not among my responsibilities in the castle, and his ire was nothing I could bear to see.

In time I understood that beneath his cloak of majesty, the master was old, and had grown weary. It was a compliment to his strong features and bearing that

these same years would disappear in the rare moments that his passions were kindled for good or ill, when his spirit came alive like a fire.

I soon understood his need for a servant with knowledge of letters when I was taught old Romanian, Latin, Greek letters and English. I was also schooled in the special duties that required my skill with a sword—though I did not carry the weapon within the castle walls.

Other Szgany were there to guard him, and to protect his home. To me he told the secrets of its halls, and some secrets of his own. The special place where he slept was remote within the crumbling structure, deep in his own vault, but still there were halls around it that demanded security, and at times I found a *sacrifice* for him.

My brothers lived in the garrison and stable outside the castle walls, but they patrolled its grounds. And yes, some of them were sent by me to wake the master, never to be seen again.

But we were paid well, and we were brave within our group. A Szgany wall of muscle was formed about the master's ramparts of worn stone—a bastion prepared as defense against the wider world.

In time, I learned that my special duties extended past the master's preservation and reached into the afterlife and beyond to reclamation. It was to this study I devoted my new knowledge of languages.

Atop the winding stair, I followed a stone passage that led to a heavy door. I paused outside of it, and glanced behind to where a sickly blue flame suddenly flared in the stairwell, and for a second it flashed along the vaulted ceiling farthest from me.

There was a sudden sound, like a small weight had dropped into water, and then nothing.

I bit down on my fears and turned back to the door which I heaved into motion on its iron hinges and swung aside to view the sparsely furnished room wherein my master kept his most precious objects.

The lantern light showed that there were bits of furniture set about as if an afterthought, and all of it was covered in dust that swirled against the amber flame, accompanied by motes of snow that had somehow entered the room. I set my precious burden down and crossed to the window where I saw that the sash was open a finger's width, and it was through this that the snow had drifted in on a cold breeze.

I shut the window and turned to the corner of the room that was strewn with treasures of every kind. Gold lay there aplenty, as coin and precious items: cups and other rich trinkets and jewelry that twinkled with priceless gems.

With these I would finance my journey south, and I knelt by the pile to draw from it a fortune in ancient coins of various nations: French, German and Hungarian. I chose the items that would most fit in a wandering Gypsy's pack, though the least of them was more than could bear much scrutiny.

But if I did not wish to bring attention to myself from bandits or foreign authorities, I had to select the treasure that I could best keep hidden, and spend safely.

After collecting this fortune and dividing it into four leather sacks, I added a precious necklace of gold and one of silver with rubies along its length. I thought that these pieces might easily pay for passage to southernmost Africa if I could find a safe place to exchange them, and they'd make a fine bribe if I came against any of the corrupt officials I'd heard stories about.

Among these things I found several pendants and amulets, all of which were too rich for me to take safely outside the castle confines; however I did find a plain necklace and pendant of steel that bore a serpent etched upon it, circular in form with its tail wrapped around its own neck. Clear to me this was the winged creature that symbolized my master's membership in the sacred Order of the Dragon.

This was small, the medallion but twice the size of a thumbnail, and so I looped the steel chain over my head and hid the device beneath my beard and woolen underclothing. Surely, if my wish came to pass then I could make it a present for my master, or if the worst happened, I could proudly wear the adornment in his memory, and as a sign of my everlasting love and loyalty to him.

Once the rest of these items were hidden at the bottom of my large leather pack, I began clearing the treasures away from their place against the wall. The metal was cold to the touch, and clouds of dust arose as I shoved the items clanging aside, but my efforts were soon rewarded.

The master's urn!

Set against the stone wall and hidden by this pile of treasure was a rectangular box almost 20 inches on the longest side, and ten on its shortest with hinged metal handles bolted near the top.

The artifact was just under 20 inches in height and was a simple looking thing; its skin formed by narrow iron bands connecting a checkerboard of gray, enameled steel squares four inches to the side that resembled armor plating.

Centered to the urn's facing side a plate was etched with my master's sigil, the same that adorned the medallion that lay hidden beneath my beard. Larger than the piece I wore, I could clearly see the reptile's folded wings upon its arching back and between them the Christian cross that had failed my master so.

Atop this urn was a hinged lid of the same light armor plating. Metal grating that formed a vent about eight inches in length and three across was recessed in its surface. There a set of thin, metal dampers could be made to open and close by twisting a pair of ornate levers shaped like curved wings on another pair of dragon symbols etched to either side of the vent.

This opening was used to allow the passage of air and liquids without exposing the urn's contents. To actually open the lid would require unfastening a pair of latches, which swung the entire top of the urn out of the way.

I knelt and undid these fastenings before swinging the lid aside, and was immediately struck by a rank gasp of decay that wafted out. I paused before reaching in and drawing out a rectangular package wrapped in leather and tied with thick twine.

I drew my knife and easily cut the strings, and then wiped at the greasy black residue that had transferred from the package to my hands. My skin tingled strangely wherever the substance had touched it.

I then lifted my lantern and peered into the urn. Indeed this finer inspection revealed a foul-smelling black slime covering the bottom that appeared to have spread up the inner surface. The irregular edge of this dark stain was fringed with a crusty ridge of mold, and there was a dim blue luminescence that flickered there, when the light from the lantern shifted.

For a moment I imagined carrying this noisome artifact in public and then I wondered if there would be some means of hiding its stench.

I glanced over at the simple metal bucket that held my master's remains, and I shuddered with shame before turning my attention back to the package and gingerly peeling away its deeply stained leather wrapping.

Larger by a half than my hand, I pulled the leather-bound contents into the light.

The master's book! It was 12 inches in height and 8 from spine to page's edge and felt to be two pounds when hefted in hand.

A symbol had been embossed on the front cover that was otherwise unadorned. The small device signified a long line of Wallachian kings. It was the house from which my master's line had sprung: Basarab. A shield-shaped mark, the right side was plain, the left was divided top to bottom by several horizontal lines set an equal distance apart.

A mark that would be obscure to any but a student of ancient Wallachian history.

Flicking through, I saw that the pages were of vellum, and bore many notes and some illustrations that described in ink my master's varied instructions on what special service I had been prepared to perform. The majority of these were written by various hands in old Romanian, while additions in Hungarian and Latin, Greek of course and another, Cape Dutch, could be found in the margins.

All of these I had been taught to recognize and to read.

The book had many thick pages...

A noise?

I turned to the window, then to the half-open door and the hallway beyond. Had I heard a sound? Did something still reside within the castle? Or had that knock come from without?

Did others have knowledge of the master's treasure? Some among my Gypsy brothers would know. Rumors at least... and some of them might have abandoned the chase for the westerners. Surely they would only wish to protect their master's treasure, but there was still greed in my tribe, and with a master dead, what value is the oath sworn to him?

Or had someone with that knowledge shared it? Did news of the master's unguarded treasures travel the land even now? Such knowledge would be welcome in the poor villages that dotted the lands around his castle.

I had to leave.

Again there was an echo, like a large drop of water had fallen into a deep well.

I had to go, but lingered a moment to page through my master's book to the section that would confirm my fears, and remind me of hope.

"An index of death," the master had once called his tome, when he'd taken me into his confidence—made me his intimate.

"Misfortune *redirected*..." he'd said at other times.

A strong hand had made a list with pen and ink, written in the ancient tongue native to old Wallachia, the country that birthed my master's own. I knew this language, and had been taught it long ago as part of my initiation into this sacred post.

And so, I recoiled in horror as I read each item, for the macabre headings reminded me of my dear master's recent horrific destruction. On the list I read: Death by fire or acid. Decapitation. Staking. Quartering. Drowning and immersion. Dismemberment. Disemboweling. Crushing.

And beside each item on the list was a page reference.

I followed the reference from "Staking" and found it coincided with a "Decapitations" referring page, and quickly read: "if the body has been reduced to dust or ash..."

Just as I had been taught, and so expected, the urn would most certainly be required, and some refuge would be needed for a time.

He'd spoken to me of it on occasion, as if some premonition vexed him, or a fear of his own demise had come upon him, for he would say: "Horvat, do what is written if the worst happens."

Each time I had listened with tremulous senses for the idea of his death had always left me uneasy.

"An old ally has made his home in South Africa, and such a safe haven will I need if ever circumstance puts me in the hands of enemies who wish for my complete destruction. No friend, but he owes me fealty, and will receive me in such a time of need." He had looked at me sternly. "The book is the key."

I re-wrapped this book in its stained leather covering and slipped it beneath my coat and into a large pocket where I also stored my fur hat when it was not in use. I rubbed my tingling hands against my coat and nodded at the simple metal bucket and its contents.

Horvat would take his master to South Africa.

I transferred the ashy remains to the urn and was pleasantly surprised to find that this doughy compound dampened the odor that came from the oily black substance covering the bottom of the container. This I would smother with dirt from the graveyard after I'd retraced my steps to the chapel grounds at the bottom of the stairs.

It was time to go.

Just as I was leaving the room the sound returned, and standing there, I decided that other Gypsies must be about the castle, or pillagers or worse, and so I started along the corridor with my knife clenched between my teeth.

The lantern swung precariously from my right wrist that I had thrust through the loop of wire from which the light hung, for both hands were needed to carry the urn by its handles. The curious box was not heavy but it was awkward, and I suspected that a protracted period carrying it would leave my arms and shoulders aching.

Still, there was nothing I could do, for my mind had set by this time on saddling my horse and using her for the trip to the coast.

Sweat soaked my face and neck as I descended the perilous stair, kicking one leg after another out into the shadowed darkness as the steps turned down in the murk.

The poor light from the swinging lantern unsettled my nerves and seemed to amplify the echoing sounds that suddenly came to me: something like laughter, a woman's gasp, and then a baby gave a single cry and went silent.

But on that end note, a faint bluish light flickered to life and threw the steps beneath me into twilight.

I exited the winding stair and found myself by the old chapel. The grounds around it were lit by this ghostly light that seeped in and out of shadow and brought the half-seen edges of stony shapes and crumbled monuments to life. This bluish glow was uneven and its flicker did nothing to aid my progress or assure my footing.

I was in the old graveyard again, and in the ill light could recognize where we had dug the earth that had been sent with the master into the west. Some 50 boxes of the precious substance did he take, yet only a single box returned, the very one in which he had traveled home.

I knelt and opened the urn quickly. The lid swung back as I hastily scraped three clods of dirt from the edge of the closest grave. Each fell with a dusty *thud* upon the contents before I slammed it shut.

Murk was settling over the landscape as I regained my feet with my burdens and I cast about a moment, disoriented, before taking several paces and stopping in an unnatural haze of dust and mist that was rising up around my boots.

I could not see the chapel. Snatching in a breath, I looked to each point of the compass before glancing down at my feet.

The dirt beneath them was solid enough, the same I had traveled mere moments before. So how could I be lost? Snarling under my breath, I looked for a landmark—something to gauge my progress.

The grounds about the chapel had been dug up and burrowed in and thoroughly disturbed to the point that it would be a difficult stretch to traverse even in full daylight. In the dark, it was a daunting landscape to travel with my good master's remains in the unwieldy urn, black pitfalls open all around, and with only the unsteady light from my swinging lantern to guide me.

Yet, here I stood in the middle of this graveyard peering at the pale-lit shadows ahead—or was that behind? I looked to left and right and marveled that the dim light had taken an almost physical form now—a corporeal mist seemed to be creeping across the malformed landscape toward me.

Where was the chapel?

I took four tentative steps and stopped again, suddenly overwhelmed by fear. My mind gibbered for escape. Was that part of this magic? First blind me of direction and then drive me mad with terror?

Pressing down my urgent need to scream, I leapt forward at a run, and by chance or unrecognized intent, I had chosen the correct way for I soon stumbled past the ruined chapel that loomed out of the fog to my left.

Another sound echoed from the broken rooftop and bounced over this rolling landscape to disguise its true source, but I was at a loss to understand.

Had it been a human voice? For so it had first seemed, but as the sound's reverberation wound down, so did my ability to identify it. What truly started as a human voice, perhaps someone hailing me at a distance, became a donkey's bray before wafting down to a rushing sound of an errant wind, or skirts catching at a woman's calf.

No sooner had I paused panting over my burden to listen than another call came. This time it seemed to rattle down from the tower stairs I'd just traversed.

By the time it reached me it rang like the peal of children playing.

I shifted my load and wiped at my eyes with the back of a free hand as I sought its source, only to find that there was nothing but the sundered earth that appeared as cold, gray heaps running in and out of darkness in the eerie light.

And the light, what of the strange light? No trick of the lantern and fog as I had originally imagined, I saw now that it glimmered from many unseen sources. A beguiling glow played about the ruined landscape and dogged my step to confuse me.

Then as I eased the urn back to both hands, I caught sight of something in the distance. In the dark black arch that led to the stair it seemed a white face was watching me.

A white face that hung there in the gloom.

I turned and ran, unable to believe my eyes, but unable to reject the vision they had shown me. Surely they were playing tricks, but with the master so vulnerable I could take no chance.

There were but two creatures that ever "lived" within the walls of the castle during my decades there, and I was one of them. The other tenant was gone now, his grisly remains a wadded ball of ash and dust and clotted blood within the ancient urn.

Chapter 3

FROM THE GYPSY HORVAT'S JOURNAL

7th November, 1893. *Transylvania at Night*

I made my way by lantern light past the main gate and across the courtyard before passing under a rounded arch and traveling a dark, damp tunnel to the master's stable. I had pulled my fur hat down over my ears to where it butted against the furry upturned collar of my simple coat.

The air was frigid and ate through the many layers of clothing it was my habit to wear about the drafty castle. So cold had the night grown that my spirit quailed at the notion of the journey before me. Was this truly a mission for a man of my age, whether he be loyal or not?

But the urn in my arms was all I needed in answer, for my dear master could no longer feel the cold nor choose his fate, so as I passed through the stable doors, a blush of shame came up to heat my face.

I had sworn an oath.

The master's mighty steeds awaited me, sunk into the shadows as black as night, only to have their muscular shapes spring out in otherworldly fashion as the orange light I carried fell from one stall to the next.

I stood back to admire the enormous beasts. Eager they were to set hoof to road, and I imagined myself flying down to the coast upon one of their great backs.

Truly, there were no other horses in the land that could challenge these steeds—and yet, such hopes were fantasy, for these animals had been trained to pull a grand calèche, not to bear a saddle. A lord with my master's unique capabilities had no need to ride.

It was imperative that the first leg of my journey be taken in secrecy, and so close to the castle there was no way I could travel in one of his splendid carriages upon the open road and not be observed.

No one could know where I was going.

The horses fretted at the sight of me, anxiously stamping and snorting as I continued along the dusty aisle between their stalls. I kept the master's urn tight against my chest, my fingers growing numb where they gripped its handles. I was otherwise burdened by pack, musket and sword.

Normally, I went about my duties carrying only the small cutting knife or churi that was traditional to my people. While its sheepfoot blade performed well at any task from cutting pegs or apples to slicing throats, I understood that the challenges of the journey ahead might require more than the practical knife could deliver in the way of personal protection.

My grandfather's father's sword was no longer up to the task, so I had chosen an old Cossack blade from the master's armory, selected because of its usefulness as a cavalry weapon. I was still determined to be mounted when I traveled to the coast.

Its two-and-a-half-foot long curved blade was designed for hacking opponents from horseback, while its tarnished appearance would not tempt any bandits upon the road, as other gilded swords kept in the armory might. It hung by my left hip; its sheathed length suspended by a sturdy shoulder strap.

To this armament I had added a foot-long stabbing dagger of the same approximate age though of indeterminate origin. Its steel blade slid easily in and out of a wood and leather sheath, perfect for close and deadly combat, or for whatever functions my simple churi could not perform around a campsite.

I also selected from the master's collection a single-shot percussion cap musket, a pistol of the same muzzle-loading variety, and a good supply of ball and black powder. My heart quavered at the sight of the old firearms and I bemoaned the fact that the master had never thought to upgrade his arsenal—something that I thought would be obvious to a man with his military history, but of course, I never spoke of it to him.

Memory of how his murderers' Winchester repeating rifles had decimated my brother Gypsies seemed to prove my foresight correct—and the master's current state reiterated the wisdom of my unvoiced reservation.

But the old weapons would have to do. They were sturdy and durable, deadly if used properly, and I was an accurate shot with both. Likewise, they were flexible regarding shot, and could use smaller caliber lead, or could be coaxed into firing acceptable substitutes.

I had heard stories of soldiers firing stones, nails and other missiles when short of ammunition. My main concern would be replenishing my store of black powder and percussion caps, without which the weapons would be useless.

Luckily, the armory had a ready supply of each. I divided some 500 percussion caps between two small leather pouches, and added a sheet of linen to use as patches for the lead shot. I chose a rather simple hunter's powder flask made from oxen horn, stopped both top and bottom with oak. It was a plain thing that I could carry from a string slung around my neck. Like the swords, there were finer pieces in the collection, but they would draw the eye, and such a thing I could not risk on the mission ahead.

The flask held a pound of black powder at most, and I felt this should be enough for my trip to the Black Sea coast so far as hunting and protection were concerned. I would carry most of my food jarred, canned or smoked and going under cover of secrecy, I had no reason to expect any but natural threats. From the coast, my future was unknown, and so I would be sure to purchase more of the powder to stand against the vagaries of fate.

The weapons were heavy, something I had grumbled about when I first thrust the pistol and dagger through the wide embroidered belt that closed my thick fur coat, and slung the musket over my shoulder with my pack, waterskin and sword.

I wore thick, quilted pants and woolen underclothes, fur hat, mittens and sturdy horsehide boots. I had other warm clothing in the pack along with loaves of hard bread, a large wheel of cheese, preserved meat and fruit and three smoked sausages as long as my arm. I included a bag of dried apples and various nuts.

On a whim, I had packed two flasks of *slivovitz*, a delicious plum brandy that could steady my nerves as it quenched my thirst. I had also considered its warming, soporific qualities as I imagined laying my 51-year-old body upon the frozen ground to sleep.

For my master's needs, the book said there was but one. That blood be admitted to the urn daily, or enough to keep the contents "wet." The initial dowsing I'd given the urn with my brother Gypsy's blood would have to do for the moment. Added to that, the most current soak I'd provided while picking up my own rations.

I had poured freely into the urn from a bucket of pig's blood that one of my brother Gypsy guards had set aside in preparation for making pudding.

The urn sloshed as I walked.

With a five- or six-day journey to the coast ahead of me, I hoped that an opportunity would arise to use my gun and provide fresh blood to the urn, and I knew that if the situation became extreme that both I and my mount could spare a little to cover any drought.

It was lamentable that the master kept no steeds for mounts, but I had my own small horse of a sturdy breed favored by my people for its strength and endurance. This one had carried me on many a journey and had done so for the seven years since its sire had died after a long life of faithful service.

This one I had named "Baba." I'd known the beast since her mother threw her and I myself did cut away her bloody caul. She seemed to remember the early association and was always pleased to see me and quick to please. Never once had she resisted one of my commands, and I prayed now that this record would go

unchallenged, for I could not help but think the road ahead would demand much from both of us.

She gave her happy whinny and snort as I passed by the master's horses and made my way over to her. I set my burdens upon the straw-covered stone by her stall, and then patted the light mane that fell forward between her ears as I fed her a dried apple. She munched contentedly as I gathered her tack, and soon had her saddled and set for travel.

After that I found a long leather harness that I cut into lengths from which I fashioned a thick strap that I fixed to the handles on either side of my master's urn. I could then put this loop up behind my head and over my shoulders to support its weight as I carried it before me. I had decided this was the best configuration for moving the precious cargo; I could keep a careful eye upon its contents, and my arms were freed for other actions.

I dug about and found a couple of thick horse blankets that I could use for my own warmth, and to wrap the urn. I'd already felt the coppery breath of warm moist air issuing from the shuttered vent, and did not want to take it unprotected into the night. Also, I thought it wise to disguise it beneath a blanket, should I meet anyone upon the road.

After packing my gear on Baba, I took out the master's map, and held it under the lantern light. He had been insistent in his instruction that I let no one see me on the road, or have knowledge of what I was doing and any who came to know it was to die.

And so tucked within the covers of his book was a special map drawn by the master's own hand. This had the main roads intersected by winding paths that led through the forested hills from one roadway to the next, and while they looked challenging to travel, keeping to their routes would keep my journey secret.

The handwritten legend told of signs should I ever lose my way, and detailed specific landmarks: trees, bridges, buildings, and stones where he had hidden clues, where by the light of my lamp I could get my bearings.

I could not help but wonder at his foresight, and marvel at the situation that might have forced him to make such a maze for travel. Indeed, he was feared by his people, and he undoubtedly liked to go about his business unmolested.

Looking the map over, I saw that these secret ways edged along the outskirts of the villages they passed, where at various intervals his winding paths snaked in amongst the homes and buildings like tendrils—offering sheltered footpaths that followed streams and river valleys before ending up in the village square.

It was plain to me that following the master's path would take me safely where I needed to go, depositing me finally at the very edge of the port town of Varna.

I was feeling anxious as I extinguished the lantern. The cold night air closed in with the darkness. I shuddered, and then suddenly felt for the small travel lamp I had packed in my bag. Its contours were easily defined near the top, but this caused me to check the pockets of my coat again for my store of matches and tinderbox.

I breathed a sigh that gave little relief, for I had not been so far from the castle in many years, and then, it was only to journey to the lands that held my own people's camps.

I'd never been to Varna or to the villages closest to it. But my master's instructions were clear, so I mounted Baba and nudged her into a slow walk as we exited the stable and passed through the tunnel to cross the courtyard.

Just at the crumbled gate, I paused to look back, and peer up at the dark battlements looming against the sky. Wrapped in shadow, the castle's jagged silhouette was a black monolith menacing the darkness. *His* spirit was still there, it seemed, and yet, that was impossible.

Again my heart trembled where my chest pressed against the master's urn, and I feared the journey ahead, but this dread was dispelled as my mind played over the white face I'd seen by the graveyard, and for a moment I saw it again, passing briefly by a window high above me.

Impossible... I was still overwrought and my mind was playing tricks. Or were there only ghosts left to populate this place? I knew it would never be my home again until my master had returned.

I gently kicked Baba's sides and we started along the road. Ahead, we'd find an old oak that would mark the beginning of the master's secret path.

I needn't have worried, or strained my eyes to find it, for as we neared the tree and the narrow, stony path that left the road and angled sharply down the mountain, a terrifying howl rose up—one wild voice, then another and another. Beneath the heavy spruce boughs on the hillside a thicket of thorn bushes broke to either side of our trail, and from the shadows came a chorus of howling wolves.

From the tension in Baba's thick shoulders, I knew she would have bucked had not her rider and burdens been so heavy.

Still more howling cut into the night sky as I caught the muscular shapes of the beasts flitting behind the intaglio of thorny branches ahead.

We would have an escort.

The night was cold but the weather cooperated well enough. The cloud cover helped to keep the chill in check, and only sent a mild dusting of snow down at odd intervals, little of which made it to the covered path I traveled.

I considered myself lucky again that the cold weather had not yet truly taken hold upon the landscape. The path was protected by overarching trees, and the early winter snow had not made much of an impact upon the root-tangled ground underfoot. I wondered if there were some parts of the secret way that would ever see snow, so dense were the branches clustering above.

I had hoped to travel for most of the night, but began to doubt this when I found the way so dark with the overcast, and without any moon or stars to light the way. My lamp would have helped, but I dared not use it as the dim light would be a beacon for many miles against the somber landscape.

So I picked my way for many hours, until long after midnight, slowly making the descent from the treacherous mount upon which the castle loomed. The site had been chosen for its defensible position, and the rocky slopes were dangerously steep and intended to keep invaders at bay.

In time my eyes adjusted to the dark, and were aided by the reflection from the snow where it had piled up in places.

And, Baba was a sure-footed little horse. She carried me with only one complaint: she was made uneasy by our honor guard of wolves. These black

beasts ran to either side, never near enough to be more than glimpsed, but we heard them scrabbling and breaking their way through the thick forest around the path. There was no doubt they were watching, and warding our precious cargo.

Baba did not like the wolves, but as all loyal animals she soon tuned her spirit to her rider's pitch. True, I was perplexed and worried about the journey, but did not fear the wolves. I had seen them in communion with the master too many times to ever think they'd bring him harm—so I doubted they would harm his servant.

When I caught their eyes flashing in the shadows now and then to either side, I knew the look to be a soulful one of homage paid to that which I held before me.

There were moments when my vision was blurred by the steam from my breath, as my fingers grew numb and cold, that I realized the full measure of my mission, and my heart stuttered at the prospect. But what choice had I? The peasantry would come for spoils once word had passed between them that the castle was undefended. Had they known the master was vulnerable, they would speed there for retribution and blood.

And, I was reminded of why they were bitter toward their lord in the form of the frozen bones that littered our path in places. Most splintered and fragmented as though they'd fallen from a great height, they lay about the forest floor, and protruded in pieces from the snow-swept landscape. Of varied ages, the bones had been shattered on impact, gnawed upon by vermin or cracked and the marrow sucked out.

From time to time I was startled to see an entire skeleton draped in the branches above me, or a moldering corpse slumped against the stones beside the way, rotted clothing still clinging in places.

The land around the castle bore witness to the master's harsh rule; his centuries of command had covered the mountainside with bony sediment. But it was his mountain; he was their master—my master.

Oh Master!

So, I wondered again about the Englishman who was the last of the master's invited guests, and I rued the day he'd been left alive as a plaything of the brides.

No one living could sympathize with a man in that predicament, since if it were not his neck on their platter it might have been one's own, but I had always questioned the cat-like nature of the witches when they had their prey close at hand. I did not care about their playful cruelty so much, but delaying the blow that would kill him had opened the door to the Englishman's escape.

I squeezed the urn closer to my chest and groaned. The same Englishman had been with the others in the bloody battle before the gates. It was he who had cut the master's throat.

I knew him by sight because he'd tried to bribe me with a gold piece, begging me to post letters that were no doubt intended to summon aid. The fool! As though any amount of money would be worth a Gypsy's honor—a simple honor sworn to so great a lord.

But I remembered hearing of his escape, and searching for him with my brothers. I had hoped the wolves had taken the man, as they took any fool who wandered near the castle, or that the river had swallowed him up—or that his bones would have lain somewhere ahead.

Alas, that was not the case, and as a result the master...

Baba whinnied then, a short and wheezy snort, and I peered into the looming gray tree branches that reached in toward the path from the pitch black beyond.

I wondered who else had survived a stay in the castle, for I knew that down all the centuries, the Englishman could not have been the only one to escape.

Baba's gentle pace and rocking motion had me nodding near sleep, so before I could take action and set up a camp for the remainder of the night, I drifted into a hazy place where memories felt like reality and reality like dreams.

The warm scent of plums rose from the slivovitz I'd spilled in my beard. I had sipped it to ward off the chill...

"It will not be death like your death, Horvat. I do not live as you do, so what would be an end to you could be considered—ah, there are no words. This is something that should not be judged by your mortal senses. I am beyond your powers of comprehension," my master had told me, late one night as he repeated his instruction should the worst ever happen. "Learn the contents of the book and follow the directions within. There will be hope for me when there would be none for one like you."

He spoke to me thus, from time to time, though he rarely spoke about things that were not of great import. And my name, yes, he did use it at such times I believe, to underline the significance of the lesson he was giving, and to pound home the punishment that would await if I were to ever fail him.

Of course my master, being a survivor as he is, would not have left certain things to chance. Someone that old well understood the risks of going about the world, and would have in place the safeguards necessary to shift the odds in the favor of survival.

Being a creature well-acquainted with death, and having experienced many brushes with it, there was little doubt that he would lay out plans for his survival: methods, money would be cached and allies would be in place that would come into play, to act in his stead if he were beyond the ability to act for himself.

And so, his employment of my brother Gypsies to safeguard his castle, and the many familiars over the ages, custodians or guardians like myself, and their education in the arts of his survival, and in the worst case, of his resurrection.

"Read the book," he had said, hypnotic eyes flaring crimson. "And follow it to the letter."

Baba snorted and her shivering flanks brought me around. My eyes snapped open, but I had to raise my mittens and rub the fur against my frozen cheeks to be sure I was alive, for there was a light in the trail before us. Of blue flame it was, like the witch fire from the peasants' tales, and I remembered Szgany talk of the fiery faerie rings that guarded lost treasure.

Then I trembled remembering the pale light I'd seen in the castle and graveyard. Similar this was, and while it looked more like fire there was no warmth.

These flames before me glimmered low to the ground and ringed round the ancient trunk of an oak tree that had only a few malformed and splintered stumps in place of branches.

Baba let out a frightened whinny when I tried to nudge her past the strange flames, and I kicked her flanks when she continued to balk. I had no interest in dismounting and leading her anywhere near the strange blue light playing about the tree.

She only snapped her head to and fro, but would not budge.

“Now, Baba, forward!” I growled, jerking the reins, but that only got her to rear slightly, and stamp excitedly in place.

I grumbled under my breath and gripped the urn tightly to dismount, but I froze.

A sound had come from behind. It was like a hoarse shout or moan, a despairing noise that a man would make only in the depths of some dire distress or in the presence of his doom.

I listened, and somewhat distantly could make out the snapping of branches, even the thump of someone moving over the ground with a heavy tread.

We were being followed.

Glancing to either side, I saw that our escort of wolves was gone, and again the aching groan came from the rear.

Baba heard it also for she suddenly bolted forward over the stones, veering crazily around the faerie fire and past the stooped old oak. Her charge forced me forward to grip the horse with my knees, holding the urn beneath me and parallel to her broad back—its precious contents protected by our flesh.

More than a half-mile on, Baba slowed either from fatigue or because her fears had calmed. She took up her gentle pace again and we continued moving along the dark way. There were no more sounds from behind, but I had stopped looking for a place to camp that night.

Chapter 4

FROM THE GYPSY HORVAT'S JOURNAL

7th November, 1893. *Race to Varna*

I awoke near noon the next day having traveled until sunrise. The overcast sky and thick trees around my camp had kept the growing light from disrupting my sleep, so I felt somewhat rested despite the welts on back and buttocks from lying on roots hidden beneath my blankets.

I rubbed at my frozen cheeks and the frosted whiskers crackled, so I levered myself into a sitting position and set about rekindling my small fire.

As I worked, I glanced over and was greeted with a snort from Baba as she nibbled dry brown shoots and sent steamy puffs of chill air about her leather hobbles.

I turned to the master's urn. It stood by my bedding and was wrapped in horse blankets, and had been dusted by drifting snow. But that one glance brought rushing back the urgency of my journey, and my terror of the night before—

mysterious sounds and what had seemed to be pursuit. The memory galvanized my sluggish limbs, and I surged from the blankets to prepare for travel.

I glanced worriedly at the dense forest that pressed in on the small clearing I'd chosen for camp, pondering the noises I had heard in the night. Surely, this had been imagination—nothing more—I decided, as I set water to boil and began feeding Baba sparingly from the sack of oats I had brought along.

I knew that she would be able to eat scrub grasses and forage for what she could find when the trail led us to the open spaces in the valleys between the mountains. I had been feeding her in preparation for the winter and so she had already developed a thick layer of fat that she could draw upon in these first days of flight.

She snorted, and her withers quivered beneath my hand—the tremor like a memory of our night travel, and I realized that she would have had to imagine the sounds, too. So my last attempt at illusion was dispelled. The sounds had not been the fancy of an anxious mind; they'd been real.

I mixed hot water in a cup with a good three ounces of slivovitz. This answered the chill, and lubricated my own meager breakfast as I ate a quick meal of cheese, bread and dried apple before loading my gear upon Baba and setting out on the trail again.

A quick check of the urn before mounting showed little through the metal vent, though warm, moist air still issued from it. There was a coppery smell, and a hint of decay, but nothing more. I dared not open the urn for a better look, so I wrapped it in horse blankets once again.

I rode for most of the day, making good time following the master's map that took us down from the high mountains through narrow passes and finally brought us to broad wooded valleys where the snow collected in patches, and the hardy grasses and dense undergrowth still grew in broad, dark swaths about the tree trunks.

I had seen no other travelers or sign so far, though faded tracks in the snow and dirt had marked the passage of foraging animals.

I had decided against doing any hunting for the first couple days, as the musket's report would echo many miles in the mountains, and draw attention if anyone was in earshot. Now that the first night of travel had been haunted, I was even more reluctant to try the weapon so fresh game would not be added to my simple fare.

Late in the day I dismounted to give poor Baba a rest, and we stopped where a forest of young oaks opened up overhead. There I unwrapped the urn again, and peered in.

Enough gray light filtered through the vent to give me a glimpse of the bottom where a glistening ruddy lump lay in a dark and stringy mire of scarlet. The human and pig's blood seemed to have coagulated, but what I saw looked "wet" enough to decrease the urgency of hunting for a new source of the precious fluid.

The second night, I made camp on a rocky shelf that overlooked a small defile where a narrow stream splashed through a jumbled landscape flecked with snow and ice. The space on which we rested was large enough for me and Baba, and was accessed by a tangled path just wide enough to admit the horse.

The exertions of travel were weighing on me, so after a quick meal I fell asleep...
...only to awaken later with my heart racing, and my eyes searching the darkness. For some seconds I lay there in my blankets by the dead coals of the fire.

Baba stood nearby, a moving shadow in the darkness. She ground her teeth and stamped, sensing that I was awake.

She had heard something too. I was just about to speak and calm her when a familiar groaning sound echoed across the silent forest.

It came the same as the night before, a man-like call at a distance, though there seemed to be little menace now. Instead, it sounded forlorn. Lost. Despairing.

I whispered something to Baba and hugged my unsheathed sword to my chest before rolling on my side and peering down from the shelf to where the black water ran against its frosted banks.

A sudden movement against the snow showed silhouettes of wolves moving to the north. With that sight came some comfort, and I was able to sleep again knowing they were on guard.

The third night I found a sloping crevice in the forest floor where we could stop. It was sheltered along its length by high rock walls and a stony overhang fringed with trees. The closed end rose to where thick young firs sprouted that would help hide the camp and make it defensible.

Baba had made a noisy meal of the feed I'd brought her, and the dried apples I carried as treats for us both. She also cropped at brown grasses and brittle plants that still clung to life amidst the mosses in the sheltered place.

I sat wrapped in blankets with the master's urn by my side and my thoughts drifted awhile as I watched our small fire burn down to embers.

The journey had been difficult that day. The master's map took us through twisted paths strung with prickled brambles. The hooks from those clinging vines had caught at my clothing and Baba's shaggy hide, and I was forced to stop and cut us loose every 50 feet.

Clouds had covered the sky from dawn to dusk, and were unmoved by the bitter wind that caused the cold to press us sorely.

The master's trail must have become overgrown since the map's making, and I hoped there were no other unknown obstacles ahead to spite us, or wear us down.

The cold had eaten too deeply into my bones for the dying fire to warm them, and so I retreated to my bedding. At least our camp was sheltered. Directly overhead the clouds still held, but glowed brightly over a waxing moon. The overcast nights had hidden its progress, and I had not thought to consider its phase before setting out.

I laughed at the absurdity of the notion. Who cared if the moon's light revealed our camp? It was the cold that would kill us.

I was certain, now, that the Gypsy Horvat was too old to fulfill his pledge.

My eyes closed...

Then I sprang upright at a sound.

It was demonic; a garbled, yelping scream that echoed through the frigid forest and it took me some confused moments to recognize it as coming from the wolves.

But they were not howling—there was no eerie power to their call—none of the master’s music. No, they were crying for aid; they were fighting for their lives!

Then I heard the powerful and resounding howl of a single wolf—the pack leader. I remembered the great black male stood as tall as my shoulder, and nowhere in his golden eyes was there anything but strength. His voice was fierce, a battle cry he loosed upon the night, but fear was trembling at its core, and the shrieks that came in answer were shrill and could not rally—unbelievably, they crossed the freezing miles as a *whimper*.

No! The master’s wolves were indomitable.

My skin turned to gooseflesh as I listened, for I knew that the regions we were passing should hold no danger for the pack. There was not a beast in the land that could wring such fear from them. The wolves had followed us near populated places, but never did we go close enough to people that could endanger the beasts after dark—and no farmer, huntsman or man-at-arms would draw such terror from that pack.

The master’s wolves had never shown a sign of fear or weakness, so I trembled at the thought of what had confronted them—and caused a rout. Nothing on God’s green earth would have dared those animals, and that notion made me reach for the unsheathed sword upon my blanket.

For there were other things in the mountains that I had only heard about in tales and legend: the old fortune tellers at the Szgany camps did more than speak of the future. At times their stories whispered of the superstitious night, where blue fire and faerie rings flickered—when the hills became home to goblins, giants and trolls, where witches knew no restraint.

And where once my dead master and his kind had prowled...

My fingers tightened on the hilt of my sword, and I flexed my arm until the keen metal glimmered in the pale light from the overcast, assuring me the blade was free of its scabbard and ready to kill.

I stared into the darkness that enveloped the open end of the sheltering crevice as the distant battle raged. The wolves’ voices grew more terrified, rising slowly at first before rushing painfully upward as strident screams were forced out. Shrieks of pain cut the shadows—the doom-soaked notes of a bloodbath filled my soul!

And then there was nothing. The forest was silent. I looked to Baba who had stood unmoving, the poor beast paralyzed with fear, before I turned back to where our rocky camp opened on the night—on the secret aftermath.

There were no more sounds of battle, or suffering or death, but still my sleep was fitful and shallow and short.

9th November.

By her lethargic actions, I could tell that Baba had slept little also, but I feared any delay to rest would cause us greater trouble. The sounds from the night before still echoed in my head as I hurried about a quick breakfast.

I could not repress a grin as poor Baba watched me gulp from the flask of slivovitz and I consoled her with a hearty pat on the head, neck and shoulders. The rough love did nothing to diminish the sense of longing in her big brown eyes

as I slid the flask away into my coat. She even seemed to be snuffling at the wind, hoping to catch the strong liquor's heady scent.

The fourth day took us to the western edge of a steep valley just after noon. The sky overhead continued as a dark gray veil throughout our travel. From our elevated position, I could see through the trees that once we'd traversed the downward slope we'd cross lowland that might trouble us by way of swamp or mire buried where snow had collected in a vast white crescent. Just past that the opposite slope rose beneath a tall forest of old beech trees with few lower limbs that promised easier travel ahead.

On top of that, the far side of the valley still showed great swaths of brown-green grass higher up near the trees, suggesting a more welcoming climate than the cold mountain forest we'd just traveled. Additionally, the rise was gradual and would allow us an easy pace that could offer some respite after our sleepless toil on the sheer and tree-clotted hill trails behind.

Baba snorted uncomfortably, and I let out a sigh of relief, for black, darting shadows ran east across the valley floor. The wolf pack had survived! They were fewer in number, there was no doubt; but a strong force of ten or more charged across the snowy expanse like they were borne on the wind. The beasts angled toward the far side of the valley, intent upon clearing a safe way for our master.

The promise of swifter passage raised my spirits and Baba's as well, and added vigor to our pace. However, the distance through clear mountain air as seen by weary eyes was misleading, and we did not reach the line of tall beech trees until almost sunset when I reined Baba in and turned her to cast a look back across the expanse we'd travelled.

There had been no sign of the wolves since we'd seen them at midday, but I did not doubt that they'd be surging ahead of us seeking the blood of enemies.

So I set the master's urn aside and squatted by my horse to look the valley over while contemplating my weary bones. I couldn't long delay, and needed to search out dry wood for a fire before making camp—and the sun was sliding from the sky.

It was then that the breath caught in my throat for I saw something across from me—something tall and man-like lurked at the edge of the dense wood where I'd stood gazing not five hours before.

But it could not be a man. Its pale flesh had revealed it to me, contrasted against the grim, dark forest. The thing crept along the shadowed border of the wood with unnatural strength and speed, and I got the feeling that it only paused in its determined movements to glare at me.

There was a rigid, busy character to the actions of its distorted limbs, as though it were anxious to come after me, but the stronger sunlight past the eave of the wood warmed the slopes below us, and seemed to deflect the creature's purpose.

The anxious figure was draped in rotten rags, and the exposed flesh must have been frozen solid by the cold, but it was undaunted. It would press the edge of the sliding shadows on the east slope before the light sent it scurrying back into the darkness beneath the trees.

My hand shifted to the hilt of my sword, but I overpowered the urge to raise it and answer the unspoken challenge. Whatever this thing was that dogged me, it had raised my fierce Szgany blood with its impudence. It was clearly on my trail,

and if it did not hunger for my flesh or poor Baba's, then something else was leading it on.

I resisted the terrible thought that something about the urn impelled it forward.

With only the setting sun to hold the creature back, I clamped down on my ire and lifted the master's urn onto Baba's back before snatching up her reins and leading her east under the branches.

It seemed my follower had to wait for the sun to set before pursuing me, and I knew, oh, too wearily, that it had taken me hours to cross the valley mounted. I could only hope the creature following me would find its trek even more onerous.

I shook myself out of my reverie, slid the urn forward on the saddle and climbed up behind it, deciding to ride until well after nightfall before finding another guarded location for my camp.

10th November.

There was nothing to mark the fifth day except more travel, and another change in landscape. After a restless but thankfully uneventful night deep in the beech forest, we ate and started moving along the master's secret path, now in a more southerly direction, and also with more haste.

The beech forest had risen over a broad rounded mountain before it began to thin out and then fall away altogether as a valley opened up before us, and then widened as it continued southeast.

Soon tended fields were spreading out on the gently sloping ground, and in places, I smelled wood smoke. Later, columns of gray marked the distant chimneys of small peasant hovels—sod and stone farmhouses with ramshackle barns, and uneven fences enclosing tiny herds.

My master's map was an exacting document, and with it I passed along the banks of many flowing streams, some narrow and others broad, either with a quick canter over a public bridge, or by slowly navigating natural fords.

I was impressed with his knowledge of these lands, for I knew nothing of the places south of the mountains, save what had been told me around Szgany fires as a boy. Back then I'd heard there was a way to cross the Mangalia River. A ford there was between Ruse and Dobrich, or was that a bridge?

But, I'd need to find the Mangalia River first! Pah, a Gypsy will go and look, and if his feet are getting wet he has found a river.

It was the Szgany way to know every rock and crevice around our homes, and in our lands, and to give not one care for what lay over the horizon.

Oh, we knew how to get to the horizon, and there were always those among us who had been to the greater places and distant lands to which our tribe had spread out for generations, so a way or map could be found.

Most folk believed that Gypsies were wanderers, and had no care for home. In fact, we do not care for borders or laws of other lands, for we recognize no sovereignty but our own.

However we are practical people who know the value of compromise. My tribe had sworn a pledge of loyalty to the master because he was the strongest in the

land. There were other lords but none could compare in power and renown or offer such protection.

So we would serve him because it suited our needs, and would continue to do so until his strength waned, or until we needed something else.

Such was my rationale when I first swore the oath, but that was long ago, long before love for him had conquered my very soul.

I was left to follow the master's map and marvel at its accuracy. Yet, I had to think that all of his years had given him the time to see everything within his kingdom and jot down those marks that defined the lands around it.

And he had challenged territories also, in his early days, the stories said. As a general at war he'd marched against the Turks and every other country on his borders. So like the Gypsy, he too respected no one's sovereignty but his own.

As the peasant farms became more prosperous and fences popped up out of the green, or where I spotted smoke arising from fire or hearth, I would give a wide berth. So I kept Baba to a course center along the valley where the uncovered lands were still blessed with dark green weeds and undergrowth that choked the edges of the several small streams that converged as one noisy watercourse that followed a winding clay-bottomed way.

Several times, I drew the interest or a wave from farmers or laborers at work, but I'd taken to traveling with my large fur hat pulled low over my eyes, and the heavy collar of my coat tucked up under my thick beard, causing the whiskers to stand straight out. That harsh profile was all I gave them in reply, and in this way did I steer clear of all interaction.

I do not know whether it was the sudden presence of these tenanted lands or the general openness of the landscape, but it was near nightfall when I came to understand that I'd lost track of our wolf pack altogether.

Before this, they had appeared at intervals, in the distance, only to disappear again beneath bough and branch in cold mist, gray drizzle, or snow. But I had counted a whole day since their last sighting.

Baba was calmer with them absent from her flanks.

However, my horse still refused to settle and balked at every command or suggestion that I gave her. Instead of picking her way over uneven rock as she previously had done, she would stop and stand in place.

I assumed she was deferring to my judgment and attempted to choose a path for her, but she would only stamp, throw her head and flick her tail without moving forward one inch. I finally had to dismount and pull at the nag's rein whenever the uncooperative mood came upon her.

I quickly grew impatient with gentle persuasion, and while I refrained from whipping her, I lashed Baba with every foul word in the Szgany vocabulary. It would have been easy to suggest that the poor creature's behavior was a paralysis created by fear, but such thinking would not get either of us to our destination.

Her stubbornness irritated me no end and slowed our progress, but when she began shying at every little sound or movement, I started to remember her mulish obstinance almost fondly.

Because Baba started at everything. A pair of swallows swooped near, and the horse bucked, almost unseating me and the master's urn. Another time, the wind

rattled some dry grass, and she charged recklessly toward a fence only to veer off at the last moment instead of jumping.

While I managed to stay in the saddle, if only narrowly, my pack had come unmoored on the cantle and it fell open as it tumbled across the field.

After dismounting and tying the frightened Baba to a wild apple tree, I lavished her again with Gypsy curses before I started wearily dragging my pack through the grass, picking up what had fallen out.

As I reloaded the gear and gave the knots a final pull, I looked into my horse's eyes and asked her calmly what had gotten into her silly brain to cause her such distress. She was a fine animal, and her nervousness was out of character.

But all she managed in response was a roll of her dark eyes and flutter of long lashes before a frightened whinny escaped her.

I could only shake my head and mount, thinking that the small farms and rustic people we had passed must have been preying upon her nerves. Certainly, their scent would be everywhere and the poor horse did not understand that civilization in any form gave some protection from the wild creatures in the woods.

Baba calmed as the day wound down to sunset, and I hoped that the causes of her dismay had been left behind. We had seen few signs of habitation as the day continued. Perhaps she had grown used to the unfamiliar landscape.

The master's map continued to aid me with its discreet marks showing hidden places for making camp, eventually leading us to a secret footpath into a small forest of fir and spruce where the tree cover would keep us warmer at night, and minimize chance encounters with the local populace. In time, I found a flat-topped limestone rise that was surrounded by dense trees of every kind and age, and there I made my camp.

I opened my eyes halfway to see ice crystals twinkling where they danced in the moonlight over me. Beyond them, the clouds glowed dully behind twisted branches. I blew out a white plume of breath and as the action dispelled the moving motes of frost it also deformed my face, and I felt the whiskers tug where my beard had frozen to the blankets.

It was the middle of the night; the moon was setting. What? Oh. Hooves rapping against stone. I had awakened to the sound of my horse snorting and kicking.

"Baba!" I snapped, just as she bucked so violently that the leather rope restraining her forelegs tangled with the rear, and she fell in a struggling heap upon the rock.

I rolled clear as she dropped, but lunged quickly toward her, anxious to calm the beast before she broke a leg. She lay struggling on her side as I came near.

The horse kicked and wriggled and fussed at the ropes about her ankles.

It wasn't until my shock had brought me fully awake that I understood her fright.

The ruckus caused by Baba's dismay had drowned out the sounds from the distant forest where the wolf pack was fighting again, but this time the despairing man-like groans came more often, at times overlapping to cover our fearsome allies altogether.

To me there could be no doubt about what I heard. The surviving wolves had joined in battle, yes; but instead of one groaning mystery, the pack had challenged many.

I imagined them fighting several of the pale, distorted man-things that had dogged our footsteps, like the one that had shown itself the day before. Its malevolent glare had made it impossible to forget.

And as I listened to the battle, I stroked Baba's forehead where she still lay trembling on her side. With my chest against her withers and arm across her shoulder, I could feel the beast quivering with fear; so I hummed a song that Gypsy mothers sing to calm their children, hoping to distract my horse from the fearsome din.

Yet even as I did this, I wondered if the song was for me also, for I could not bear the echoing cries as the wolf pack's fury turned again to terror, as those sounds changed to hideous screams. I could not deny it. Something was killing the wolves!

When the cold night went quiet some minutes later, I helped poor Baba to her feet and stood with her awhile, still crooning and stroking her shaking flanks. The pair of us kept glancing into the trees that ringed us on every side. It was no longer safe there in our camp, but we dared not attempt to travel without some light—and rekindling a fire would doubtless summon the threat to us if we stayed.

Certain that neither of us could sleep but desiring warmth, I led Baba close to my blankets where I wrapped myself and lay there looking up at her dark eyes where she stood over me.

Her breathing began to slow, and my own deepened with it. I said something to cheer her about the sky turning from black to dark blue in the east.

Exhaustion must have got the better of me for I fell asleep.

...only to awaken to Baba's screams! My eyes flashed open, and I looked up at a terrifying thing standing over me. It was human in shape though its movements appeared stiff and somewhat labored. It was naked but for rotting rags that hung down from its oddly angled shoulders. These had been raised up by some trick of its distorted spine to cradle and shield the back of the creature's ugly face and head.

And it was ugly! The early morning dim spared me nothing.

Its lower jaw hung open like it had been dislocated and displayed a mouthful of sharp yellow teeth that glistened in a plume of steaming breath. The mouth was stretched very wide with the lower teeth dropping well down onto its chest as if the jawbone was hanging by muscle alone, and each time it gnashed its fangs this way, a horrific *groan* came out.

The swollen red mouth was filled with teeth that snapped behind puckering lips, and it seemed the lower jaw was not broken after all, but was native to its position below the breastbone giving the creature a horrific gaping aspect of terror.

The blubbery lips that quivered over the orifice sucked at the dark blue dawn, before lashing downward at me, telescoping out from the body in a muscular ring. I slid back a foot, and the lips kissed the air by my hips—that close, I saw a finer set of hooked teeth encircling the lips themselves.

Dear master! What hideous thing was this?

It was no ghostly shape in a graveyard, or sprinkling of blue witch-light in the woods. This thing was roaring flesh and fang come to kill and to devour.

I had fallen asleep with my sword in one hand and Baba's reins in the other, but they had slipped out of sight with the horse as I drowsed. I reached for the musket that lay on my blanket by my left leg, before bellowing more from fear than fury. I heaved the gun upward to loose a single shot into the ugly creature's pale and nacreous eye.

Its hideous mouth fell open at the report, and a great groan and scream brayed out as the left side of its face was reduced to dripping gore by the lead shot. The startled beast leapt back yowling, snapping its horrible teeth as it tore at the rocks with its claws, as its remaining eye glared at me with burning hate. Did it not feel pain?

I cast aside the musket and sprang to my feet hacking at the creature with my sword, but it lunged out of reach.

It was only then that I could spare a glance to see others like it. The pale gray skin on their misshapen bodies moved against the black forest near the edge of our camp, and showed poor Baba's plunging hooves in sharp relief as they swarmed her on every side.

I charged forward to hack at my own opponent and the sword cut a deep black furrow in its belly. I slashed on and on until the creature slipped into the trees at its back.

Wheeling about, I saw in the twilight that Baba's attackers appeared more dead than alive.

Their bodies were broken in places; the skin and muscle was torn to expose dripping innards and sundered veins. Their forms had a flattened, or crushed appearance as if they had spent much time with great weight pressing down upon them like they'd been caught in glacial snows or avalanches, been swept away in landslides or been buried in a grave.

Their limbs had been locked in contorted positions and their faces were twisted beyond all reason; the crushing effect had shifted eyes loose of the bony sockets themselves, and the features were smeared all over their pulpy heads.

I drew the pistol from my belt and with sword raised took a step toward the fiends as their claws gouged strips of hide and flesh from my lunging horse. Baba's screams were answered by the monsters' gibbering moans as their ghastly mouths kept sweeping open and lashing outward to latch against the bloody flesh on my mount's neck and back.

It was then that I understood, to my great horror, the simple but deadly usage of the small hooked teeth that ringed those awful lips for as the creatures' hideous mouths stretched outward these curved spines caught in Baba's flesh.

With jerking motions of their upper bodies, the monsters set these sharp anchors in place then they pulled and heaved until the skin and flesh began to tear away from the poor horse exposing the muscle and veins beneath. As blood sprang from Baba's wounds the ghoulish creatures latched on again; their horrid mouths dribbling thick red blood where their lips pressed tight to the streaming flesh.

The skin on their misshapen faces went scarlet as they fed.

But there was nothing I could do with five of them upon her, rending her flesh and feeding upon it. She kicked and jumped within their clutches, but despite their mangled shapes the strength within the beasts was more than a match for the horse.

I quickly thrust my guns into my pack and shouldered the bag while the creatures heaved at poor Baba until she hung suspended by their claws and gorging lips.

Biting back my fear and sadness, I swept up the master's urn and slung its strap across my shoulders. With this burden before me, I held my sword high and hacked at the nearest boughs before charging out of the circle of trees and plunging recklessly into the darkness.

It left me with a heavy heart to abandon my faithful Baba to such a gruesome fate, but my loyalty to the master was a match to her own.

11th November.

I thank our patron saint that the attack came so near to sunup and that it was a clear morning, for it appeared that on this sixth day of travel that my pursuers were delayed by the light that poured from the red sky behind the distant mountains.

Or were they simply engorged after their feast of my poor mount? That notion had my blood boiling and I wished that some of my tribe were near, that I might lead a group of Szgany warriors to avenge the cruelty of these unnatural things, for we Gypsies value loyalty as a king does his gold.

But alone such thoughts were folly, for I had no interest to feel the bloody kisses of those fiends, and by myself, I knew I would not long avoid their embrace.

So, I continued on afoot, my exhaustion growing with each yard I covered; but there was no chance now for rest or safety, and I wished to make the most of Baba's sacrifice. If the creatures were delayed by food and sun, then I would be able to get many hours ahead of them.

The map showed that I was close to my goal, but that the coast was still a long way for a man to walk cross-country with so many burdens. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was not finished with this ordeal, that the creature that had come at me alone had not died from his wound, and that he and his brothers were on a greater mission that could not be turned aside by a mere Gypsy servant or the meal they had made of his loyal mount. They had come for me, but it seemed Baba had been an irresistible feast to a hunger that overwhelmed their darker purpose.

If they came for me now, I would not survive.

I had stopped mere minutes after my escape to reload my musket and check my pistol, and an hour after that I paused again for a lonely breakfast of cold sausage and bread. I opened the second bottle of slivovitz to raise a cheer to Baba's part in the journey and brushed away a tear knowing I could not have made it so far without her.

I continued on with the master's urn swinging from my shoulders before me, my sword firmly in hand, in much the same way as I had since first starting upon the path, and I was soon crossing flat meadows and trudging over rolling hills that would lead me to the coast, and to Varna.

I saw few people, but I had kept my distance from the road where it followed a small river a quarter mile to my right and I answered what hails of friendship came to me with silence. None of them could know my mission or the value of my burden, and those who attempted contact would never know their luck, for I had been commanded by the master to kill anyone who might guess my purpose.

Near the end of the day, I mounted a rise to rest and eat and when I chanced to look back I was startled to see the movement of the creatures again. They were following me by keeping to the shadows where they could, under the overhang of the riverbank or beneath the shaggy trees that grew beside the river. The creatures moved from shelter to shelter, reluctant to bear the full burden of sun for which they were not made, but unwilling or unable to let me escape.

It was slow going for them, and they were still far behind, and whether they had feasted or not, the sunlight was exacting a punishing toll, for steam leapt from the skin of any it touched.

Their game was clear enough to me, however. They'd move through the light of day and press upon my trail to wear me down, so that in darkness they might overtake me. I'd be ripped to ribbons, and my dear master would be lost forever, or worse.

I hurried on with all possible speed, my limbs aching, my lungs and heart laboring. My clothing was soaked through with sweat, and I had been stifled beneath it in the heat of the sun.

Continuing at a staggering jog, I nibbled sausage and cheese, but had lost my waterskin in the last attack. My tongue was swelling in my mouth for I had shied away from the narrow river that was so close but acted as a roadway for my enemies.

I could only eat more after I could slake my thirst, but each time I thought of it I grew depressed. The miles that passed seemed to put me farther from safety, for I'd progressed from the rolling hills to flatlands where a few trees, a road and riverbed offered little defense. I could only lurch forward, chased by the fiends that grew nearer still.

As the shadows grew longer and the sun slid behind the distant hills, I caught sight of thatched and shingled roofs ahead that marked a village. I had abandoned the master's secret path when I realized the road was the only way I might find relative safety. While this way to the coast was well-marked on the map, I knew I would not survive another night in the wild.

But when I struck the road, some strange feeling of urgency thrilled along my nerves and I began to run over the bed of small stones that snaked to the south through the gently sweeping landscape. At times the road drifted near the river on my right where its waters babbled in a cloak of bluish mist.

Then, I saw that the watercourse turned toward the road ahead of me and went under it where the locals had built a small bridge of arched and solid stone. There

the boards upon the bridge sloped gently upward between two walls of rock. I paused before it to curse my luck, and then set a boot upon the nearest plank.

For if the ghouls had followed the stream then...

My suspicion was proven before I finished the thought, for over the side of this expanse clambered one of their number.

I froze when I recognized the very fiend that had attacked me in the forest. His face was a ruin where he glared at me with a single eye.

He was tall and wrapped in rags that barely covered his body. The pale skin that showed through was gray and raw in places, but somehow blended with the mist that filled the riverbed and crept into the air around the bridge. The creature's eye shone now, a sickly blue, with glimmering green rings glowing around it in the gloom.

The eerie fog must have protected him for the last rays of the setting sun no longer caused his flesh to steam. But in the growing dim, his ugly black maw opened and closed grotesquely, flexing outward to show many shiny teeth on the pulsing ring of flesh.

I pulled my pistol and shot, but the ball went wide, so I drew my sword to make a stand. My heart labored with doubt, for I had not the time or inclination to set my master's urn aside, and yet strapped over my chest it was clearly in harm's way.

For this thing, despite its injuries, seemed to be invigorated by the mist and made well by the approaching night.

But there was nothing for it. I lunged ahead, slashing at its chest. The blade made a deep cut from its shoulder to belly as it dodged, but the creature felt nothing, and lashed out with its claws to catch my gleaming blade.

Heaving back, I managed to wrench my weapon free but I stumbled against one of the low stone walls that lined both sides of the bridge. As I struggled to gain my balance, the ghoul's hideous mouth swept open again, and from the distended orifice came a horrific moan that caused my heart to sink for its call was echoed by similar voices to the north.

The others were coming fast.

The one-eyed creature leapt recklessly toward me, pushing my sword aside as it slipped its arms around my master's urn.

Its breath stank of corrupted flesh, and the purpled lips were dotted with suppurating pustules where they puckered in the air near my face.

I slid one arm around the urn for the creature's grip was strong and it was too close for me to strike with my curved blade. I dropped my pistol and it clattered on the bridge.

The creature kicked my thigh and heaved on the urn, dragging me away from the wall; the makeshift belt around my shoulders twisted, the leather creaking as my precious burden was pulled from my grasp.

The ghoulish thing snarled at me and blew stinging spittle at my face as it wrenched and tugged at the urn. I struggled to keep my balance and turned my sword enough to slash the creature's side, but just as it heaved and swung me about, a noise burst from inside the urn.

"Urrrghzz!" came a sound like a grating growl. Angry and wet it crackled in the air, and the thing attacking me froze.

The bright eye in the ghoulish face lit up, and something like a lustful smile pulled its fleshy lips away from its sharp teeth. Paused it did to gloat at the defiant noise from within the urn, and in that second I found my footing, and stabbed my sword upwards. The point slid in just between the creature's lower jaw and its throat and came out through the fiend's remaining eye.

The creature screamed and released the urn, pushing most violently against my sword arm, until at last it staggered free of my blade and fell off the span into the mist.

Barely pausing to snatch up my pistol, I continued over the bridge at a run for I could waste no time with the ghoul's partners coming fast for me. I hurried toward the orange lights of the village hoping there was help there, or that many lanterns gathered would be enough to repel the creatures that followed me.

I was surprised when I arrived at the village that there was no sign of any local militia mustering a response to the battle at the bridge, but I realized though the night was still, the sounds from the struggle had not carried over the distance.

It seemed that the groans issuing from my attacker and his brothers were either meant for my ears alone, or they were a common enough occurrence that the village folk attributed them to some natural force unworthy of investigation. Sadly, I was unlikely to learn more, since the secrecy of my mission would not suffer the acquaintance of any local that I might query.

My asking questions would only provoke the same from others.

The Fortress Inn was a low stone building at the village's edge. It was one story in height, made of heavy blocks and entered through a narrow door comprised of thick oak and iron bracing. The building's few windows were stoutly shuttered also and once closed would have made a formidable castle of the place. I came in through the front door over which hung a shield-shaped sign marked with the inn's name.

There were only three rooms on the large main floor that were offered for rent, and of those two were occupied, and another had been put aside for a merchant who was traveling from the coast, and due to arrive at any moment.

The innkeeper was a heavysset man with a thick moustache who gave away his Slovak heritage in his accent and bearing; but he was a seemly and courteous fellow, as I have often found them to be in the presence of ready gold.

He lamented that the only accommodation he could offer me was a mattress in the small attic over the back of the building. It would not be fancy, and might be musty, but I was assured it was a most comfortable place for a weary traveler.

"For the master is weary, is he not?" he asked, looking me up and down, and I quaked for a moment at mention of "master" but my alarm diminished quickly when I realized he was simply addressing me formally. This I attributed to my opening of a coin purse when I had first entered to inquire about a room, and making sure the lamplight glinted off the gold within his line of sight.

I accepted the attic room and ordered a dinner of bread, meat pie and cider. While I waited, I kept the urn and my things piled by my knees beneath the table, and when he delivered my drink I queried the proprietor about the means of getting a berth upon a ship.

"To work?" he asked incredulously. It was clear in his expression that he judged me too old for such employment.

"No, for travel, only," I explained. "There is a great distance I need to go."

"Well," he said, with a curious flare of his eyes. "Then you must ask the harbormaster when you reach Varna. He will know which ships are going where *and* when."

I sat bolt upright. "Am I not in Varna?"

"You are at Aksakovo, a village on the road to the port," the innkeeper said and laughed. "The Black Sea is six miles south from here."

He returned to his business with a smile, crossing the room to an open space behind the bar where an old woman worked over a stove.

I lifted my drink, but almost dropped it when a clatter arose at the entrance. Fearing the worse, I spun around reaching for my sword; but it was only a man in work clothes standing before the open front door rubbing his large hands together and grinning before he entered and made his way to the bar.

I turned back to my table breathing a sigh of relief that the newcomer was not one of my creatures. Either they were fearful of so many people, or they were reluctant to attack with their leader injured—if leader he was. Yet, I could not shake the feeling that they would come again. The strange desire I had seen in the creature's face when he had his arms wrapped around the urn had hinted as much.

Then I wondered if I hadn't had some small piece of luck, as I remembered the clear sky. Perhaps it was the full moon that kept the creatures at bay, for I had seen the great disk rising, setting fire to the dark just before I had staggered the last few feet to the inn.

Thought of them brought me back to the urn and the strange growl that had issued from it during the fight on the bridge. I still had not had time to investigate it for myself, and I gasped, suddenly worried that the noise would come again, and draw the attention of others. I lifted my pack and set it atop the container, knowing the thick cloth would insulate it, should any noise begin.

After my simple meal, I paid the innkeeper with a gold coin. The big Slovak exposed a crooked row of rotten teeth beneath his moustache that he promptly used to test the metal by giving it a hearty bite.

The man pocketed the money, smiling distractedly as he showed me along the inn's single hallway and to the rear wall where a rough wooden ladder led up to the attic.

"I am sure you will be warm and dry. We keep the flour up there!" he said, with a laugh. "Will you join us by the fire for drinks and stories? Many would be curious to hear your tale."

That notion caused me to tug at my beard and pull up my collar to obscure my face a little more. Such a public gathering would not do, so I told him I had come far and was leaving early, though I would appreciate some breakfast if there was any when I arose for the day.

He assured me that his wife would be cooking sausages before the sunrise, so I thanked him and carried my pack and musket halfway up the ladder where I saw a simple mattress of tick and straw that raised a cloud of dust when I threw my bag on it.

I started back down, but the innkeeper was too fast and had already hoisted the master's urn up for me to take.

"*Shoof!*" he said, wrinkling his nose, and eyeing the urn suspiciously. He had caught a whiff of its contents, but made no comment as he passed it to me and wiped his hands on his apron.

I frowned and heaved the urn up into the attic, before accepting the chamber pot and small brass candleholder the man held up to me.

Nodding my thanks, I climbed into the attic, and carried the master's urn over to the mattress where I knelt, suddenly overcome with curiosity. I quickly removed the covering blanket, feeling a twinge of fear when I noticed streaks of the ghoulish black blood upon the cloth as I folded it.

And then I held the glowing candle up over the vent. The grating had a rusty tinge to it and from it came a dank, coppery smell that I noticed quickly filled the attic space with the scent of decay. A draft played about my whiskers as I nosed the scent and I judged that the urn's odor would not likely disturb the rest of the inn if I covered it again with the blanket.

I held the candle gingerly in one hand, angling the brass holder so its light would penetrate the vent after I had shifted the dampers out of the way. Sadly, my curiosity was not well rewarded because I could only make out a peculiar dull, reddish gleam in the dark interior, and perhaps a contour of some shape where the crimson turned from purple to shadow like something round and fat was nestled in there.

I got a sudden sense that there had been some small movement, but then my vision blurred as my weariness took hold, and I rubbed my eyes as I leaned against the urn. How could I trust my senses? And I dared not disturb whatever lay within, so I closed the dampers, set the blanket back atop the vent, and made myself comfortable beside it on the mattress.

I fell asleep before I took my third deep breath.

Chapter 5

FROM THE GYPSY HORVAT'S JOURNAL

12th November, 1893. *Bound for Africa*

"*For the dead travel fast,*" I muttered the old saying to myself with some irony as I trudged onto the crowded wharves at Varna the following morning, my arms trembling and back aching from my burdens and many labors.

My sleep at the Fortress Inn had been deep, but not restful, seeming to have aggravated my many physical discomforts; and my pains were little helped by the ration of slivovitz that I had sipped along the way.

The miles had passed slowly after sunrise, marked by a gently rolling landscape home to farmer's fields, vineyards or orchards where tight stands of apple, plum and cherry trees grew—and in other places wild bush dominated still with beech and fir branches hanging over the road.

Everywhere the air was growing warmer and moist, but that did little to buoy my spirits.

The urn had seemed to have increased in weight with every step I took along the master's knotted paths, and this relatively short journey from Aksakovo to the Black Sea port with the rising sun glowing on my left shoulder had worn away whatever desperate energy remained to me.

I had slept deeply even though I should have been vigilant. It was only my good luck that the creatures had not attacked the village in the dead of night, nor peered in shuttered window or pounded on door, and the innkeeper had reported nothing untoward occurring.

As anxious as I was about my impending trip to foreign lands, and as dark as was my sheltered anguish at the thought of leaving my home and people, those ghoulish creatures were one thing I would be pleased to leave far behind.

Sea birds shrieked as I took my first great breaths of the open ocean air, and I found myself again both repulsed and intoxicated by the peculiar mixture of scents: the smell of fish, saltwater, tar and decay. I had found the pungent air startling at a distance, but had grown used to it as I approached the docks. However, smelling it now as I looked at the oily water that lapped at the pilings, I was gripped for a moment by despair.

For where I stood and pondered all of that seawater, the teachings in the master's book played in my mind. The lesson had been simple.

Always the instructions insisted the master's remains be kept in a dry environment, coming in contact with no liquid save blood. Blood was essential to the urn's internal workings, hidden as they were and blood would provide the essential liquid for life and growth. Nothing else could be tolerated in that closed system, for any other fluid would be poison.

Additionally, the point was made time and again that the urn's contents had to be kept away from moving or running water of any kind or the results would be dire.

And yet, here I was about to take this urn and its contents on a long journey over the sea. The thought had caused the quiver of doubt that ran along my spine, and held me paralyzed.

It was only the movement of strangers on the dock that broke me from this state, but I kept my face away from them as they passed, and paid little attention to their manner or garb, content to keep to myself and guard the secret of my travel and the choice that lay ahead.

I glanced to either side of me at sandy beach and tall trees that followed the gently curving shore as far as the eye could see. Here and there, suspended walkways made of timber and pilings stretched into the water as rough docks from which men delivered goods to small boats that waited. Still more, fishermen perhaps, went about their business on other similar watercraft.

Close at hand I saw that a great mountain of rock had been quarried and dumped in the shallows and from this in stages, a long pier was being built out into the depths. It was reinforced by massive timbers and in places covered with planking to create a travel way for cargo-laden wagons.

These trundled out to the ships that were tied to the farthest timbers. Past them, other masted vessels were anchored either awaiting their turn at the dock, or were loading and unloading via several smaller boats I noted ferrying goods and passengers between them and the shore.

A great deal of activity surrounded the massive construction project, and it was clear to me that the new wharf had been pressed into service despite its unfinished state, forming a platform for ships that moored to it out where the water was deepest.

I was too wise to do as the innkeeper had suggested and pursue passage to Africa through any official channel, as it was my duty to move the urn without leaving any sign or trail. People would ask questions if I blithely sought out passage and divulged my destination—the harbormaster might ask me even more.

Instead, I had elected to take a more difficult and possibly more dangerous route. I would go along the great wharf and make inquiries there about the specific ships that I found docked, and ask where each was bound.

From there I could expand my knowledge of the trip ahead to quietly and safely find a way. I knew that some of these sea-going men might see my naiveté as an opportunity to take advantage, but I knew that I had enough ready gold to satisfy the greediest of criminal hearts—and should any bad faith enter the deal, my sword would make up the difference.

I booked passage on an American schooner called the ALLISON JANE that was bound for Morocco where it would resupply and take on more cargo before making the Atlantic crossing.

Its captain was a short, powerfully built man with leathery skin darkened by many suns who described this journey to me in English.

He wore a thick wool cap and sweater, loose-fitting canvas trousers, coat and rugged boots. These seemed to do nothing to guard him against the November air that he found chill, a discomfort that he illustrated by repeatedly rubbing his hands together and blowing on them.

His name was Duvall, and he seemed uninterested in my business or eventual destination once I'd made it plain that I was not headed to North America. He assured me that I could find another ship to take me wherever I wished to go once I had reached Morocco. Ships frequently steamed and sailed north to Europe and south along the African coast after putting into the port of Casablanca.

Aside from his preoccupation with the cold, the captain had seemed more interested in the gold coins I counted out for him than the story I had fabricated to maintain my anonymity. When I recognized his complete disinterest, the tale died unfinished upon my lips.

Captain Duvall said that as the only passenger, I should report to the wharf at noon. Since the ALLISON JANE was bound to set sail one hour after that, he warned that he would not wait for me.

With this two-hour deadline in mind, I hurried about my final preparations for the journey ahead, carrying the master's urn slung forward over my chest by its leather strap with its true dimensions concealed by a thick blanket. My pack hung across my back, sometimes tangling with the Cossack sword and musket where they hung from the opposite shoulder.

My outlandish appearance and obvious burdens drew some notice from those citizens of Varna that I passed, though I doubted I was recognized as anything more than an oddity.

Life in the master's castle left me with few outward garments that would mark me as a Gypsy. The exigencies of living atop the cold mountain had forced me to adopt the heavy fur and leather garments favored by the Slovaks.

Had it been summer as I made my way along the Varna streets, then my colorful riding clothes might have given away my Szgany heritage by their pattern and style; but it had been so long since I'd been to the camps of my own kind that the traditional clothing I still carried in my pack had become rare and threadbare, and I had grown too used to dressing in the furry garb of a mountain man to consider my own for use as anything more than underclothing.

My physical appearance, however, might have drawn the suspicions of the locals, for I had the broad and weighty cheeks of the men of my clan behind my beard, divided top and bottom by a thick, sweeping moustache, and vertically by a bulbous nose that was similar to both my father's and dear mother's.

I was told that generations of eking a living out of the high mountain passes was responsible for the thick chest and ribcage common to my people, and the wide shoulders supporting strong arms.

That collection of powerful attributes was mounted somewhat incongruously upon a set of long, well-muscled legs; the result of the Szgany people's constant roaming.

I kept my hair in Gypsy style, so it fell in long, loose curls to shoulder length, but was cut in a tight line above my bushy brows. My skin was the color of strong tea, though the flesh upon my face and hands was a degree darker, weathered and stained by wind and sun.

These characteristics could apply to many of the peoples that lived in the Carpathians, and would likely be deemed as such if not for my accent which was heavy from years of speaking only to my brother Gypsies and on the rare occasion to my master. This disparity had assured that all of the proud tongues I had been taught for use in my special service now sprang from my lips with the lilting tone of a language that was made for singing.

My appearance taken with *that* and the locals may indeed have marked me for a Gypsy and they then might have lavished the scorn upon me that was sometimes reserved for my folk when we travel.

However, I did not intend to be in Varna long enough to awaken any such prejudice.

Varna was a bustling city spread out around a broad bay that opened on a wide swath of the north-western Black Sea coast. It was a gigantic collection of structures to me, someone who had previously only been exposed to the master's castle and Slovak villages, the sprawling camps of my people and the mountains and wide valleys between. In bald terms, to me Varna was a vast sea of buildings that I had never imagined possible.

But, I had no time to marvel with my transportation preparing for launch, and my curiosity was further subdued when I met the eye of a man soon after. He was hurrying toward me past the storefronts, dressed as a merchant with gold and

silver upon his hands, and at his throat—a contrast to his fine but otherwise sober attire.

He must have caught my glance at his jewelry for his fingers quickly came up to clasp at his collar, while fear filled his eye. He hurried away from me casting his look of dismay left and right as he crossed the street, and I had no conception of how I had offended him.

Had he recognized my Szgany heritage—we are often characterized as thieves and miscreants by “civilized” folk—or had I simply looked well-armed, outlandish and wild, and therefore worthy of fear and suspicion?

I would never know, but the incident was enough to warn me, and ever after did I keep my eyes down, and away from any natives of Varna who approached. I had decided that since I was a simple fellow from the country I was bound to cause offenses I did not understand that would draw attention I could not afford.

So, I looked for places to do my shopping as close to the docks as possible arranging for supplies, and a change of clothing since my own garments were worn and much needed replacement, and would be ill-suited to the African climate that awaited.

The master had told me little of my eventual destination, and so I had been left to consult the older Gypsy warriors who were still spry enough to serve with the castle guard.

From these, I heard many strange things repeated from old tales that I remembered as a boy about Africa being a land of uncanny beasts and mythical monsters, and few knew more than this.

However, some of these men recalled relatives who had wandered the rolling world and in ships had sailed the coast of that distant place. Time and again were they told of the heat, and the rains. This Dark Continent, it seemed, was a vast forest that burned under an equatorial sun if it was not drowning under tropical storms.

Since my clothing was suited to mountain living, I thought it wise to select new gear for the southern lands I was to visit, and in the process further obscure my true identity.

I found a clothier who offered garments “off the rack” or “tailored-to-suit.” As I had no time to wait for refinements, I was lucky to find some sturdy travel garments that bore a Western European cut in terms of style.

I also purchased two pairs of canvas workpants, light cotton undergarments, and two thick wool shirts that were a little snug around the belly, but I imagined privation in my near future might diminish any extra fat upon my frame.

I bought a heavy canvas coat and some sturdy leather boots that I would take and alternate with the horsehide pair I still wore from my journey. Then, I bought a wide-brimmed felt hat, that I could use when we reached a warmer climate, but I could not bear to part with my fur hat yet, so stored the new in my bag for later use.

The clothier looked me up and down before saying, “You still look like a Gypsy.” He clicked his tongue. “It’s got to be the beard...”

But I kept the beard. I knew my eyes and skin and the accent from my tongue might betray me as Szgany, also. Would I cut those off, too?

I stuffed my new purchases into my pack and made a short walk from the clothier to a dry goods store where I purchased oil for the traveler's lamp I carried and more matches; I also added another powder flask to my possessions and a bag of lead shot. I felt certain I had enough percussion caps to discharge the combined load I was carrying for my guns, so I did not buy more.

I had lost the blankets I used for my bedding, and my waterskin during the attack in which the ghouls had killed my poor Baba, so I replaced both and added a second waterskin, remembering the rumored heat of the country to which I was going.

I asked the fellow if he sold slivovitz because my own supply of the precious liquor was running out, and he spoke of a shop and began to give me complicated directions.

But I cut him off, as I was suddenly filled with a sense of urgency that my time was running short, so I cast about the store and added two flasks of peppermint schnapps that I found available there, before paying for my order and hurrying back toward the docks to where I remembered passing a butcher shop.

After filling my order of sausage, dried meat, nuts and cheese the butcher, a kindly and large-featured man, had looked bewildered when I asked for three large bottles of pig's blood. He had been taken aback, and a suspicious look began to form in his features until he saw my open coin purse and the master's gold within.

He was a Slovak, after all, and I knew that such open commerce would immediately swing to my favor, since they are a practical people despite their excesses who were no lovers of poverty. I knew I'd be able to make the exchange if I could shine enough gold in his eye.

Indeed, the display replaced the questions that had been forming on his lips with a broad grin that flashed beneath his curled moustache, before he left the shop floor to fill the order.

Upon his return, he even offered me, free of charge, strips of oiled canvas that I wrapped around each bottle to protect and disguise their contents. I linked these by tying a length of thick twine around their necks to carry them with my waterskins on the shoulder opposite my overstuffed pack.

Upon receipt of his payment, the butcher spit on the coins for luck.

I boarded the ALLISON JANE keeping my face down and away from the sailors who were clambering about the rigging overhead, making ready to sail. I knew that my over-burdened figure must have drawn every busy eye, but as I was still covered by my mountain clothing, I could have passed by their sight as no more than a workman delivering goods to the ship.

In time they would know of their passenger, but I would make it my habit to stay away from all interactions with them where I could. As the weather warmed, I would abandon the heavy coat and fur hat that still obscured my features, and so we would deal with introductions if some situation made them necessary.

A short bald fellow in a bright green tunic took me below deck to show me my small cabin. It was "small" on the scale of "ridiculous," being really little more than a closet on the forward side of the hold.

It could be accessed by cramped passageways that ran to either side of the main cargo area, or via a ladder that led down from a hatch overhead to the confined space just outside my door. The crew slept in hammocks in a space to the rear of the hold, and past that was the galley for food preparation and meals.

I frowned at my tiny quarters realizing I could half-recline on the wooden box that would only serve me as a “bed” if I kept my head and shoulders braced up against the ship’s sloping outer wall. I did not relish the sleep I would receive upon this voyage, but did what I could to arrange my possessions in the space provided.

I leaned my musket and sword against the wall under the small brass porthole, but tied my wide belt under my coat so I could keep my pistol and long knife hidden beneath its folds.

The smell of decay from the urn had diminished since I last had the opportunity to check and the rich coppery scent of blood now leached through its covering. This concerned me at first, until the malodorous stench of urine, pitch and mold had collected in the passage outside my cabin, and I realized that the urn’s strong aroma would likely go unnoticed.

It was while I was attempting to make some comfortable arrangement of my “bed” that a noise from the urn brought me around. It was not a sound uttered, so much as it was the effect of some movement, but there had been a quiet *thump* in the armored box that caused the sides to vibrate and my rolled blanket to fall off the top from where I had left it balanced.

I quickly pulled aside the urn’s wrapping and peered down through the vent, twisting the ornate levers until the dampers shifted away to show a pair of reddish points like bits of coal that I took to be eyes looking up at me from the utter darkness within.

In the dim light below deck it was difficult to see more, but I tried—twisting and tipping the urn to allow the weak illumination from the porthole in through the metal grate.

At one point, I thought I glimpsed a ridged, fleshy body... like a pale, veiny sausage glistening with red mucous, but the darkness inside the urn was very nearly complete.

Then the shape within, only glimpsed, rolled and disappeared suddenly beneath a black, brown mud that issued a sudden whiff of rotten blood with the action.

I realized that in time the close confines and warming temperatures might worsen the smell enough to draw attention. The thought had occurred to me while procuring my supplies in Varna, and I had decided that draping the vent with a piece of linen imbued by the strong peppermint schnapps would still allow the flow of air, but offer some covering scent to the noisome smell, especially so with the door or porthole open.

Such consideration was natural to me when it came to the care of my master’s remains and I considered it an honor to be so charged. For the past three decades I had faithfully executed my special duties and those that could be considered mundane, and in this service I had come to see his comforts as my own.

I remember that cleaning his combs and brushes had tested this bond, for I was loath to discard any of the magnificent hairs that I found clinging to his grooming items.

In time, I had acquired a goodly sized ball of the dark and precious filaments that I could not part with, for I regarded them as highly as I did my own life.

Thought of this brought a pang, for in the pressing urgency of my current mission, I had been unable to bring the item due to weight considerations, and it now lay behind with my other personal things, few of which I held as dear to me.

Overhead, the captain's strong voice rang from side to side, and there was an immediate explosion of loud activity as many feet pounded the deck. I covered the master's urn and stowed it beneath my pack by the bed, then took some solace in the fact that while the cabin was small, I could secure it with lock and key.

With the first motion of the vessel, I climbed the ladder topside and found an unoccupied space by the rail away from the busy crew where I could watch as the ALLISON JANE moved away from the Varna docks and the many other ships anchored there.

We cut a quiet path through the water's mirror surface, slowly picking up speed as the sails flapped weakly before catching the ocean breeze.

Ahead of the wind, the schooner traveled quickly out of the bay and on the way we surged past many shore-bound humps of hills and twisted jetties of native stone.

I chanced then to see a pale, gray thing on the shore atop one of the rocky outcroppings where grew a tangle of dense conifers and brush. The thick overcast must have given it liberty to be about at such a time, though I did notice that it would not come far from the shadows of trees that grew in abundance there.

I saw first one ghoul, and then another of the gray creatures stand, and then more; their crushed, disorganized faces twisted with malice, glaring from the underbrush as they watched my leave-taking. I thanked the gods I was not to spend another night on shore, for I counted 16 of the brutes there.

My Szgany brothers sang merry songs. Why not the Gypsy Horvat? It is said that the Szgany tribes find voice for music in the darkest of times, and yet... The words were there for me, but the tune was lost, and my heart was too bruised to find it.

I was tired. My voice was a hoarse thing made raw from the cold wind in the mountains, and like my body, was worn and weary. True, I had accomplished a great feat, journeying through ice and peril from the castle to the sea, and overcoming my fears to bring the master's urn the first—but was it the *most* dangerous leg of my travail? So I hoped, but now...

Off to places unknown.

I had my possessions, my mission, and the master's urn, but with the loss of my poor Baba had come the realization that I had little else left to care for. I was leaving the only other things I had ever found familiar: my Gypsy brothers, the castle on its mountain perch, and my years of faithful service in its halls.

And yet, I had that service still. It was my only companion, but these duties that had caused my heart to swell with pride in the past now clouded it with doubt, and while I loved my master, in his diminished state I was left to suffer alone.

There, in my isolation, even his disdain might have cheered me.

I was too tired to overcome the feelings of my despairing heart, so I toiled at rest and passed the first few days in my tiny cabin—crammed into the space, too exhausted to consider sleep or comfort.

There was no song in my heart, but a story to tell? Yes, that was it, to pass the time when I was awake in my cabin and dared not venture out on the deck and bear the scrutiny of the sailors who moved about the ship, or dangled in its rigging despite the joyful magic they had worked upon me.

I was cheered, it seemed by those brawny angels that tended the vessel, for the sailors sang at their work and at their leisure, and I found it heartening to hear any of their songs.

Their voices rolled over the deck above me during the day, and at night muted, sweet ballads were crooned to the sway of the ship sending mysterious notes shifting ghost-like through the shadows as the hull boomed and moaned around me.

But their spirit cheered me, and with the lightening of my own heart came alignment with my greater mission in the service of the master. I realized when I boarded the schooner Allison Jane that I would have the time and leisure to despair, or to do my duty, and tend my courage for the days ahead.

So I began my journal, a story of all that had transpired, and if the saint preserved me, would continue to unfold as I moved the master's remains toward his South African ally. I started at the events that first occurred when the westerners had attacked my master, and sent me overland through peril, pain and loss and put me aboard a ship with the urn so close at hand, and now so quiet.

I wrote it by the light seeping through the porthole when I could not sleep in the day, when the urn often went still and the seabirds called overhead, or in the soft light from my small lamp at night when the sailors hummed and timbers creaked as we rose and fell on the rolling swells.

The dangers of the desperate journey had kept me from attempting such a record while still on Transylvanian soil, but the notion was born there in the night when fear kept me from sleep, and so I had purchased a journal, ink and pen with my other supplies in Varna, thinking that the sturdy deck of the ship, the long voyage, and my isolation would make this cabin the better place to write it.

I know that keeping a journal flies in the face of my master's wisdom, but writing it in the same ancient tongue in which he wrote his book of instructions would protect the contents from any but his eyes should he ever be brought back whole and well from the disembodied state he now was in.

If the chronicle was not simply lost. With the vast ocean swirling around us and pitching many miles deep beneath the fragile vessel, it was more likely to disappear into the depths with its chronicler and all else.

So why would I do this when my master had forbade any such iteration of our retreat? I was as moved as any man might be when far from home in alien surrounds, with nothing more to remind him of his past than his memories, and nothing to link him to the present but his actions.

Perhaps this was a letter to my dear master, and should I not survive to see his return, he would know the love with which his loyal Gypsy had served him.

Writing that, I could not help but set a protective palm upon the urn's covered surface to feel its warmth. It was true, since coming aboard, the urn had been mostly silent, but it had grown warmer by the day.

We had set sail for Morocco on the 12th of November, 1893 and headed south for the strait at Bosphorus that we entered on the 18th before making good speed through fine weather with little to report in way of experience. The moon appeared in the first nights that followed, as the clouds permitted, waning as we traveled west.

The ship passed so swiftly through the scrutiny of Turkish inspectors and customs officers that I imagined some kind of payment had been made. There was much jocularly and back slapping between one sashed and mustachioed official and Captain Duvall after a small bag was passed from the latter to the former as they stood on the wharf.

I watched this through the porthole in my cabin, for I stayed below decks at that time, with the master's urn disguised beneath blankets and hidden behind my pack with my loaded musket and my sword. The captain had said that I should only come up on deck if he called, but added that such formalities or searches were unlikely.

What would I have done had there been a search? I could not say for I could only imagine the worst if customs officials had discovered the master's urn. In such a case, there would have been another exchange of money, or of blood.

On the 19th, we passed through the Dardanelles with the winds playing to our favor in this instance, and I overheard sailors saying one to the other, that it seemed the tides themselves had turned to speed our passage through the strait from the Sea of Marmara and on into the Aegean.

The coming week was sure to go slowly, but it would give me more time to recover from my exertions in the mountains, and to heal whatever strains and bruises remained. Perhaps I could use the time for simple reflection. Much had changed in my life, and I needed to regain my strength for what lay ahead.

I continued to feed myself with preserved fruits I had purchased in Varna and other things: nuts, bread and sausage. I am offered a bowl of the crew's fare at sunup and sunset. I should have declined, as acceptance brought one of the crewmen near my quarters to deliver it, but decided that a refusal would have drawn more unwelcome interest than any glimpse a sailor might get inside my cabin or whiff of its close atmosphere.

21st November, 1893.

More changes have come to the contents of my master's urn. The daily ration of pig's blood was having an interesting effect, though the degree of these evolutions did not become apparent until we had traveled well into the Mediterranean Sea.

One night after sunset, strange, wet, sticky noises began to issue through the metal grating in the lid, and when I peered in to investigate, I was able to see orange, ember-like eyes looking back up at me, and in the low lamplight I could easily see movement within.

Again, the body was worm-like with ridges denoting sections and the eyes were set in a bulbous knob at one end. They watched me for a time before turning away, and the bloated shape rolled and wriggled until it was buried beneath the thick gore there.

I was unable to see more for the black substance that had once stained the bottom and sides of the container had continued to grow upward and now covered the inside of the lid. There it sent thin black veins onto the outer surface through the vent while lowering viny tendrils that dripped like icicles and formed an obscuring blind inside.

I feared tampering with the dampers, for the web-like forms had wrapped around them in such a way as to keep the vent open. I resisted further inspection and adding more light to my investigations since the thing I had glimpsed inside clearly preferred the shadows.

23rd November, 1893.

We passed by Gibraltar and through the strait today, and are due to reach Casablanca, Morocco in the morning. The “rock” was magnificent and its promontory had reminded me of the mountain upon which the master’s castle sits. I was overcome with homesickness momentarily, but the feeling was quickly dispelled as my mind returned to the odd occurrences that had been reported on the ship.

LATER

and the ship was quiet, though I doubted that meant anyone aboard was sleeping soundly. Strange things had been occurring for two nights now. November 21st had one crewman complaining to Captain Duvall that he’d seen a ghost. Duvall had him clapped in irons for drinking on duty, as I learned from a sailor who had been sent to query the crew about the disturbance.

On the night of November 22nd, two more sailors had reported a glowing green face looking down at them from the crow’s nest high atop the mainmast.

I wished that I could keep watch with the others, for I had a keen interest of my own. Stories of a glowing face had reminded me too much of what I had witnessed in the master’s tower, and I prayed that some fell thing had not followed me and the urn, or worse had accompanied us for the duration of the trip.

23rd November, 1893.

I did not know the time. The sky was black. A sailor had reported seeing a face in the crow’s nest again, and Captain Duvall investigated before ordering the crew to stop the chatter about ghosts. He had also released the previously

imprisoned sailor without further penalty or apology, and then called us all out to the deck to witness something that he said would clear the thoughts of haunting from our minds.

He had ordered the lanterns shuttered before pointing up to the mainmast, and all of us gasped at a spectral blue-green light that clung to the rigging and structure. A single glowing ball of flame had formed that had us all crying out as it suddenly rolled off the ropes and disappeared in a flash.

"That's enough, now!" Captain Duvall had grated. "Damn you fools, that's St. Elmo's fire! No harm to man or beast. No more than crickets and lightning bugs!"

The exclamation had been followed by a joyous shout as the crew was brought to realization and chastised for their superstitious thoughts.

One crewman nearest me had explained in halting English: "It's something as comes with weather sometimes. Like lightning, or a spark from flint."

I was not so easily persuaded however, for the light had reminded me of something else.

24th November, 1893.

The ship had docked in Casablanca before I met the captain in my room just past noon. I had been impressed with Duvall's stern command of his crew for it reminded me of my master. In fact, his demeanor had encouraged me to believe that he might understand my predicament, and that he would be open to some practical application of the gold I carried.

So I had begged him to meet me in my room where I might speak to him about a business proposition and he had agreed without a moment's hesitation. Life on the sea would not be long or profitable for a man prone to procrastination.

Duvall easily understood my lack of experience in seamanship, and had agreed to act as my agent and be discreet regarding my affairs as he queried other captains at the dock about buying me passage aboard a ship headed south along the coast, hopefully as far as South Africa.

However Duvall's service had proven expensive.

A stern look had come upon him as he explained that he only had a day's layover in Casablanca that would require his complete attention. The ALLISON JANE was to be inspected and supplies had to be laid in.

When I thought he was primed to reject my plea, I may have acted precipitously when I drew from my pocket the silver necklace I'd brought from the castle.

He had frowned as his eyes slid over the rubies that dotted its entire length, but a smile soon twitched at the corner of his mouth as he judged their authenticity.

"This would buy you passage around the world and more," he had grumbled, eyeing me over the chain. "Am I to take a cut from this as agent?"

"Take from its value the price for my passage to South Africa, and the rest, please receive as payment in full, Captain Duvall," I had said, shaking my head grimly. "For I hope to travel soon and most quietly."

"Ah," Duvall answered, hefting the necklace and catching it. "Soon and quiet it shall be."

I nodded when the captain left, having sealed our silent bargain.

As I awaited his return, I hoped that I could be on my way as quickly as possible. Captain Duvall had an honest look, and must have understood the necessity of having others believe his word, so I did not think he would cheat me.

Reputation would be prized in a seafaring life, since as a merchant captain he was guardian of his ship and cargo, master of his crew and judge of their fates.

The port was a busy one, but I did no more than glimpse out the porthole at the many ships of varied flags and nationalities that were tied up by crowded and bustling wharves of wood and stone.

I was sitting on my bed and listening to curious fluting music that came to me upon a warm breeze scented with spice and sewage when a monstrous braying sound rattled the ship. I chanced to peer out at a figure wrapped in cloth from head to toe who stood on a dusty pier by a hideous beast.

I knew the man must be of Muslim heritage, as I'd heard stories about their attempts to conquer my master's lands. Always were they thus described, covered in robes and veils so as not to insult their god. But the tales said that beneath the cloth were most formidable warriors with long black beards and piercing eyes, with steel armor covering their strong, dark limbs.

But what the man led by braided rein was a beast whose origin I could not guess. It was no horse, lacking all fluid lines, and was long-necked with a hump on the back of its large, square body that seemed out of place with its thin and knobby limbs. Its ugly face would not even bear description.

It pulled at the rein and as its load of heavy bags shifted, it bellowed again.

I backed away from the porthole and was glad Morocco was not my final destination, for what kind of a place could breed such a monster?

This fright put me in mind of the things we'd witnessed upon our voyage. The crew still seemed embarrassed by their dismay over St. Elmo's fire, and was anxious to put the incident behind them.

I was still concerned by the discrepancy in the reports because the first sailors had described a "green" face leering down from the mast. We'd all witnessed a blue-green ball of light over the ship that reminded me of the faerie fires I'd seen in the Transylvanian forest, and I realized that I had been through too much in my life to ever think a thing as innocent again.

And I could not forget the pale face at the castle.

Chapter 6

FROM THE GYPSY HORVAT'S JOURNAL

25th November, 1893. *The Westerner Goes South*

South Africa awaits!

Captain Duvall had returned to the ALLISON JANE two hours after our discussion to tell me that he had booked passage for me upon the WESTERNER, claiming that he had done so for only a fraction of the silver necklace's value. As

he had not requested any additional money or valuables for acting as my agent, I could only imagine that the portion remaining to him had been great indeed.

The WESTERNER was a steamship of some age and history that could also operate as a sailing ship. Many vessels that were exclusively steamers or sailing schooners like the ALLISON JANE carried cargo up and down the African coast and from all points of the compass there, and many of those subsidized their operation by taking passengers in simple rooms reserved for that purpose.

The WESTERNER would do the same, taking me south in stages, and from port to port, with the ship picking up or delivering passengers and cargo as the opportunities arose.

Without further discussion, Duvall had given me my ticket and drawn a small map upon a crumpled piece of newsprint to where I would find the WESTERNER's berth.

He said it was not far, and as I had awaited Duvall with my possessions packed and ready to go; I was soon standing on the dock before my transport to South Africa.

Duvall had informed me that the WESTERNER was a ship of some 90 feet in length with a crew of 25. Its black hull rose to eight feet above the waterline where a deck of polished wood ran from bow to stern. On this was a covered steel and wooden structure or building about ten feet in height that covered most of the deck and no doubt formed the inner architecture of the vessel. Round windows dotted this structure, interspersed with doors and other access hatches.

A good-sized cabin was mounted atop that and set almost center to the first raised structure. This had many windows and I was later informed that the captain piloted the vessel from inside that elevated room. Behind it rose a single black funnel through which smoke from its steam engine would be released.

A tall mast towered ahead and behind the upper structures, and would be employed for hanging sails. Duvall had explained that ships like the WESTERNER exploited this dual-purpose propulsion to make them formidable challengers in the competitive trade business, since they could quickly adapt to the various types of weather and seas that bedeviled ocean traffic. Ships like the WESTERNER could rely on her engines to travel in calm water or even upriver as long as the depth held.

I was taken aback when I first saw the ship's curious silhouette, and briefly considered finding some other mode of transportation. The WESTERNER's dark outline and iron hull looked very heavy, and I did not understand how it could float.

I had seen steam trains while on errands as far west of my master's castle as Bistritz. Their bulky shapes and ugly contours when matched with the noisy screaming that came from them had bordered on the demonic to my memory. But, I had marveled at the unimaginable power of the engines pulling so many cars full of cargo, and I had to relent that such strength might be a great asset if we were to survive the coming voyage in the perilous Atlantic.

The WESTERNER's Captain Banks met me at the dock and brought me aboard. He was a man of mixed race as the caramel color of his skin and set of his handsome features suggested, and I hoped he was sympathetic to me for that reason. Especially, when overhearing his crew's grumbling about my Gypsy

heritage as I boarded. One of them even made the sign that would protect him from the evil eye. *Pah!*

I had changed into my new travel clothes before leaving the ALLISON JANE, but my beard and face remained the same. I can only imagine my Szgany blood was betrayed by the curved Cossack sword I had chosen for protection and which still hung from my shoulder with my possessions as I boarded.

It was possible that some crewmen had been to the mountains north of Varna, and had guessed my true race, or they'd tried the curse out on me and I had confirmed their suspicions with a furious facial expression as I crossed the gangplank. It is not like my people to let such an insult go unanswered, but I was not coming aboard for the Gypsy Horvat or his pride, and my mission would not survive any lapse of self-control.

Captain Banks told me he had filled the ship's four passenger berths with a collection of foreigners, the majority of whom I was told had stayed in their rooms for most of the voyage from England, and kept well clear of the operating deck, only coming forth for fresh air or to attend supper. Banks showed me that the dining room or "mess," as he called it, was just ahead of the passenger compartments with the galley on the other side.

He led me down a short metal stair and along a narrow corridor that ran between two large cargo holds and finally to a small cabin opposite the crew quarters near the engine room. The air below deck was smoky and smelled of oil, but I had to remember my master's desire that we go anonymously on our journey. The hazy atmosphere was certainly conducive to that goal.

The captain left me there after saying that the Westerner was behind schedule, and would set out in two hours, and that I should make myself comfortable in the meantime.

Once, while arranging my possessions, I heard what I thought was the high-pitched bleat of a goat or other animal followed by the low clucking sound of contented chickens. I stood frozen listening, but the noise did not recur, so I could not be certain of what I had heard.

I could only hope that such creatures were aboard for where there was life there was blood.

I was in my room when the ship left port. It began with a sudden startling peal of a loud horn or whistle. Its deafening pitch set my teeth on edge, but it also drew my attention to the loud shouting of men in the engine room—and that noise was disrupted by the urgent ringing of bells.

The steam engine came to life as a vibration at first, shuddering up through the deck itself, and shaking the bed on which I sat. This agitation increased until the power manifested as a throbbing noise that soon became deafening to my inexperienced ears.

After my recent travel in the silent wilderness and the thrumming calm of life aboard the wind-borne schooner, this disruptive pounding destroyed all memory of wind in trees, of wave and foam, of sails thumping and decks creaking.

A *rattling*, steel *knocking* was at the core of this racket that increased in volume until it pounded inside my head, my very bones seeming to echo along with every ringing iron beam or rivet in the ship. The drilling din was disturbed at intervals

by the clanging of harsh bells while overhead a loud horn or whistle alternately blatted or shrieked at varying times and pitches.

I could barely think as a faster metallic punctuation to this rhythmic percussion was added, corrupting all my senses until I doubted I would survive aboard the WESTERNER. I wrenched the felt brim of my new hat down over my ears and curled up on the bed where I moaned and muttered curses against Captain Duvall for finding this nightmarish transport for me.

I lay there groaning for a time in dismay and fury until the noise slipped away from my perceptions altogether. Magically, the repetitive knocking diminished, and could only be detected if I focused my senses full upon it and I wondered if the seas around the ship absorbed the worst of this infernal clamor.

As time progressed, the horns, whistles and bells abated, and no longer reminded me that I had lost the WESTERNER's engine altogether, its voice hidden to me behind the deck plating, or somehow buried in the constantly throbbing of my heart.

I would never have thought such a thing possible and was finally surprised, when my curiosity drove me from my bed to the porthole where I gasped. We were far from the docks. The ship's action had been so smooth that I had had to peer out to confirm that we were moving.

This fact softened my regard toward the steamship, and I considered my initial unpleasant reaction had been caused by unfamiliarity and nothing more. What an amazing vessel the WESTERNER was!

I was tempted to keep my own secrets and stay to my room, but I quickly feared such isolation after those mean-spirited sailors had identified my race and made an open show of their contempt for it. While their threatening manner compelled me to hide from their advances, I thought it would be wiser to be seen about the ship by the other passengers, and by Captain Banks.

I wanted him to remember that I was aboard, and keeping myself in his thoughts meant I was less likely to suffer at the hands of his crew. With my fellow passengers representing the outer world, I knew the captain would be reluctant to allow such bullying to go unchecked.

Reminding him that I had a room below decks might ensure that I would not be found murdered in it.

I am in luck!

Since I had been unable to visit any Moroccan butchers during my time secreted below deck when the ALLISON JANE was docked at Casablanca, I doubted my remaining bottle of pig's blood would suffice to keep the urn's contents "wet" for the journey ahead.

But now it seems there is a source of fresh blood on the WESTERNER. Those sounds I had heard upon first arrival had turned out to be creatures laid in for inclusion on the menu for the captain, crew and passengers.

A short walk below decks toward the forward part of the ship had put me by a locked door from which emanated the smell of manure and other animal aromas. The existence of live beasts was then confirmed when I heard the bleating of a goat or sheep—followed quickly by the cooing of a pigeon.

I would only need to find some means of procuring a supply of that which ran in the veins of those dinner items, but which might be considered a useless byproduct of the butchering process.

In fact, I knew I would resolve that issue rapidly, for if I did not find a fresh source of the precious fluid, I'd have to replace the pig's blood with my own and that notion terrified me.

I could not expect to continue such a relationship for long, and provide guardianship to the master's urn in the depleted state to which it would reduce me.

So, I would inquire about the ship to see what sort of foods had been laid in, using some pretext that I had foreign tastes or religious restrictions regarding the kind of flesh and recipes that might cross my palate.

This query would benefit me twofold: it would gain me access to the live animals, and would further my desire to be known about the ship, and keep me safely in the captain's sight.

Unfortunately, I did not consider who might also be aboard, and quickly came to regret my decision to mix with the other passengers.

A bell clanged very late in the afternoon that I had been told would signify the time for dining. The captain had previously introduced me to the room set aside for this function. It was little more than a narrow hallway on the main deck that was crammed with a long table and chairs.

An iron stove sat at one end and would heat the space if the weather demanded it. Currently, the warming African sun was tempered by a cool breeze as we traveled south, and I knew that heating would not be a consideration for some time to come.

The passengers had been summoned to eat together, and would at times share the space with the crew. On this occasion, the first, I was relieved to find no sailors in attendance, as their behavior toward me had already precluded any good company.

I hesitated in the doorway before the "mess" or dining room wondering why the WESTERNER's sailors did not sing as those did upon the ALLISON JANE. Was that a side effect of their work around the heavy steam engine, because its clamorous voice when raised would brook no accompaniment, or was it simply the sailors themselves, and did the darkness that I had seen in their gazes also shroud their hearts?

Regardless, I was pleased that none were in attendance. I entered the room and tried to get a sense of the other seated guests to know where I might best place myself at the table.

Four men sat around the farthest end by the stove where I thought the captain might sit had he been there. An old man with a long white beard who wore a woolen suit was seated closer to me; and beside him was an old woman in a blue, satin dress with a broad lace collar, wearing a white shawl around her shoulders. Across from them sat a young girl in a lacy white dress and red coat, and a boy in black jacket, short pants and knee high socks.

The four men at the table's end had fallen silent when I entered before taking up their discussion again.

Three of these men were hale and hearty: two of older middle age and two of 20 years or so. One of the younger was pale, and of their group he sat closest to me with head hanging. Still he must have sensed my entry for he glanced up and said with a scowl, "What are you looking at you dirty *gyp*?"

His companions broke from their talk to laugh, and then raised their glasses in celebration of his spirit before drinking.

The sick young man just winced from the effort of voicing the insult and looked back at the floor, folding his hands across his stomach and groaning.

These men were British it seemed to me by their accents, and they came dressed in well-designed but coarse clothing: canvas jackets and leather riding pants, high boots and gloves.

All of them were red faced with drink, and the healthiest of the younger men seemed to be having some fun with his friends because he had added a shiny black top hat to his rough ensemble. The men smoked fat cigars and the air in the narrow compartment was blue and rank with it.

The old woman and the girl across from her dabbed at their noses with scented handkerchiefs.

There were two half-empty bottles of brown liquor set out on the table, and the men poured liberally from both. A teapot sat by them, but cups and saucers had been distributed among the old couple and the children.

The two older British men were in their late 40s, and one of them kept giving shepherding glances to the younger men, especially the sick one, and I saw a distinct resemblance in his concerned features.

As I studied them with sidelong glances, I noticed the eldest of the middle-aged men looked quite different from his companions, and bore a dark, brown skin that had to come from living and working out of doors.

The whisky he consumed, for I had identified its pungent aroma despite their cigars, seemed to be stoking some inner fire. A dangerous gleam was beginning to form in the remarkable eyes that darted about from under graying brows. His middle-aged companion and the younger men, I imagined being some wealthy man and his sons on an expedition that would make men of the younger.

I kept my glances brief and face lowered as I hovered over the farthest chair, though I did catch a slight, apologetic look from the white-bearded man and old woman. The children across from them both kept their heads down, with their attention on their folded hands.

The man with the dangerous eyes scowled as I took my seat.

The old man reached out to pat his female companion's hand before stroking his long white whiskers and saying, "Please, continue Lord William."

"Yes, yes, it's the damn heathens that cause the trouble," the middle aged man said, glaring at his sick son and then the other. Lord William had a huge set of mutton chop whiskers that he tugged at with his free hand. "Since the end of the slave trade what's to do with them, eh Frank?"

"Germany's up to something, you can bet she covets all of Europe and there's more trouble brewing with the Boers..." the man with the dangerous eyes grated,

seemingly off topic as he stared into Lord William's face. "That bunch of farmers are little better than the darkies or *kaffirs* as they call them."

"But what has that to do with Europe?" the old man asked, sipping from his china cup. His accent shared British and French inflections.

"There are insults to the British crown that have never been answered, and so long as we've got foreign kings, kaisers and presidents we'll have war," Lord William warned. "I've many friends in Europe say Germany will have to be dealt with sooner or later. Who can do business with a bully?" The man lowered his eyes. "And if we're not careful when our backs are turned, the damn African savages will inherit Europe by slipping in while we're at war." He shook his head. "Cursed irony. We do the fighting and those lazy blighters reap the profits."

"Oh, they'll earn their keep," Frank the dark man said, before downing his drink. "We can't have them lagging in coconut groves while the rest of the civilized world fights for God and country. No! All the colonies will contribute to any wars that are to come, and the kaffirs won't be exempt."

Lord William pointed at me. "These Gypsies are no better than the savages that infest Africa. Leftovers from heathen days preceding our own Christian civilization of Europe. Another time, another cooking pot. Perhaps the spices would be different than those used by a black chef."

Face warming at this insult, I peered up from under the broad brim of my hat and could see him staring at me.

He goaded: "Isn't that right, Gypsy?"

His sick son coughed and then held up the two-fingered sign used to ward off the devil, and his companions laughed as they refreshed their drinks.

The old woman blushed and said: "Please Lord William, I know you speak in jest."

"*Half* in jest... and don't worry about the Gypsy. They love a good joke!" Lord William wiped at whisky that dripped from his mutton chops. "My lady, the truth cannot be contradicted. The civilized world tries to help them but it's in their nature to resist maturity, hard work and loyalty to the crown. The entire continent of Africa is either wasted in the hands of its simple *converted* children, or it's overrun with savages, and wild spaces. No, you give Britain time and we shall save these tribes from themselves. Knock down their accursed jungles and put up a school and playground."

"*School*—and you've made no mention of churches," the old man sputtered. "Of course, where would you fit them amongst your rubber plantations and factories?"

"Did I say school?" Lord William drawled, lips cracking in a sarcastic smile. "I suppose the children will need some training—"

"—for when they join their parents at the work houses!" Frank barked. "To earn their keep."

The healthy young man said: "And what of the lions and apes, Father? Surely, you don't think them fitting playthings for English schoolchildren."

"That's why we've come to hunt them, Nicholas!" Lord William said, rolling his glass between his hands. "Everyone needs a hat, and lion skin would keep them as warm in winter as beaver." He flicked a finger at his son's top hat before puffing his cigar until the ember flared.

"And more hats to the hide," Frank rasped. "That'll knock the price down."

"Here's a pleasant fantasy. School uniforms cut from zebra skin!" Lord William roared with laughter, and the hunters refilled their drinks before lifting them at his jest.

I sat quietly, ears burning, with my right hand under the table wrapped around the hilt of my churi. The small cutting knife was the only weapon I had brought with me, and yet I longed to answer their insults with it.

"You..." the sick man groaned along the table, and then he banged his hand upon it until I looked up. "Take your hat off, there's a lady present!"

The rest of the gathering fell silent, all of them with a shared look of expectation, as I reached up to remove the hat.

"Oh Christ, Harry are you sure?" Lord William sneered. "We can see that much more of his face, now!"

"I don't like him, Father," the sick man said, setting his forehead against the table.

"Neither does your dad, Harry," Frank said. "Just drink up that whisky and your guts will calm soon enough."

"It don't stay down, Colonel Frank," Harry answered, moving his lips thickly.

"Then up she comes," Frank said. "Sooner or later your guts will get tired of it, and then you'll steady in with the ship."

"Forgive my son," Lord William said to the old couple who were looking more and more uncomfortable. "He's not been to sea before, and he's yet to find his legs."

"And where are you going, Lord William?" the old woman asked to change the subject.

"The colonel has arranged a hunting expedition," Lord William said, raising his glass to cheer his companion, Frank.

I listened to this with eyes downcast, and decided finally to leave the room before the food arrived. I would find a way to arrange for meals in my cabin. In truth, the hostility from the hunters had me feeling uncomfortable to be so far from the master's urn.

"I'll have the captain keep an eye on that one," Lord William said, gesturing to me as I rose and made my way to the door. "Otherwise, we'll find our cabins stripped of jewels and coin."

The hunters laughed as I left.

26th November, 1893.

I have decided to stay in my room to keep watch upon the urn and to avoid the British hunters. I cannot risk more confrontation with those men, so I will have to take my chances that the captain will see to my safety, and hope that being out of sight will keep me out of the hunters' minds.

As I do this, I must admit it to be a much better accommodation than that which I had aboard the ALLISON JANE. The room ran ten feet to the hull and at least 15 parallel to the keel. Being on the lowest deck and near the engine meant it could be noisy and often smelled of oil and burning coal, but it was grand by comparison.

There was a single bed, a wardrobe, set of cupboards, and table and chair where I ate my simple breakfast and lunch of sausage and dried bread that I still had as rations in my pack.

While I am forced below decks I use my time to update this secret journal and to contemplate what might await me at my destination for I knew little of Africa—*south* or otherwise.

Until my time upon the ALLISON JANE I had never met a black man though I had heard of them. Several of that crew were of this African variety of man, though other than the color of their skin and subtleties in facial features, they were much like the other sailors.

I had heard of African slavery also, but knew little more than that at one time the great empires had traded the people of Africa, and kept them as property.

I considered asking one of the black crewmen who served aboard the WESTERNER what he knew of his homeland, but I abandoned the notion, remembering again my master's warning to draw no attention to myself—and I could not be certain these sailors would be free to answer, and if they could, would they not simply attack my heritage as the others had?

Of Africa herself, I had only heard that it was a vast jungle filled with terrifying and strange animals. By all accounts around the Szgany fires, most of the black people who had originally lived on the continent had long since been killed in war, or been enslaved by any one of the western European powers.

We Szgany shared a history of violence and subjugation at the hands of more powerful nations, so I could understand the process that had been wreaked upon Africa and her people, though I did not sympathize. The Szgany had long ago learned to take hardship in stride, and we'd come to consider it a part of our tough natures to be ever struggling out from under a yoke that had been forced upon us.

In the process we had become untamable and I wondered if there would be a black people in Africa, some family of men and women who like the Szgany had resisted the slave master's whip, and who even now wandered the great jungle-continent unbowed as my own people traveled Europe.

LATER—Of note, Captain Banks himself has come to my room and offered an apology for the behavior of the British hunters. I had asked one of his crew earlier in the day if I could have my meals delivered to my cabin, and that I would be happy to pay any extra fee that the service might require.

The captain had already been planning to speak with me when he received my request. It seems that the old woman in the dining room had been upset by the hunters' treatment of me in front of her grandchildren and had complained to the captain herself the night before.

Captain Banks had looked grim after agreeing to have my food brought to my room. His full lips were twisted with irony as he mused.

"The greatness of Europe." He laughed. His English was fine, but he had a curious accent that I could not place. "Civilization!"

The captain's dark eyes had regarded me humorlessly as he said: "Those British hunters would not want Leopold's 'civilized' jaws set about their throats. His 'civilizing' mission is a savage sport that ravages the African lands. He made it a bloody butcher shop, and so it remains."

I nodded, although the name of Leopold was unfamiliar to me.

"Only slaves, ivory and rubber interest the 'civilized' world," Banks had sneered. "Despite the fact that the price for these things is blood."

The captain hoped that the episode in the dining room would not be repeated, and said that he would speak to the hunters and vouch for my safety personally.

Then he had sniffed at the air.

"Smoke," he declared, eyes searching the ceiling as his nose twitched. "But I smell a touch of rot." He looked at me. "And peppermint."

"I hadn't noticed," I answered.

"Let me know if you do," Captain Banks said, shrugging.

In the dim light from the porthole and my lamp, the captain's brown skin and features had taken on an otherworldly glow that gave me comfort in their strength and natural beauty.

I thanked him by wringing his sinewy hand with both of mine before he repeated that he would have my meals sent to my room at no extra charge, but that I must remember that I would always be welcome in the *mess*.

Of course, I could not go back there. My mission was of too much importance to risk any violent incident that might endanger its outcome.

27th November, 1893.

It is near dawn and there has been some kind of trouble on the ship. Sailors awakened all the passengers to check on their safety. The night watch said he saw a man on the main deck near the bow, with the edge of his silhouette marked by a curious glow of lantern or flame.

He would not respond to any hails as he opened a hatch and climbed below deck.

As crewmen investigated the cabins overhead I heard the sick young hunter say, "You watch! It's that Gypsy's work. His kind always meddle in the devil's business."

28th November, 1893.

Nothing much more has been said of the mysterious man who was seen in the dead of night, but Captain Banks sent word to every passenger that moving about the open deck was not allowed after sundown unless permission was given by the captain himself, and the individual granted that liberty remained in the company of a crewmember.

It was drizzling, the sky was filled with cloud, and the sea outside my porthole was gray and calm. I knew the British hunters would be about the ship, so I took some lunch in my room where I added to my chronicle and continued to contemplate the outcome of this voyage. I'd found the steamship to be a unique form of travel, and I could not help but think that its power would have appealed to my master also.

Thinking of my master made me remember the pig's blood. The remaining bottle was almost empty, and ready to go out the porthole and join the others at the bottom of the sea. So before I had to open my own veins, I would have to ask the ship's cook if there were anything we could arrange.

I was hesitant because I knew the request was unusual, and might provoke the ire or suspicion of the captain himself if he were to hear about it. I had enough blood for two days or three at most before I would have no recourse but to remedy the situation personally.

To steer away from that uncomfortable notion, I directed my mind toward Africa.

More interesting to me than the thoughts of the black kingdoms were the stories of fantastic and terrible creatures that lived in the endless jungle. Old ones from my camp carried the stories, and other well-traveled Szgany brought tales about man-eating river dragons as long as four men are tall, and of giant eagles that could pluck a child from a mother's arms.

And there were other tales of wild men covered with hair from head to toe who had sharp yellow fangs, and lived in the trees and would eat any man who ventured near.

While those stories appealed to a childlike enthusiasm in my heart, I realized they were born of superstition and nothing more, or so I consoled myself as I thought of setting foot upon this Dark Continent.

Other notions also did I use to calm my imagination. I would be going to "South" Africa, and that land had been colonized by western powers for many years, with several European countries laying claim to it. Surely, in their struggle they had tamed any wilderness they'd first found there.

I was to take the master's remains to the port of Cape Town, and as this would be a very civilized part of South Africa, I doubted whether I'd see more than pet dogs and draft animals.

LATER—I was awakened to the sound of the crew stampeding all over the ship, and was turned out to the main deck with the other passengers where we were questioned by Captain Banks. The engineer had reported seeing a bluish light in the engine room, and heard the sound of someone running up the stairs when he went in to investigate.

I had been one of the first awakened by the disturbance, as these events were said to have occurred just outside my room; however, I was unable to provide any information for that reason since I was sleeping at the time the commotion started.

The captain had repeated his order that none of the passengers was allowed to roam about the ship so late after dark without permission and unaccompanied, and he added that the engine room was off limits at all times.

I was standing with the others on the deck when the sickly British hunter had spat on the boards and glared at me declaring: "It's the gyp I tell you! Put him overboard or he'll witch us all."

To this the captain had taken great offense, stepping close to the man and saying he had not asked for any suggestions from him. "I am in command of this vessel."

"I figure you'd need some help," the young man had said insolently. "You being a *kaffir*." And he stroked his own pale cheek with a finger. "Unless it's why you're in cahoots with a Gypsy."

The captain's hands had curled into hard fists as he registered the insult. I am sure he had been just about to hit the young hunter when the one named Colonel Frank stepped in between.

"That's enough, Captain," the man had growled threateningly. "He's sick to delirium."

The captain snarled at the hunters, and ordered us all back to our rooms to sleep. As I had approached the stairs, I saw Colonel Frank and the sick man glaring at me.

Myself, I wondered at this new haunting. Blue lights, I remembered—but noise?

29th November, 1893.

The sun had set on another long day. I continued to think of my master and had been sitting at the small table reading his book again. I wondered about the urn, and the process that was taking place within. It was clear to me that whatever was growing inside had the semblance of life.

Wet and slithery sounds of movement continued to issue forth, though I could see less through the dense mesh of black vines or tendrils that had grown thicker within. If this creature had come or been birthed from the master's remains, I wondered if that meant the master himself would reconstitute in this gory fashion?

I was prepared to facilitate his resurrection, but had only considered this process would be performed upon a complete set of remains. Despite the master's reference book, nothing had prepared me for this.

At night, the noises came more frequently from within the urn, and at times I would hold my lamp over the vent and peer into its depths. It was difficult to observe anything, but I was sure that I had seen thin arm- and leg-like structures now jutting from the pale and glistening larval body, though just as quickly the shape would roll and disappear in a muddy slurry of clotted blood.

The instructions in my master's book had said enormous power would be required if his destruction were so complete, and in such cases the results could be unpredictable.

Memory loss was certain after revivification of any kind, and the extent of this depended upon many things: the degree of damage inflicted upon him, his associations after reforming, and the realities of setting, time and place that awaited him in this revived state. His surroundings would directly inform his reclamation.

But a pile of ash and dust? Dare I even dream that such a thing could again become my dear master?

The book warned that the worst of these cases, as this surely must have been, might leave him "like a child in mind" that would need to re-learn how to survive and to remember his true character.

His book said that a servant so tasked would be responsible for this re-education, to entice his true self back from death. The master's history stretched back for many centuries and would require much time to be remembered.

The instructions had cautioned that nothing was certain in the process, and again, peering into the urn, I wondered what kind of life would await him if he was to return as a ghastly creature, little more than a freakish reptile.

This brought my thoughts around to his South African ally. The master had told me that he was a great and terrible lord of the southernmost part of the Dark Continent whose family had held power in the Cape Colony there for longer than records were kept. I did not know the master's bond with him or how it had been forged.

The instructions in the book reiterated the master's own. I was to go to Cape Town and inquire of the port authorities about a man named *Worling de Graaf*.

"Call yourself Count DeVille upon your arrival in Cape Town... my ally will come for you."

I remembered the master then, so handsome; his eyes had been burning as he tutored me. He must have perceived my unspoken question for he had raised a finger to silence me before I opened my mouth, saying: "Worling is a great lord in those lands, and he is *of the kind*."

He did not speak of many as being "of the kind," so I could only guess at his meaning since I dared not confirm my suspicions by asking.

Perhaps this Worling de Graaf's influence was required to complete my master's transformation. I could only pray for some guidance, for each glimpse into the urn only compounded its mystery.

30th November, 1893.

Morning, and the sky is bright. The air continues to warm as we journey south.

The hall outside my room was quiet when I awoke and I felt no vibration through the deck plates. There had been times aboard when the ship's engines were silenced, and for hours on end we plied the waters under sail alone. Then, the ship made no sound as it leapt across the waves ahead of the strong Atlantic wind.

It felt like flying, and the quiet always caused my spirits to rise.

After my breakfast of ham, eggs and toast, I had hoped to endear myself to the cook, and had brought my dirty dishes back to the galley but missed him there. Despondent, I retraced my steps to make the harrowing journey back along the length of the ship to my room.

But, I paused by the bottom of the stairs that descended from the main deck when I overheard voices through the opening above me.

"Saw it, he did," one gruff voice had said in English. "Atop the foremast."

"I know Omar said 'flames,' but he's addled from a life of drink," another voice answered. "I says Elmo's sparks is all."

"I says, it's that Gypsy devil we have aboard," the first voice warned. "You smelled what's coming from the porthole and around his door?"

"No! Cause I ain't a snoop," the second voice declared. "Nor have I time to be hanging my nose over the side of the ship."

"We was painting the rail, and a few of us fellas smelled it was like an open grave—by his door too. Nothing but trouble to come from this. The young Englishman says it too..." the first said, then added, ominously. "I tell you, we can't stand for it."

I hurried back to my room and quickly checked on the urn before pouring a small portion of the remaining pig's blood through the vent. Indeed, I must have grown used to the smell creeping past the metal dampers, for it seemed the open porthole had not removed all evidence of its internal actions.

My attempt to stifle it with the peppermint-scented linen was not enough. On a clear, still day, undoubtedly, the smell of the grave might have traced up the side of the ship or leaked out under my door. Was it leaving some scent upon my clothing, too?

1st December, 1893.

I have run out of pig's blood and had to use my own. There was but one way to remedy this situation, but remedy it, I must—regardless of the trouble that was brewing. My hand was still throbbing where I had opened the flesh with my churi blade to allow some drops to fall through the vent and into the urn.

I feared that some of the more exotic men in the crew had become suspicious of me. Perhaps the odor from the urn had brought this upon us and I had heard that dark-skinned men of the southern seas, as some of the crewmen were, are sensitive to the spiritual world, and were highly superstitious, and quick to judge, especially when such perceptions were shaded by the tenets of the Christian Church.

I was preparing to return my luncheon dishes to the cook, thinking that if he were alone I might discuss my need for a supply of blood, when I discovered a crudely fashioned cross made of kindling wood and twine set before my door. A half-circle formed of fine white sand or ash, sea shells and a severed chicken's foot had been drawn on the floor around it.

Every time I had been away from my room previously, I had found it locked and its contents unmolested when I returned, but I now felt that would not long be the case if someone feared me enough to have performed a primitive rite before my very cabin door.

It may be too late already, but I must take steps to see that these superstitions do not grow into something lethal and so I will try to speak to the captain.

But when is it safe to leave my room?

3rd December, 1893.

A storm from the north had been chasing us since we found it waiting at sunrise. Outside my porthole the ocean was iron gray and only distinguishable

from the sky by its wind-lashed surface that was torn by high waves and flecked with streaks of foam.

I had been forced to feed the urn again, and my hand ached from where I had shed blood a second time. A real solution was required to this dilemma and there could be no more delay. The master's book had instructed me to feed the urn each day, and yet I had elected to skip the previous day's bloodletting, concerned by how it might impact me, and my capacity to guard the urn—especially, now that the crew was openly suspicious of me.

I had been forced to stay in my cabin to avoid the British hunters, and the isolation only narrowed my hopes of solving the problem. How could I chance running afoul of those men while away from my room; and would not such an occurrence provide an opportunity for the hostile crewmen to break in and disturb the urn?

Also I had heard people outside my door: bluish light had flickered along its lower edge, the deck had creaked under someone's weight, and I was certain I caught the low bellows of a man breathing in the night. I had to steel my nerves to gain fresh blood for the master, but I procrastinated not out of fear for myself.

I simply knew that the urn was no longer safe!

And worse, its contents had become even more active—the slithering sounds of life were continuous now that the blood had begun to grow scarce. Truly, I had only withheld the fluid in the last instance out of fear for the master; for I felt his safety could only be assured by my strength and sword.

But had the absence of blood increased his thirst and agitation, or had it somehow altered the process of his transformation?

It was at noon that the storm had caught up to us, and the crew of the WESTERNER had responded by throwing up more sailcloth and stuffing the engine with coal. Great black clouds of smoke would be churning from the ship's funnel as evidenced by the air in my room that had grown murky with the fumes.

The weather had forced me to shut my porthole tight, yet I glimpsed the breakers that roared and crashed as the storm lashed the distant rocky shore.

I believed the captain's hope had been to run ahead of the storm, skirting its edge and using its terrifying winds to escape the worst of it by passing near to the African coast.

The entire ship vibrated as it rose and fell on the raucous waves—and all the while the men made an endless racket shoveling coal. The steam engine throbbed and churned against the overpowering forces of nature; and in short time, heat from the overworked machinery had made the lower deck unbearable. My room was like an oven.

I fear Captain Bank's gamble has left us in perilous straits. The sky over the ocean has grown impenetrable with clouds and the rain fills the wind that pushes us ever closer to land.

LATER—

Activity grew more urgent in the urn as the afternoon progressed toward sundown, and several times a thumping noise came forth accompanied by a repetitive snake-like hissing.

I needed more blood, so I threw my fears aside and donned my old coat, absently checking the inner pocket for the master's book were I had wedged it with my old fur hat. I chose the long garment for it would cover both my long knife and churi. I dared not travel the ship unarmed now, though I feared to carry my pistol would cast me from the captain's good graces.

I drew my blankets over the urn, left the cabin and locked the door with the saint's name upon my lips. Then, I climbed the swaying stairs to the enclosed companionway atop them where the winds pounded at the windows and doors all along its unoccupied length.

I struggled through this central hall by passenger cabins, navigating the housing that protected the main deck, lurching left and right, forward and backward as the ship was buffeted by the howling wind and heaved by raging waves.

My simple prayer had aided me for I found the dining room empty, and breathing a sigh of relief, I passed through it to the galley on the other side. Doubtless, the crew would be busy keeping the ship on course, and the other passengers were riding out the storm in the security of their own rooms.

The ship's cook had introduced himself as Joe on one of my previous trips to the galley when I had been lucky enough to find him but lacking the courage to bridge the topic of the blood. He was of Asian descent, and so had undoubtedly experienced some prejudice at the hands of the WESTERNER's crew in his time aboard.

There is a sympathy that occurs between the downtrodden that lasts well beyond the final morsel of food, and so when I lunged through the door to the galley, Joe scolded me for being out of my cabin in the storm. The canny cook had wedged a chair between the stove and the wall, and was using a length of rope tied to it as a harness to steady himself against the movement of the ship.

Joe quickly undid this and reached out to catch me as I stumbled close. When I pulled a handful of gold coins from my pocket, he gasped.

I explained that what I had to say was important but had to be kept secret. He answered me with a sidelong glance that was replaced with a relieved expression when I told him that I needed help to procure a live chicken or other animal, if such a thing was possible on the ship. I required some measure of blood from butchering any of the animals he used in cooking.

"I hope to prepare Szgany recipes that require that ingredient..." I told him, and Joe laughed, saying I had picked a foolish time to prepare my supper.

However, the gold coins had caught his eye, so he said I was lucky, and led me across the rolling deck to a small room just off the kitchen where he kept cooking supplies, and there he produced a large glass jar filled with blood.

He explained that he had slaughtered a lamb only that morning and had intended to add the crimson fluid to enrich soup stock.

I left Joe tying himself into his chair, and made my way back toward the dining room with my purchase, but paused after opening the door for my worst fear was confirmed. Beneath the swinging ceiling lamp, the seasick young hunter was sitting bent over with one cheek pressed against the tabletop.

He was sweating heavily, and there was vomit on the floor beside him and on his pants. The agitated seas must have worked up his sickness again, and he was having trouble keeping his “tonic” down.

“You *lurking* again,” he accused, glaring up from the table. “There’s a stink on you I don’t like.” He started to drag himself to his feet. “What are you up to when you skulk about?”

I simply shook my head from side to side, and held the jar of blood tighter against me, glad that the cook had wrapped it in paper to disguise its contents.

“I’m talking to you!” he said, leaning against the table to steady himself as the ship rolled.

I started past but the seas lifted the deck and dropped it, throwing us both into the table, where we slammed into each other. The hunter grabbed my arm, and pulled to catch himself as the sea struck the ship again and I lost my balance.

The jar fell to the deck and shattered. Blood poured out of the ruined package and started sloshing back and forth as the hunter looked down on it white-faced.

“Blood?” He gulped against an urge to vomit. “You’re in business with the Chinaman! Have you two put something in my food?” He stared across the table at me. “Now, whose blood is this, then?” The man was drunk on his tonic, and his breath reeked of whisky.

I swore and reached for my knife, but the hunter only laughed.

“No going back now,” the young man sneered, looking at the shining churi blade. “You’ll hang for pulling a knife on Lord William’s son.”

The ship lurched again, and the hunter fell to his knees in the spilled blood where he vomited and was wracked by spasms.

I stood over him, pondering my next action. To left and right, I saw through the windows that night was falling fast, the darkness amplified by the thick layer of storm cloud that was pushing down on the ship. The sea was turning black around us.

I could not kill the man without incurring the wrath of his companions, and the crew as well. So, I decided there was no other course but to alert the captain. Surely he would side with me, having experienced the man’s offensive behavior and manner himself.

I slid my knife away, knowing that reporting this exchange might also gain me Captain Banks’ sympathy if things got worse between me and the hunters, as this new incident was reported and news of it spread around the ship.

Or would Banks simply put me in chains?

An Englishman’s word, especially an aristocrat’s, would always be believed over a Gypsy’s, and the sick man had three of his own kind aboard who all bore arms. If an altercation took place, I knew I would not stand a chance of surviving to see the South African shores, and neither would my dear master.

With him so vulnerable now, and yet the urn so active—I felt his return was near.

So I went back toward the galley and climbed up the ladder to the room over the main housing where the captain and his sailors steered the ship.

To do this I had to pass through a space that was open to the elements, where the crew could stand watch, and from that new vantage point I came to fully understand how much more dangerous our predicament had become.

The ocean about us was heaving with frothy waves that battered the hull, and tossed the ship in an unceasing hail of rain. This rising wind sent the drops against me like blinding bullets, but I still could see the distant lightning flicker and hear the ominous boom of thunder traveling over the ocean's surging surface.

Opposite that terrible view there was nothing to see but looming darkness in the growing dim.

Atop the ladder were another small platform and a door that I pushed open. Inside, the air was hot. The captain stood by the wheel across from me with a stern-looking crewman to his right and left. Bank's face was turned to the side, grim and lined with sweat where he balanced a chart, trying to read it in the uneven light from a swaying lamp held up by a dark-skinned sailor.

"Get back to your cabin," the captain ordered, after the wind behind me had snatched the door from my hand and slammed it shut. "Damn it—the storm!"

"But sir," I began, as the captain glared at me. "The hunters..."

"This storm is hard after us, and I've no time to talk about those British fools. They've been ordered to their cabins as well," the captain growled. "Do the same. I'll hear your story when we've reached calm."

I winced, exasperated, and began to speak again, but the captain shouted.

"Damn you! I need my thoughts uncluttered to get us clear of these waters," he said, and then his eyes flashed an unspoken order to the other sailor at his side. "We're too close to shore!"

The sailor crossed the pitching deck to me and heaved the door aside where with a piercing glance he repeated the captain's order to leave.

I staggered out into the rain and gripped the ladder to descend—before pausing again in the open space, awestruck, as lightning flashed, and the ship shuddered under a deafening roar of thunder.

When I reached the main deck, I could feel it vibrating through my boots as the steamship's powerful engine fought against the murderous seas.

I hurried through the dining room again, empty now save for the table and skim of blood that slid around and stained its floor, and once across, I struggled down the swaying stairs—until my heart leapt into my mouth.

Oh Master!

I could see through the hot murk of smoke in the hall that the door to my cabin was ajar, and lines of amber light were leaking out around its splintered edges.

I sprinted the length of the hall without being aware of movement or sound and then slipped into my cabin. The door had been broken open by some means, but I did not wait to identify the cause for my eyes were drawn to where the seasick hunter was on his bloodstained knees by my bed.

I closed the door behind me, pressing it quietly against the splintered frame. Lightning flashed through the porthole to overpower the lamplight, while thunder boomed.

I lunged for balance on the shifting deck.

The blankets had been pulled aside, and the man was sliding his hands over the master's urn, looking for some way to open it, unaware that I was close. The throb and rattle of the WESTERNER's engine had deafened him to my entry.

Curse the man! I drew my churi blade and rushed across the cabin to grab him from behind.

But the hunter must have seen some movement or shadow for he turned in time to grip the wrist that held the knife. We wrestled, and as we fought, excited *yelping* noises issued from inside the urn!

The deck continued to pitch and rock beneath our feet as we fought, but I soon gained a bit of leverage and with my better health I clubbed the man with my free hand until he fell dazed upon the deck.

I lifted the senseless fool's shoulders over the urn and in my fury slit his throat with a single deep cut that grated on bone. The hot blood spurted down through the vent and a smooth pale face appeared from the shadows inside where it lapped at the flow and then showered in the thick crimson stream.

And I was drawn from my black rage by the sudden appearance of thin white fingers, featureless, without nails or lines or imprint; the tiny digits slipped out of the darkness to grip the metal crosspieces that formed the vent. Stunned, I slid my knife away...

"Master..." I whispered, but barely had a chance to smile before the door to my cabin flew open and the hunter's companions appeared. They all held firearms, but were paralyzed by the ugly scene before them.

"You bloody fiend!" Lord William shouted as he and the others raised their weapons to fire.

I heaved the dead young man aside, and wrapped my arms protectively around the urn when the ship suddenly rocked and shuddered, and there was a high-pitched scream of metal plates tearing.

My attackers were thrown backwards through the door as I slammed into the bed, but I had the presence of mind to snatch up my pistol from the mattress and thrust it through my belt beside my knife while I slung my sword and powder flask over my neck.

I picked up the master's urn again as metal shrieked and the ship shook and roared, as one of the hunters cried out feebly for the Gypsy.

I clambered to my feet and ran for the door, leaping over the tangle of men and into the heated air in the hall.

Sliding the urn's strap about my shoulders, I hurried to the base of the stairs. Behind me I heard the hunters getting to their feet as farther on, sailors cried out from the engine room.

My only hope was to find safety with the captain, and so I climbed the stairs.

I barely got the urn to the top before there was a terrific roar! A great explosion of fire and force sent me crashing upward through a window and into the open air.

Chapter 7

FROM THE GYPSY HORVAT'S JOURNAL

3rd December, 1893. *Shipwreck*

I, the Gypsy Horvat, will continue to keep this journal; though I know not why. Doom follows me, and I begin to think that there was never any chance of success. Grave circumstances have set tragedy upon me and left me here to die alone, but I will leave the words in this record as the final blows struck—as a testament to my struggle.

Struggle. That is the word that I must rally around, for it was my master's struggle that empowered me to leave my homeland and come to this wretched place, as fearful as I was.

Struggle. As he did, valiantly, to make a new life.

Struggle. As I have since.

Pleased I was, and counted it some small favor of my patron saint that I had slipped on my old coat before seeking blood for the urn while still aboard the WESTERNER, for I had reflexively hidden the master's book in the large inside pocket with my old fur hat and so unwittingly preserved both.

Also I had failed to transfer the treasures from its many deep pockets to the new canvas coat I had purchased in Varna, an oversight that had assured the survival of my journal, writing paper, ink and pen—among other things, and I have since found flotsam upon which I can write.

All of it arrived sodden and sandy but has since dried out. Though it is wrinkled and resists the ink from time to time, it is more than serviceable considering the environs into which I have been thrown. Sadly, the ink will only last as long as it will if nothing to replace it comes in upon the tide.

But with these things have I chronicled the sinking of the WESTERNER steamship, the desperate moments leading to its bitter end, and the agony that has followed.

I was thrown through an expanding ball of fire as the ship exploded around me. Polished walls of wood and painted steel disintegrated in flash and flame and noise as I hurtled with them at the edge of the blast. An invisible force struck me in the chest and knocked me senseless.

But only for an instant. I opened my eyes to find myself still tumbling high through the air, windborne and falling with the rain and wreckage. From this great height I glimpsed the tortured wreckage of the WESTERNER below, bright against the surging sea. Its belly had torn open, and its back had snapped. Slivered wood and sheets of mangled steel were blazing in the storm while about them human bodies rolled in the waves.

The ship had broken in two and its hull had been breached by the cold water, and I could only imagine that its overheated engine had exploded, perhaps its fuel as well. The steamship's shredded pieces still clung to the jagged rocks that had first pierced it, and as they burned and melted they toppled into foaming swells.

I realized with impossible relief that I yet clutched the master's urn tight to my chest. The explosion had deafened me to any sound, but I felt some vibration come from within.

Until I hit the water too quickly to do more than tighten my grip upon the urn. The impact as I struck the waves tore it away from my arms, though I clung to it still by just one hand, and its strap sawed the back of my neck.

I dropped through the darkness, rolling and sinking until I struck the frigid rocks and kicked off against them, chasing the precious seconds in which the urn might yet be saved.

And I popped up close to the sinking wreckage where I saw by the flickering orange flames that while the lid atop the urn was closed, the vent was open!

Crying out, I gripped the precious container with one hand and tried to work the dials to close the opening; but as I kicked to keep my head above the water my spirits sank, for the black webbing that had filled the urn now held the dampers wide.

Water had rushed in, and yet a hopeful shout came from me, for I sensed by the urn's buoyant character that there still was air inside—it had not flooded completely. The container floated half-free of the waves, and even aided my clumsy efforts to swim for shore.

Many yards from me, the WESTERNER slid off the rocks in pieces and sank beneath the waves. The ship's two halves lolled in the surf and its torn hull continued to rasp as the powerful tides raked it over the jagged stones, lifting its broken sections on the waves and pulling its pieces toward the depths.

There was a powerful *bang* that sent ripples through the water as the ship continued its iron screaming, coming apart in mammoth shards; the tons of ragged steel and splintered wood tumbled over the black rock, dragging survivors that clung to it into the deep.

I strove in darkness to stay afloat and avoid that fate. The urn itself still remained buoyant but was unwieldy, and my own sodden clothes dragged at me.

Then to wrench my heart, I felt sudden spastic action inside the urn that thumped repeatedly from side to side and then went still. Praying to Saint Sarah I hoped that what life was growing within might hang on a moment longer for I had glimpsed a distant line of pale sand that marked the shore.

But the WESTERNER's sinking had acted like a damn that had broken, and those waves it had held back with its bulk now poured over the rocks that had sunk her and pounded after me.

I fought to stay afloat against a new barrage of white caps but was sent rolling over a reef of stone and coral and pushed down finally, spinning and tumbling in the cold. I thumped and scraped against the rocky bottom, unable to protect my face from the buffeting as I clung to the master's urn.

My lungs burned and my temples throbbed as I rolled beneath the frigid waves, but still I held fast to the container, despairing; for its contents had surely been flooded.

As proof of this, steam and froth and bubbles issued from the vent when the currents pushed me suddenly to the surface, and the foaming tumult left me in shallows. Weeping, I sought my footing on the rocks beneath the water as a roaring sound came to me, and I turned to see a wall of gray hurtling near.

I managed a lurching stagger and jump but could not escape the towering surge. Just before the great wave hit and drove me down against the rocks and sand, a plaintive, bubbling cry burst from the urn.

I awoke upon my back far up the sandy beach and saw the purple glow of approaching dawn creeping into the sky, a dim backlight to heavy palms and tall, slim-trunked trees that held thick clusters of leaves high above me. In dips and valleys of this variegated ceiling I could see distant black mountains looming.

Toward my feet, the glossy strand flickered from some few flaming remnants of the WESTERNER that had floated to shore and still guttered where the surf crashed some yard or two from my boots.

My ringing ears could barely hear the waves as I craned my neck to see the light from the warming sky hint at bobbing shapes in the swell. These looked like corpses that were soon beset by white caps and twisted debris.

The sea still tossed but the storm had passed into the darkness that clutched the southern clouds.

Miraculously, my frozen hands yet gripped the master's urn and had kept it upright by my side, even in my senseless state; its metal vent was pointed skyward and held hope for me that the contents had survived the dangerous landing.

A hope that was dashed when I clambered to my knees and opened the fastenings that held the lid in place—inside, the water reached almost to the top!

Crying out, I tipped the urn on the sandy shore and in terror watched the foaming broth pour out. Slippery it was with slime or scum as it gushed over the beach, and was red-rimmed with fleshy bits of wrack that scattered in the murky morning light.

"No!" I bellowed to the savage dawn, and turned the urn so that I might better look at its interior, the contents were liquefying now it seemed—and almost lost. I thrust my hand into the gelatinous mass within, mortified to feel something solid slip and thump lifelessly against the side.

My action shifted the contents further and caused something to protrude from this mass, the sight of which caused my spirits to sink completely. A pale gray thing, weakly veined in black and brown lines slid through the jelly-like substance that oozed out onto the sand. It was featureless, unfinished—little more than an unformed infant in size and shape, but lifeless, possessed of malformed limbs; the muscle and bone dissolving in the morning gloom as I watched.

The disintegrating body had the consistency of cooked cabbage.

And it was dead, quite dead.

In despair, I lunged forward to sweep up these remnants in my wet embrace, and from my harrowed eyes bitter tears poured upon the lifeless thing as it continued to crumble in my grasp. I wept upon the wave-washed shore, and thought only of my dear master, taken from me, and I shed new tears as I cursed my poor fortune to have guided him to this end.

And then I wailed at my own fate, alone and shipwrecked on a savage shore, my mission in tatters and a failure, with my own life soon to echo the master's ignoble end.

I lifted my swollen eyes and looked into the jungle; its shadows fighting the morning light. Instead of being torn apart by wind and wave like my master, I would be riven by the claws and fangs of savage beasts.

I looked down at the disintegrating form that dripped through my fingers and onto the wet sand, and I swore to make some better end for my master than this. I could wear my sorrow until my own end, but now could indulge his memory by maintaining some grace in my service.

Horvat be damned; I would embrace the dignity that he carried in life even on that brutal shore, and so conforming to my master's ethic, I would bury him with what honors could be given in so desolate a place as the African coast.

I was surrounded by encroaching wilderness that no doubt teemed with savage carnivores, but I would delay my own survival to guarantee his eternal rest.

So, with tingling hands and fingers, I placed my master's remains back into the urn and carried him inland along a natural dirt path edged by long grasses and large trees that drooped with willow-like branches.

Sobbing without tears, I staggered forward with my sad burden until the trees fell away to either side and the path opened on a broad clearing full of tall grass and leafy plants. From a great flat center place the land swept gently away and upward in all directions to a crest where impenetrable jungle grew to ring it around.

Yet as I sadly staggered, I noticed hot and feral points gleaming where some beast glared hungrily at me from the thick forest edge atop the slope—the orbs set aflame by the reflecting sunrise.

My hair stood on end when the eyes disappeared behind the windswept curtain of fronds that masked the jungle floor, and I knew I'd never live the day through if I did not find or construct a place of safety.

This notion was reinforced when something deep within the forest howled hungrily, and another thing let go a ravenous scream in return.

My blood turned to ice in the silence that followed. I had to find some safety.

And what of grace, dignity and my master's burial?

Would I live long enough to pay my final respects or be eaten while digging his grave?

And yet, I might do more than this. Something struck me then, some notion, perhaps the hard spine of my Szgany warrior nature stiffened, and I thought of the brothers I'd left so far behind. Many dead and others still retreating to our camps—had they been revenged?

Had the master? And his legacy—what of that?

In the moment, I realized I could not cease my struggle. What good my master's grave, if there was no one left to tend it?

And what good his chronicle, if there was no record of it. If no one knew his end?

Before seeing to my own needs, I carried the urn and its precious contents and climbed a nearby tree using natural hand and footholds in its rough bark until I was 25 feet from the ground. There I wedged the urn into a cleft made by two thick limbs growing close to the heavy trunk.

I prayed its elevated position would keep it secure for the time I needed to build a place of safety for myself, so that I might see to the solemn task of my master's monument, and afterwards, provide me peace enough to finish writing the story of his last adventure.

And so it was with heavy heart that I set to work.

As the sun rose over the eastern mountains its golden rays fell upon the lush forest that grew from the heights and swept down in a shimmering green avalanche toward the clearing and the beach beyond. There at the shore, the trees were smaller and of a bushier type that thrived in the sandy soil. Farther in, however, all about the open space, the varieties of trees grew to over a hundred feet in height to where their branches wove into an unbroken ceiling of dark green, vine-draped shadow.

This leafy covering would keep sunlight from falling directly into the clearing until midday, and then partially for only an hour or two before and after. It was plain by the lush grasses and plants that the wet and humid conditions in the open space were perfect for life.

With the sun came every kind of sound, birds at first, I was sure; but those were quickly joined by other things I could not hazard to guess. It was taking some time for my hearing to return to normal, as the explosion of the WESTERNER still echoed in them, but as they healed, I was rewarded with the sounds of a wide array of living creatures.

Whether the calls came from insects or hoofed, clawed and slithering beasts, I knew not the authors of the raucous overture that harangued the jungle; but they gave me no end of starts and surprises as the sun continued to rise, and forest music played.

Certainly, birds I came to recognize in time as dominant in the symphony and these harmonized well with other tunes that were clearly sung by benevolent mouths, but there were creatures also in the chorus whose throats seemed shaped for a darker song and their contributions intruded upon the lighter rhythm.

Their terrestrial notes rang willfully within the cloud of avian music, screaming and calling with what were clearly voices to me, or so I thought, and though they spoke no words that I could understand, the discordant cries echoed through the verdure and left me thinking of the strident and savage hearts of men.

Other things also filled my heart with dread, which I soon paired with the disruptive noises in question. Great disturbances high in the branches, deep in the leafy blind, would explode and the trees would sway and lurch about beneath the action of monstrous muscles. These violent outbreaks were preceded and followed by moments of stillness in the crowding jungle that left me shuddering, and fearing the authors of the next disturbance.

Worse, those still moments might draw out until my dread diminished into calm, only to have that detonated by yet another scream and vibration of the canopy as a dark and terrible creature hidden there announced its escape from hell.

All of this eventually deflected my initial purpose and sent me hurrying to the open beach in search of flotsam from the shipwreck in which I hoped to find weapons. I still had my sword in its scabbard, my long knife, churi and pistol. My powder flask had been soaked in the landing, but most of its contents appeared dry. I had separated out the damp powder and set it on great flat leaves to dry in the sun.

By it, I had also placed the master's book, my fur hat, the journal and other sodden articles.

I was pleased again also that I had chosen my old coat over the new for in its damp pockets I found one leather pouch containing almost 250 percussion caps for my pistol still well-wrapped with most of its contents dry, and a sheet of linen I could use to patch the lead shot. I found seven loose lead balls in one pocket and in another was tucked the bag of 30 that I had purchased in Varna.

Again I mourned the loss of my musket that would surely be at the bottom of the ocean because I knew that its range would have made it a finer tool for hunting than the pistol.

Regardless, my old coat continued to offer little flashes of happiness, for I found 20 sodden matches in the bottom of one pocket beneath my fine tinderbox.

I had begun to regard the old coat with a bittersweet eye, for I knew the unexpected "treasures" were the greatest gift the garment could deliver now, and the heavy coat would be too warm to be of use in these tropical climes; but I blessed it just the same, vowing that it would forever have a place of honor in my heart.

On the beach in daylight, I saw a few remnants of the WESTERNER jutting up from just below the surface 50 yards from shore. Near it a tall column of rock rose from the water to stand some 20 feet above the wreckage with another shorter fist of stone to its side followed by more in a chain where in stages they angled back toward the beach like a pier or breakwater promising safe harbor that the shallows and submerged rocks would deny.

Certainly, Captain Banks had thought it so.

The tidal currents that had lashed the beach the previous night had pushed pieces of the ship, its contents and dead or wounded crew far to the south. I could not risk a lengthy walk without much better armament, but was quickly rewarded during a casual saunter when I stumbled upon a small bag of lead shot attached to the belt and short, loose pants favored by sailors aboard the Westerner.

There was no sign of the man who had worn the garment, though wine-colored stains at the waist and knees suggested a terrible fate. I put aside the grim notion, and confiscated the shot before returning to the clearing, there eventually to test the dryness of the black powder, and to expose also the percussion caps to the sun to ensure that their brief dousing in seawater had not destroyed their effectiveness.

I decided to do no more beachcombing until I had created a safe place from which to work.

The grassy clearing was some 100 paces across and roughly circular. The flat space I had noticed rose toward the back to where a few trees of medium height grew closely together but stood out from the others and were separated from the jungle proper by about 40 paces of open ground on the inland side.

Those trees were stout, and showed many years upon their gray bark. They grew together in a close gathering where the five solid trunks vied for space by overlapping their thick limbs.

This drew my interest for it seemed to me that nature had taken care to prepare the stout base upon which I could build a shelter, as I gauged a place about ten

feet from the ground where their broad branches tangled to form a platform with the tree trunks combining to act as a columns.

It was not two hours after sunrise, so I determined that I had a full day to prepare something temporary up in the trees that I could defend and stay safe within as I began work on the larger structure. I could see several errant branches that sprang up from the intertwining nexus of crowded trees that would have to be dealt with, realizing that even with a saw and carpenter tools it would require many hours to knock them out of the way before I could build a floor...

...but first I would construct some shelter. Temporary, I would call it, but many days would pass before I could complete the main construction, and consider it secure, so I would need some guarded place to sleep until that time.

After climbing up into the tangle of trees that would stand as the larger work's foundation, I looked around and wondered.

I had some skill as a builder and some as carpenter from my years at the master's castle. It was an ancient structure that my brother Gypsies and I would be embarrassed to admit had deteriorated to a sad condition with some areas of it dangerous and in other cases impassable. We did what we could to repair it and shored up those pieces of construction that could be saved or threatened collapse and we reinforced areas that had adjoining ruins.

In some parts of the castle massive old oak doors bound in iron had collapsed upon their rusted hinges. Those that we could not fix were often bricked over. We could not have the place fall into ruin, and yet the master had not requested any ongoing renovations.

Neither myself nor my Szgany brothers would dare to presume our lord's intentions, and so would not undertake any larger rebuilding or conscripting of tradesmen from the nearby villages. Most of the locals would have been too terrified of the castle and its occupant to approach or accept employment there, and we well knew our master did not easily accommodate presumption.

So we did what we could to keep the castle safe, but took no greater steps to modify a building that the master clearly accepted the way it was.

Regardless, we had all learned some necessary skills from the various trades...

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the repetitive squawking of some exotic bird high overhead that was answered or challenged by a high *peeping* and *warbling* from others, and I had to laugh despite my introspective mood.

There I was in an African tree thinking of a Transylvanian castle.

The angled trunks below me came together, so and so...warping inward to form a pedestal and rough platform of their branches... It was clear what I needed to do.

I could see the place to put a temporary elevated structure, if only I could find the materials required to build it and make it secure—to work then...

Certain hardship, admittedly "courage" would be required to survive the first few nights so exposed, for I did not relish sitting astride a jungle branch with sword in one hand and twigs in another as the shadows gathered around me. So this reality could serve as impetus to push the project faster, knowing that a drawn-out enterprise would wear me down, and make me vulnerable to predators that must have been already after my scent.

So with that concept in mind and sword in hand, I followed the path back to the beach where I began searching along the sand to the south for any wreckage that I might use for building, all the while scanning for signs of food or fresh water—and keeping both ears and eyes peeled for hungry carnivores.

Always the birds and animals were singing and calling in the shadowed green on my left, but they were interrupted at times by sudden silences, and it was in those quiet spaces where I kept the keenest watch, for surely some beast of prey had frightened the others.

Always the birds and animals took up their song again, and I was allowed a small decrease in my anxiety.

There would be no time to search out a spring or stream for fresh water, nor would I go too deeply into the dark forest until my black powder had completely dried out and been tested. However, the heat of the rising sun had me thinking that a water source would soon be paramount, perhaps a treasure more important than the shelter I was endeavoring to build.

I was lucky in the end, for a short distance down the beach, no more than a quarter mile, I discovered a chunk of decking from the WESTERNER's cargo hold that had broken loose in the explosion and grounded, and upon this was roped a flat of planed lumber, undoubtedly destined for some port along the African coast where builders would be expecting its arrival.

Farther along the beach I found a bottle of wine and then was thrilled to see something rising from the shallows 50 feet offshore. I almost ran the last distance after I had waded out through the waves, for I'd seen the words stenciled upon a box of three-inch nails.

In the rocks nearby I found more finished wood—unvarnished trim and doorframes—a heavy mallet for pounding stakes or large iron spikes, and half-buried in the sand, a shovel. In a drift of dirt and seaweed ten yards from that, I came upon a large, crumpled sheet of drowned sailcloth and a ball of thick twine twice the size of my fist.

With such a bounty at hand, I decided it was time to build.

One glance at the sun confirmed this, as it had risen high during my search, and would be directly overhead by the time I had carried most of my building supplies back to the clearing.

It would be a grave oversight if I did not also mention that I found a body, though in truth, I was surprised that there were not more. The poor fellow was 20, had a red beard and was a stranger to me for I could not remember him from the WESTERNER.

He had no wounds upon him, though his flesh was as pale as scrubbed stone, and while I could not prove it, I was certain that like the rest of the crew, he had drowned when the steamer went down; but unlike his fellows, he had been washed ashore.

I dragged him up to the rise where the jungle grew down to the sands, and left him after I had searched his pockets and found three English pennies. I kept them since I realized in this place I found myself, any manufactured item had enormous value, and who knew what eventuality could occur where I might need money—no matter how small the sum.

It was impossible to handle the cheap metal without thinking of all the gold and silver of mine that would now be at the ocean floor.

That thought diminished the sinking feeling I suddenly had in my gut, for how could I feel guilt knowing that if fate had altered things but an inch or two this way or that, the dead sailor could have easily been claiming a fortune from my own corpse?

The dead man also started me wondering what had happened to the others. Had Captain Banks and any of his crew survived the wreck? Had the British hunters? That second notion had me looking over my shoulder as I gathered up the lumber I could carry.

They would likely be armed, and Colonel Frank had looked more than capable of surviving the rigors of the jungle—perhaps even flourishing in the wild. I understood that the WESTERNER's sailors would have blamed me for the shipwreck, and would have sought revenge upon me for that. But, I knew Colonel Frank and the hunters, had they survived, would have more personal motivation for vengeance against me.

But there was no reason or evidence to think that anyone else aboard had survived the steamship's explosion. No more than there was yet any indication that I was lucky to have lived through it.

Even more good reasons to hurry about the business at hand. More than likely, everyone had perished in the blast or drowned in the storm, and what remains came ashore had been consumed by the predatory creatures that I had only heard about in tales.

No need to worry about *British* hunters, when the jungle surely brimmed with so many of the African kind.

An hour or two passed, and I had managed to get the majority of the building supplies back to the clearing just after noon, with only a few disruptions: sounds from the jungle, of movement or bloodthirsty calls of the kind I have previously described. These disruptions always made me drop my burdens and stand trembling in place with sword in hand, with my eyes scanning the dense foliage.

I do not know if it was on my fourth or fifth trip back to the beach, that I noticed the sailor's body had disappeared from where I'd left it at the eave of the jungle. I could see the marks in the sand, grooves made by lifeless legs and feet to show that the corpse had been dragged, but I dared not investigate it further.

What was there to do but be terrified, and terrified, what could I do but see to the working of my plan? Only through action could I hope to diminish my fears.

The day was at its hottest with the sun directly overhead when I started working on the main support structure using long stout boards that I doubled up to increase in length, and nailed these to the inner edges of the four stoutest trees over the central tangle of branches that would bear the weight of what I could later build.

This form was roughly square, about 18 feet on a side and ten feet from the ground. I was then able to build a rudimentary platform on the south side of this structure by positioning boards that crossed from the form to the intertwining branches in a series of joists that I covered with the planed planks to make a floor. This temporary base was about 18 feet by five.

After that, I built a makeshift wall by folding up sailcloth and nailing it to overhead branches where it hung down with its lower edges held out and open by nails to form a triangular lean-to on that partial platform. I could enter the shelter through folds in the cloth that could be held closed from within.

There still remained a few branches and a fifth tree trunk that grew inward and would interfere with the completion of my floor but the wood and sailcloth “shelf” I was building would offer me some protection until I could find a way to prune them.

I drank sparingly of the wine that I had found, and had collected up a handful of smooth beach stones that I kept in my mouth to curb my thirst.

With my temporary “shelter” taking shape, I could stand back and imagine the rest of the simple construction I had in mind. The 18 by 18 foot arrangement of supports would be utilized to their fullest later, and seemed a trifle generous when I looked up at them from the foot of the ladder I’d made after scavenging short lengths of dead wood and nailing a series of 9 rungs up the outer surface of one of the trees.

True I could have constructed a smaller permanent shelter much more quickly, but I realized weather and proximity to predators might keep me locked up inside any house I built for myself, and so I had hoped more space within might make any long periods of confinement endurable.

Near sunset, I made a small meal for myself of berries that grew in abundance on dense bushes that ringed the clearing round, had a couple more swigs of wine and climbed up into my “shelter.” Then with my back set against layers of sail cloth that formed the wall and a stout tree trunk tight against my kidneys, I pulled the material closed after me and with my long knife and sword in hand attempted to pass the night.

The jungle came alive with noise when darkness fell—bird song again, though different, and other cries strange and uncanny indeed. These sounds came to me, seemingly louder than in the day, though I’m sure the pitch black exaggerated their effect. As the night progressed, some calls grew more terrifying and sudden, jerking me from what meager sleep I could manage.

Something large passed noisily through the trees beyond the western side of the clearing, and a terrifying yowl came from the north soon after that I instinctively identified as coming from some kind of great cat from the tales I’d been told.

I kept my knees tucked tight to my chest as I listened to the night just past my fort of sailcloth, and I resolved to test the black powder I had collected up before sunset.

I had loaded my pistol before entering the shelter and it was close at hand, but I would only use it in desperation, for only then would I chance a misfire. I had decided against testing the powder before my shelter was ready for the night because the noise from it was sure to attract creatures of every kind.

However, I could not suffer another sleepless night with only blades to protect me, and I swore that if I survived until daybreak, I would have a better answer to the wild creatures that crowded around me.

Later, I heard something snuffling at the foot of the trees under me, and I was put in mind of the pigs that my mother used to keep in summer. With this warm thought in my head, I drifted off and passed the final few hours before sunrise.

The following morning I breakfasted on berries and the remainder of the wine, knowing that I'd have to make all haste to finish my shelter, while realizing that without water or food, there would be little point.

The berries would provide some sustenance, but I would require water if I wished to work quickly in the heat, and I knew that I would have to venture into the surrounding jungle to look for a source of the precious fluid. To do that I needed a special kind of courage.

So I took some steps from the sheltering trees, lifted my pistol and fired it toward the beach, much to the loud protest of the jungle around me. I could not help but smile as the gun smoke rolled like fog across the long grasses, thinking that the report had put my savage neighbors on notice that the Gypsy Horvat had arrived, and he would not go down without a fight.

The black powder was dry, and it seemed the percussion caps had not suffered from their immersion.

With reloaded pistol in hand I traveled the perimeter of the clearing, and then took some cautious steps beneath the jungle cover, moving inland to the east. The land rose there and at times showed a mossy outgrowth of rock and stone. The air was damp with moisture, and I was envisioning the collection of raindrops for drinking when a distant gurgling sound reached my ears.

I moved carefully through the tall ferns and tangled creepers, until I caught sight of an outcrop of crumbled black rock. The block-like shape of the stones gave it a misleading look of having been a structure that had collapsed and fallen down the slope upon which it had stood.

But I was relieved to find a small stream at its base that was fed by a cold, dark spring. Imagining the sort of creatures that such a water source might attract, I knelt down on one knee and drank by using my hand as a cup while I kept my pistol trained on the surrounding verdure.

The water was delicious, clean and fresh, and I drank until my belly was bloated.

I would return later with my wine bottle, and fill it, and would look along the beach for other containers in which I could carry water.

Feeling somewhat refreshed, I walked down to the shore and continued my search for supplies and materials, and was pleased to see from patterns on the sand that the waves had come up quite high in the night which meant that more flotsam might have been carried ashore.

The WESTERNER must have been hauling a cargo of building supplies for I quickly found more lumber. Pieces of varied lengths and thickness had been pushed up separately in the night. These would do well as part of the main platform and floor, and the basics of uprights and beams for framing in the structure.

They would allow for rapid construction once they had been collected and dragged to the clearing. I added to this prize with another great sheet of sailcloth,

and a bundle of canvas. Combined with some of the oversized leaves I'd seen at the jungle's edge I imagined the oiled canvas to be a perfect sheathing for my roof.

As the heat increased, and the afternoon wore on, my shelter continued to take shape. But the heat was punishing. I had quickly finished the water I'd earlier collected, and had twice dared the jungle's edge to refill it.

My stomach grumbled constantly now, and cramped painfully if I drank too quickly. When I finished the bottle again, I walked toward the jungle spring but paused first to fill up at the berry bushes that ringed the clearing, and as I stood there with pistol ready, I listened.

Various creatures bellowed and called in the tangled jungle, while distant shapes moved like shadows behind the cover of trees and bushes, terrifying me as I moved finally back toward the spring. While drinking there, I saw a set of red eyes flashing at me from the shadowed undergrowth to the north.

I had known instinctively that all these wild things were coming near, and watching me, curious but fearful of my foreign look and scent, and it was only that fear that had kept their bloody hunger in check.

They would be hungry as I was...

Perhaps this need sent me out to the shore again to look for flotsam while the sun was still high, with the hope that other things had washed up that I might eat. In fact, while scouring the sands, I found and devoured a small fish that had been swept by the sea into a shallow pond.

Other small fry dogged my weary feet when I waded out past the waves, but they easily escaped my efforts to catch them. That experience left me with the desire to build a fishing pole or somehow make a net.

It was while I was on my way back after that, feeling some small contentment at the influx of nutrition, that I was blessed by the saint with the discovery of an axe.

It was lying flat in the sand, and almost buried, and I would have missed it if not for the constant erosion from the waves. It must have been washed up right after the shipwreck and buried by the storm. As I lifted it free, my heart surged at the turn of luck, and encouraged me to believe that there could be many other useful items buried near.

With my new axe I returned to building and chopped off the top of one tree where it would have pierced the floor and ceiling. While that had brought painful blisters to my hands, I continued on to shear off two stout branches and several dead ones that would have interfered with the raising of my walls.

Up to that point I had been using fist-sized, flat-edged stones collected from the beach to hammer nails which was a finger-bruising but efficient enough method; however, I was pleased to streamline that process by inverting the axe-head and employing its blunt end to pound them into the boards once they'd been started.

The day left me hungry, soaked with sweat and exhausted staring out at the setting sun from within my little shelter. My stomach complained of hunger, but I was pleased with my progress, and fell asleep beneath my sailcloth walls awaking only once to clutch at my weapons when more snuffling things passed beneath me.

I awoke the next morning and surveyed the structure. With the intruding tree and branches out of the way, I was able to get right to work, and so completed the sturdy floor by extending joists and affixing them to the center tangle of branches that would bear their weight.

I continued like this, building the greater structure outward from my temporary “shelter” using most of what remained of the planed lumber to cover the floor. Upon that base I built the frame for the walls, installing one section after another in from the edge of the platform by some two feet or so.

This left an open shelf of flooring that traveled the perimeter of the walls and would be sheltered by an overhang of the roof when I completed that. It was my thought that I would require a safe place to hang the skins of animals, and cook foods outside of the building proper. It would also create a balcony from which I could safely observe the surrounding area.

Some time after noon, I started closing in the walls using sheets of splintered wood I’d found from the wreckage, fixing them behind a double-thickness of sailcloth and canvas, at times reinforcing them by weaving stout branches in the frames I had built, connecting them to the other frames in the wall, and tying them in place with twine to conserve nails.

When I finally stepped back to have a look with the roof joists halfway completed, I realized the result of my efforts looked familiar, and I laughed to think it the shape and design of a yurt. It was a type of building used by nomadic easterners and its design was shared and borrowed by Szgany from those stony plains.

Seeing the canvas-draped sides and flexible lines of the roof, I was put in mind of a large tent built on a wooden platform and perched up in a tree. I laughed again, and took a swig from my bottle of water. Indeed, I had been forced to build eight sections for the walls because I did not have enough long lumber to do fewer, and in my haste, I had attached them together in a somewhat circular fashion.

Later, I would reinforce the sides using logs from the forest and mortar from the clay that surrounded my waterhole, but for now, I could revel in my yurt’s nostalgic and absurd character.

My good humor left me that night as I tossed and turned on the hard wooden platform within the protection of my simple shelter, for thought of my master’s remains would not leave my mind. They had been hidden high in the tree for two nights now and needed to be buried.

Was I forestalling this eventuality with the small hope that he might still somehow survive the wrecking of the WESTERNER? Or was I simply delaying that moment that would sever my connection to him in this life, and in that severance, my connection to the homeland he had provided me?

There was no chance of his resurrection now. Each day I’d climbed up to look into the urn that had become a coffin but never was there any change to the sad remains within.

I had accumulated a thorough enough knowledge of the master’s book to know that seawater was the bane and destroyer of any attempt at reclamation for him. Once mixed with his ashes, the salty liquid would reduce his remains to nothing, and forever dispel his noble spirit.

Yet I could not commit him to this end without leaving at least some lasting mark of his resting place, and so the following morning, I took the urn and its contents some 60 paces southwest from my shelter. To bury him there would allow me to gaze at his grave from my savage home whenever my spirits grew fearful in the jungle night, and I needed the memory of his bravery to bolster my own courage.

I carried the urn to where the ground began to rise at the clearing's edge and where a tree grew of a kind that I had never seen before. It had a strange, tapered bottle-shaped trunk, and held its long thin branches outward four feet above my head where broad green leaves grew and thin seed pods as long as my forearm dangled.

But like the search for the falling "star" that marked the passing of a soul into death, it was a Transylvanian tradition to place a fir tree at the head of my master's coffin. As I had neither fir tree nor coffin, I thought the curious but wholesome-looking plant would do as well as a manifestation of the tree of life.

I had decided to leave the master's sad remains within the urn, and deemed it a fitting place, but a wave of sorrow washed over me again. We had come so close!

As I knelt by his urn, my eyes roved tenderly over it as tears spilled out. Well, enough then. Instead of a vessel for resurrection, the urn would take him to his eternal rest.

I turned to the unusual tree and started digging by its roots with my shovel, easily cutting into the black earth. I fell back on my knees to weep from time to time, looking up through tears to see the master's tree was ringed in by a group of taller trees of a different kind that grew up the slope away from the clearing to where they formed part of the green girdle for the closest jungle giants that cast their leafy boughs high overhead.

I could not help but be cheered to see this as a suitable honor guard, and so I continued digging in the fertile soil and dug until I found a flat, rectangular stone, and then another. Turning them over in my hands, I saw that these had not been shaped by luck but by craft, and I decided they must have marked some ancient structure, long forgotten now, and gone.

There was no time to give it much thought, for whatever civilization might have laid the stones was no longer in evidence, and had disappeared into the history of the Dark Continent.

So, I flung the stones aside for later use in my own building and dug the grave as the tropical heat soaked me through my shirt and pants, until the hole was deep enough that I could set the urn upon its side within.

Then, I retreated to where I had left my coat by the yurt, and from its pocket I drew the master's book. I paged through nostalgically before taking out his secret map. This, I kissed, re-folded and placed inside the cover before carrying the book to the grave where I knelt to slip it into the urn. It was fitting that he take his secrets with him.

The violence of the shipwreck had damaged one of the hinges that held the vented lid to the urn, and this had given me the idea of removing the flat piece of armored metal altogether and using its surface as a grave marker for upon it to either side of the opening were etched the stylized symbols of my master's order.

I saw no purpose to hiding his presence in such a savage wilderness, and I took some solace from the fact that though I also seemed fated to disappear here on this foreign shore, to be an unnamed set of bleaching bones, at least someone might chance upon the headstone and emblem and tremble at the sight of my master's sigil.

And they'd remember him.

But not as I remembered him, as a generous master, and I liked to think at times that he might have thought of me as a loving servant—or a friend perhaps? He was misunderstood by all who judged him for his history. I had listened to him when he cared to speak, and he did from time to time over my many decades of service.

I remembered him drunk on his favorite drink, for so he could become after feasting, but he would speak to me then of his dreams and fantasies and his past. It was at such a time that I learned of his ancient battles with the Turks, and the dreaded Muslims; and he had spoken of the terrible vengeance he would carry out upon all traitors.

And at those times or other, often I thought it was the isolation of his life in the dark that had him musing, for he had yearned at those times to be someone new.

This was perhaps because his great and terrible deeds would forever precede him, and had been distorted by time and enemies into great and terrible lies. In those times that he had thought this, he had expressed a wish that he might have been instead reborn like a wolf free in the wild, owing loyalty only to his nature and to the world beneath his feet.

How he wished that he might run the earth's rolling green miles without the weight of responsibility like a chain around his neck. That he might be free to live his life.

All his power and his ambition had rewarded him with nothing but hatred and isolation. He was forever alone. While that thought did assuage my sorrow for having lost him from my life to his restful peace, it did nothing to comfort me about his death.

"You are free now, Master," I wept as I folded earth over his grave. "You are free."

Chapter 8

FROM THE GYPSY HORVAT'S JOURNAL

3rd January, 1894. Orphan

I no longer accurately measure the days and weeks but if my calculations are correct, I am into a new year but I have no time to celebrate. At least I am warm and have food and water, which is something for which I feel fortunate. The dangerous life around the yurt has kept me in, and left me much time to write. Creatures are in

the bushes and trees that edge the clearing, so I will update my journal to pass the time and avoid being eaten.

In the days and weeks that followed the sad burial, I continued to work on my jungle home; unsure of how long I might survive, but certain I would never see my master or my homeland again. While I would always admit to having a heavy heart at this time, I was pleased to be busy with the realities of life in this dangerous place.

My daily searches along the beach were rewarded more often than they were not. I found sheets of painted wood panel that I recognized as coming from the WESTERNER's main companionway. These were damaged but with careful applications of my churi knife and axe, I could whittle them into the shapes I required to decorate and fortify my yurt's canvas walls.

Bracing and reinforcing those with wire, woven branches and pieces of sheet metal from the steamship's ventilation had allowed me to add windows that faced each other in walls to either side of the west wall where I had made my entrance.

I would eventually need heating and cooking fires within the shelter, and so required access to fresh air without opening my home to the dangers that surrounded the clearing. Once I'd designed and framed in these windows, I used stout green branches from the surrounding jungle to weave a protective and secure screen for each that would allow a breeze in and keep predators out. I used simple flaps of canvas to cover them at night when the insects were at their worst.

The entrance? Well that had presented me with a problem, as I'd left a low gap in the initial sailcloth wall that was inefficient and awkward, but that was easy to defend.

Then I had a piece of luck one day while beachcombing and came upon a solid mahogany door still in its wooden frame, weathered, but little damaged from its time in the sea. Again, I had to attribute it to the destroyed steamer that had sunk and marooned me.

While it presented a difficult task for me to haul it from the distant location where I discovered it to the clearing, and then lifting it into place; it allowed me to extend and fortify the western wall of my home while creating an efficient and secure portal.

Its locking mechanism was broken, but I resolved that issue by fashioning a simple latch of hardwood that I hung on the inside of the door and affixed to the frame. This latch would fall into place whenever I shut the door and was opened again by pulling on a woven rawhide drawstring that I had threaded from inside and through a small hole in the wall to where I'd hidden it in the rafters overhead.

Later, I found and dragged back several sheets of metal that I assumed came from the WESTERNER's lower decks or engine room. Once these were installed they gave my yurt's inner walls another armored layer.

Following another storm, I set out early one morning armed with sword and pistol to search the beach and some twist of luck led me to a stretch of sand covered with a great wedge of small black rocks that I quickly identified as remnants of the stores of coal that would have powered the sunken WESTERNER.

The seas the previous night must have been raging indeed to have driven this heavy material to the shore. Realizing the value of this, I quickly flung it as far up the beach as I could to guard against waves, vowing to return and collect it for my home.

Days later, my beachcombing produced a set of cupboards and a chest of drawers that I recognized as coming from Joe's kitchen aboard the steamship. These had washed up a mile to the south but were worth the extreme effort to get them back to the clearing since they helped organize my new home while providing a solid bulwark against the claws, fangs and horns that I knew lurked in the jungle around me. Parts of the ship's inner architecture continued to wash ashore also, and I carried back anything I could knock into pieces small enough to carry.

It was four weeks before the yurt was completed, and in that time I continued collecting furnishings and other useful items that had previously washed up along the shore, or were stranded by some new violence of sea and storm.

Because the steamship had exploded after striking the rocks, its contents had been cast onto the waves at every point of the compass, and that which did not sink was washed ashore: two wooden chairs and a small writing table, a broom, and carpenter's tools—a hammer and chisel—turned up much later that I put to use refining my home's construction; also wooden utensils for cooking, bowls and plates, several articles of clothing: a warm sailor's tunic, a sweater and two shirts, pants and canvas jumper. A coal shovel and a rake turned up too—anything with wood attached washed ashore, or was later beached.

I was blessed to find a pair of lamps. One was almost buried in sand, and clearly belonged in a more refined environment. It was a miracle that its fluted glass chimney had only been chipped along the edge during its landing; and the other lamp turned up after a windy and wavy night. That one was wrapped in a metal housing that gave it a more sturdy appearance and character, suggesting that it had been in use by the steamship's crew.

Inexplicably also considering their weight, in time I found a half-gallon tin of lamp oil, an oil can for lubricating machinery, candles, several tins of meat, a cooking pot and some rope. Additionally, I'd found an empty keg, and I refilled this daily from my little spring to keep a supply of fresh water close to the yurt.

Many were the times I'd think of these treasures as I stood on the sand and looked out at the sea before my home. There I'd watch the waves thrash against, expose and cover by degrees the uneven line of black rocks upon which we'd run aground, and I'd think of how the bulk of the WESTERNER's material and cargo would be lying there at the bottom beyond reach.

Regardless, a treasure trove of floating wreckage allowed me to refine my jungle yurt, and in some way pay homage to my master.

I was delighted by a prize that washed up one windy night. I did not recognize the great chair from my time aboard the Westerner but such a fine piece must have been intended for the captain's use. I wondered also if either of the other two more utilitarian chairs was familiar in any way, and I had some moments of consternation, thinking that perhaps I'd seen the cook tied to one.

The furnishings I arranged in a fashion that reminded me of the castle with the great wooden chair very much like one he favored. It had a tall, narrow back and widely spaced armrests that from certain angles produced an alarming silhouette—invoking a palpable phantom as if he were sitting there.

This effect was only increased when I set the chair in place before one wall that I'd re-modeled with my carpenter's tools to emulate the fireplace in the castle's great hall.

Mine was a quarter the actual size with part of the Westerner's fireproof ductwork adapted for use as its firebox, flue and chimney that I vented through the top of the yurt.

The header and mantel shelf I built of hardwood instead of stone, and was placed atop two pieces of decorative woodwork—a pair of pillars I had recognized as formerly gracing the steamship's wall by the dining room.

Also from the wreckage I had found a case of wine, and several items of glassware. I had to dive into deep water to get them, but they were a prize worth any risk.

I had never been a drinker in my decades at the castle, but there were days in the jungle when it rained torrentially making work outside impossible. I would put on the fine sailor's tunic, pour myself a glass of this wine and stand in the yurt before my fireplace with the warm flames against my back.

With my home locked up tight against the savage jungle, I would sip the bitter liquid and let my mind rove over my life at the castle with my master.

And I would mourn him bitterly.

Yet there was something more that ate at me. True I mourned the master, but another feeling had crept into the sadness: guilt. Not because I had survived and he had not, but I felt guilty for deriving some pleasure from my solitary life in the jungle.

These feelings came upon me unaware when I was working on the yurt, or if I was collecting meat from my traps or stretching a hide, but I would feel this overwhelming sense of freedom and excitement—even joy—that would be immediately pounced upon by my outrage.

How dare I smile? How dare I enjoy the jungle breeze warmly waving the long leaves overhead? How dare the Gypsy Horvat relish the taste of fresh meat cooked over the hearth that he'd built with his own two hands?

How dare Horvat? His master had died, and the worthless Gypsy had failed him!

I had made an oath, but the day-to-day living demanded too much for any man to obsess about that which did not matter here and now.

How dare Horvat?

Before I knew it I'd be caught up again, smiling ear to ear as I cleaned a large fish snagged from a tidal pool along the beach, and imagining its meat spitting over the fire.

I would be thinking of spices—only to have the depression and the guilt come upon me again.

I had failed my master! Or so I had thought at first, for whether it was my poor character or the action upon me of this life of freedom, but I had gone over my service, and the lengths to which I'd traveled to offer him hope.

I had served him well in life with all my heart and soul. Which soon had me wondering if I could serve him still, but not with mourning.

The years of working for such an important and serious lord had not always been easy, and had at times lain heavy upon my Gypsy heart.

How often had I sung since I'd been in his employ? How often had I danced, drunk wine or played at love? And these things were the lifeblood of my Szgany soul?

So, I came to see that this sad mission, colored darkly as it was by its result, could yet offer us a welcome end. For having done all that I could for him, might not the master have relented to my good service some small reward—a reward, perhaps, as dubious as living in such a dangerous place?

Could I not honor my oath to him by thinking back on my days of music and dance, on my dear family and friends by the fire, raising our cups and singing of the wonderful and terrible lord in the castle who had made it all possible for us?

So it was a sad truth, but one I had to embrace if I wished to survive, for my days demanded every inch of my awareness and would not allow for pondering on a gloomy castle that seemed forever ago.

No. I knew I would ever be saddened by the outcome of our journey, but I could make the most of what I had left and with my numbered days I could create a monument to my great and generous master.

Such a thing will I attempt with this new year and with all the time now left to me!

4th February, 1894

Food was not as difficult a problem as it had at first seemed to my desperate mind. In fact, while the situation was simple to resolve, maintaining it would be the difficult part, for I would have to learn the seasons wherein these exotic fruits, vegetables and nuts came into ripeness. I would need to know the ways of the local plants and wildlife if I was to have a steady store of fresh food.

But I was surrounded by edible things. Fruit, berries and nuts there were aplenty, and I fashioned a fishing pole for myself with which I added protein to my diet.

I also knew how to make a snare from my early days when as a boy I'd add rabbit and other meats to my family's table. The snares were simple to make using twine and the life abundant enough in the tall grasses and plants about the yurt that I was soon enjoying miniature deer, small pigs and strange squirrel-like creatures that were so captured.

I think they were monkeys, but I cannot be certain from the tales I've recollected.

They were tasty enough little beasts, though their histrionics while still in the snare could elicit sympathy when I found them alive, since they resembled little old men, some of them right down to their long gray beards. But I was hungry for meat, and these were succulent.

In the beginning, I built fires in a ring of stones 15 feet from the yurt entrance, which left me in a precarious position that did little to settle the half-cooked meals I hastily made there. The steaming meat sent a pungent invitation into the surrounding jungle to fanged guests that I was ill-prepared to receive, and on several occasions I had been forced to abandon my cooking meat altogether as some noise from the leafy shadows played upon my nerves.

This tension only expedited the installation of my fireplace and its application as a hearth upon which I could roast meat using a metal rod I'd found in flotsam as a spit. The fireplace turned out to be an excellent forum for this endeavor, perfect, once I had fashioned a pan to catch the drippings and spatter.

Of firewood, there was an inexhaustible supply to be collected from the vast jungle that surrounded my home. I found it a much more agreeable fuel than the coal I had discovered on the beach, but I still rescued some of the black substance to store beneath the yurt for later use, should some unforeseen event keep me from gathering wood.

I used my tinderbox to start the fire, and from there would light thin wooden tapers I'd made from kindling to set flame to candle or lamp—all sources of illumination that I consumed sparingly, with a mind toward conservation similar to that which I directed at the matches remaining to me. Since all depended upon substances that were not natural to those environs, once they were exhausted they would be irreplaceable.

It seemed that for me, the greatest challenge would be to avoid becoming a meal myself.

For the first days of my exile, and for the weeks that followed, I became more and more aware of my savage neighbors. A sighting was often foretold when the noisy jungle fell silent.

On such occasions I might see the spotted coat of a great yellow cat, flitting through high branches or stationary, a black-furred beast watching me with burning eyes from the bough of a distant tree. My angry curses did nothing more than draw a deathly silence or at most a throaty growl.

Each and every night from my handmade bed, I heard movement outside my home. Sleek and powerful bodies slid through the long grasses and broad-leafed undergrowth. Soft and cautious footfalls padded close, and once I had to make a great noise to scare something large and heavy from off of my roof.

The creatures of the jungle had swiftly lost their fear of me, and now I feared they were developing an appetite.

Perhaps the curious smells and foreign textures of my yurt would keep them unsettled, even skittish for now—as they must have while I was building the structure, but I could not doubt that time would draw them closer still, as even now some must have wished to explore my scent further or to set their teeth in my flesh.

I would take comfort in my bladed weapons and loaded pistol at such times, knowing that they gave me some small margin to hope. So long as I kept a wary eye, I would have an answer for the beasts.

But there were other times that left me searching for a response. Alarming times, like when I saw evidence that my master's grave had been disturbed. I found marks in the black soil at the base of the tree like something had been digging at his final resting place, but had been frightened off before plundering its contents.

At night I had no response to give, for all beasts ruled the jungle after dark, so they'd have their way, but in the daytime? No! One afternoon with axe in hand I chased a monstrous dog-like beast away. It took everything in me to overcome my terror of it, for the ugly thing was shaped like a spotted demon from the pit.

It skulked off quickly as I approached, hideous head held low on its swinging neck, with its flashing forelegs twice the length of those in back—and all the while it screamed at me like a man beset with madness.

I was glad it had kept on running.

One of those *devil-dogs* finally dug deep enough to scratch the surface of the urn, and I pledged to be more vigilant in the future—day or night—as I heaped earth and stones over the desecrated grave.

I kept a wary eye for the devil-dogs—and the big cats too, they always came to my mind with fear; but they did not disturb me as profoundly as the *wild men* did when they appeared.

At first, I smelled these strange creatures, before I saw them. A funky scent of sweat and dirt crept out of the surrounding jungle—almost human, it was, but so thick was the surrounding brush, that I only got a glimpse of them—half-realized, gigantic and fur-covered shapes that sank quietly into the greenery.

I did not know what to think.

I finally saw these creatures on the fifth week, though I had smelled them in the days before this. They never did come closer than the edge of the wood that grew around to the north, east and south—so again, this was only a glimpse; but they were covered with dark hair, these wild men and were of enormous muscular proportions.

They lurked about the foliage watching me; their eyes gleaming in demonic faces.

At first, I imagined they were otherworldly; the things from Szgany tales. Brothers to the Ördög himself, these monsters were black enough, though the high grasses and plants obscured their lower extremities, so I did not know if they had hooves and pointed tails as the legends said—or if they slithered about on their bellies like snakes.

Certainly, their thick and bony brows looked strong enough to bear the large, sharp horns of the demon myth.

But worst of all, I could not stand their hideous countenances, nor the sinister scrutiny they directed at me through their red-rimmed, piggish eyes. It so disturbed me that I took to firing at them with my pistol at any sighting.

The thunderclap of noise was enough at first to send them running, but in time they grew bolder, even as I became accustomed to the range and caused fur to fly when my pistol flashed.

Finally, I came to think of them less as *men* than beasts, for in their efforts to escape my smoking pistol they displayed their full measure and strength.

Man-like they were but so grotesque in shape and multiplied many times in size and weight, to suggest they were a mockery of the human form. Many hundreds of pounds each of them were, though the males were as large by three times than the square-bodied females.

Again like a parody of the human form, the awkward brutes carried their mass on long, thick arms, leaning forward on closed fists, swinging and ambling with their short hind legs flying. Despite their grotesque bodies they moved quickly through the thick plant life, and almost flew when they took to the tree branches, and swept themselves from hand to hand into the distance.

At a distance, these great beasts howled their hate at me in a garble of strangled noises, now like the hideous approximation of the human voice. They shook the trees that overhung and edged the clearing, snapping stout branches in their rage; but it seemed they quickly came to understand the lethal danger that my pistol represented, and only those foolish or fearsome enough dared to come within its range.

There were many in this group of wild men, and it was strange to me that such large creatures could move so quickly and quietly—a skill that ever kept my nerves on edge. They came and went at their leisure, sometimes snacking on the berries that grew at the jungle's edge.

After their first visit, I knew I would only be happy when their wandering took them elsewhere.

As time went on, my aim and accuracy became much more dangerous since using a pistol with limited caps, shot and powder called for nothing less. So, while I did most of my hunting with snares, I would if I sighted such a thing hunt for creatures that would provide variety or bounty for my table.

So, the wall across from my fireplace was soon decorated with the horned skulls of forest antelopes. Their pelts made warm covers for my bed after I had scraped and dried them on the crude balcony before my door.

The skulls of forest pigs, and monkey skins were also added to the wall, though never had I been able to add the skull or pelt of a big cat to my collection, so fast and sly were they.

I kept my long knife in my belt on the hip opposite the pistol and never traveled about the clearing without my sword slung over my shoulder. But I was ever worried about the diminishing supply of ammunition for the gun, so did what I could to design weapons of my own making.

I had fashioned a thrusting spear by sharpening a long, stout sapling trunk, and I was also working on a serviceable bow and arrow, though I knew that would take some doing since I had little knowledge of their true design.

I had seen slingshots used by the other boys in the Gypsy camp, but I had not yet time to make one. They also did not seem suitable as defense against the creatures I had so far seen.

Hunger and fear was a great tutor, however, so I knew I would work on them in the time to come.

I was relieved to find that the wild men would leave for weeks on end, and supply me with a break from their terrible presence, during which I could focus on the big cats and devil-dogs that inhabited the jungle forest. Those were not as

canny as the hairy men, and like most of the other animals could be scared off by my voice hurling curses. While that was an encouraging thing, I knew it would not last.

Those beasts, the cats especially, applied their teeth and fangs in pure surprise, and seeing one, might very well distract me from the one that lurked behind.

I noticed also, in this time, that the tree by the master's grave had changed, and at first I blamed the creatures that had molested the earth at its roots.

The curious tree had dropped all its leaves, and its long seed pods had fallen like spears, their sharp points thrusting into the earth to form a palisade around the master's headstone.

The bark on the tree's bulbous trunk had also changed. What once had been bright and green, was now dark and threaded through with black and purple lines.

I briefly considered digging the urn up to move it but realized I would need greater cause than a disfigured tree to disturb such hallowed ground.

2nd May, 1894

My beard grew as the months passed and I struggled to remain mindful of it. I had tried to keep it bobbed close to my chin with quick slashes of my long knife but the chore slipped my mind with all my other work at hand, and so, I turned around at times to find its longest gray threads tangling in my teeth as I dined or wagging down near my belt as I paced the beach.

I did what I could to maintain the semblance of civilization about myself, and tried to bathe each time I washed my clothing at the shore whenever it became too rank and oily for even me to bear. But, I had found a bar of soap amongst my sea-swept swag and I figured it would last a year or more at the rate I was using it.

I had taken to wearing my old fur hat. I found its snug fit comforting, and worth the lines of sweat it sent running down my neck at midday. It kept the moisture out when it rained and stopped the clouds of insects from burrowing under my scalp whenever the vast swarms pestered the area.

Perhaps my ability to consider such a thing marked my life progressing, though I found time moved strangely there, with even the African seasons difficult to tell one from the other.

Beautiful orchids and fragrant flowers of every color and description bloomed at varied intervals, often overlapping, and too disparate to relate to any particular growing period, just as the abundant fruit ripened on its own schedule independent of other fruits or observable factors. I supposed that related directly to the climate in which I found myself.

For the most part, it shifted between exceedingly hot day and night with lots of cloud cover, while slipping for days into an almost constant rain—and hence the adoption of my old hat.

Regardless, the jungle sounds pervaded, only diminishing by some small degree at night, when the rain fell, or when a large carnivore was about.

And it was like the changing of the guard as daytime insects, birds and animals exchanged their positions with the creatures that did their living in the dark.

The variously vocal insects, birds and animals were both a blessing and a curse. Those I could eat were welcome, but there were dangerous beasts in the jungle vastness about me and so the harmless animals could be torture to my ears or distract me, even though some of those creatures provided warning calls about these possible threats.

But making such distinctions would take much more exposure for me to recognize, and so if I wished to be out of my shelter for any length of time total focus was required and complete detachment from any intellectual pursuits that did not pertain to my immediate environment.

In this way I found I was a better hunter, and only in this way was I able to survive. In time, this focus allowed me to sense the approach of many jungle beasts. My mind had sharpened along intuitive lines, and my instincts allowed me to smell some of them coming, even from far away.

I soon learned to follow the cadence, pitch and roll of the general jungle sounds—and listen for any change. It was like a coded language that could be deciphered by anyone who understood the key.

Even if the noise drove me mad at times.

Then came one afternoon when the sky had become gray, and the jungle noises had fluctuated, growing more urgent before fading down to silence as the abundant life around me began to recognize the true character of the coming storm.

When the clouds turned black, and the ocean waves were crashing toward the trees, I knew that a most terrible maelstrom was brewing.

Ironically, such foul weather was safer for me, as few of the jungle beasts could abide the lightning strikes and thunder; so they sought out shelter in the forest depths, but errant dangers remained. Some creatures found no such safety and were driven mad in the open clearing where they crashed around my yurt, somehow aware of the inner refuge, and seeking some mode of entry.

In the past a simple shout or pistol shot had scared away whatever wanted in, for with a wad of paper instead of a precious lead ball in place, the black powder still provided a deafening crash when it was ignited.

But this day, as the extremity of weather grew worse, I made my way back to the yurt after spending several minutes on the shore watching the breakers, and wondering aimlessly if this new disturbance might cast some other valuables up from the deep.

My supply of lead shot had grown dangerously low after a recent challenge from a few of the more courageous wild men. I did not relish the day when the rounds ran out, and the question of their replacement had hung over me.

But the black sky and sea refused to answer, hiding its dangerous intent behind the wind that snatched the froth from the ocean waves and cast it inland.

I paused on my way to the yurt, and drew my sword for I saw a hairy body lying prostrate on the master's grave. I slowed on the path and approached cautiously as the wind buffeted and the rain began to pelt down.

It was one of the devil-dogs with the mismatched limbs. The beast had dug deep, and exposed the urn itself. Cursed fiend! It must have been in hiding earlier as I strode past to the shore, only coming out again to finish its task.

In trembling hands I held my sword, inching closer to it. I was prepared to draw my pistol and expend valuable lead, but I knew a well-placed thrust could prove as lethal—where the mere sight of me had driven them off before.

Was it deaf? The devil-dog had not moved.

Lightning struck near the beach and I started as the dazzling light sent my shadow over the beast by the grave. Still, it lay motionless.

I snarled at the clouds to steel my nerve. With sword before me, I stepped closer still. Then I saw the thing's wicked eyes were open and staring. Its hideous black muzzle was flecked with dirt and its powerful jaws and exposed fangs hung into the dark hole it had dug. Just inside, I saw the urn. Its surface had been scraped by the beast's claws—and stained with streaks of blood.

Blood?

Lightning flashed again, and a vicious crack of thunder detonated over the clearing. So violent was the blow that the nearby trees came alive with noise as the nested birds reacted fearfully to the sound.

I knelt to study the beast by the grave. It was dead—surely—but I poked it with my sword again to be sure. I did not know the things enough to trust, and it wore the look of nightmares.

"Devil," I whispered, nudging it with my sword point again.

It was dead; so I grabbed it by the right hind leg and rolled it away from the open grave until it came to rest upon its back. It was dead, indeed.

Its throat had been torn open; the thick hide was matted with clotting blood.

I steadied myself in a crouch and cast about the clearing as the long grasses snapped in the wind. A devil-dog! Its brother then had killed it over the spoils, and yet lurked... or had one of the wild men come upon it?

The clouds rumbled, power building and the jungle life raised a din to fill the void.

There was a crackling sound in the long grass to my right. A weight had settled on brittle stems close by—and I glanced at the dead devil-dog, imagining the coming battle with another of its kind.

Then to my dismay, I realized the jungle had gone deathly quiet, and in place of a thousand birds and animals, there was a sharp resonant clicking coming from within the long grass.

I leapt up and ran toward the yurt, only passing ten feet before the storm arrived with all its vehemence, releasing a blinding flash of lightning and deafening crash of thunder.

I kept my sword up as I ran, half turning with the other hand poised to draw my pistol. If the powder were wet... it would not fire.

And I could not climb to safety without one hand free!

Behind me, I had no doubt, something followed that caused the wind-whipped grasses to jerk and sway. The clicking continued, but now I heard scrabbling

claws on dead branches, as leaves and grass snapped against hard flesh and muscle.

I kept on toward the yurt, and leapt for the lowest rung of the ladder. There was no time. I had seen beasts killed in the jungle, and it took no time at all. In a flash it happened.

One second to look aside and the jaws closed over the victim's windpipe.

The clicking continued, repetitive, coming louder now and slowing: *Clack! Clack!* As if two stones were striking together—or like some beast was taking its position to strike.

Thunder roared and rain poured down in a torrent as I leapt for the fifth slippery rung of the ladder.

The rain hammered down upon my shoulders as I heaved myself upward rung to rung, and I barely suppressed a cry of joy when I saw the door before me. I scrambled onto the platform, and dropped my sword to lash up with an open hand to grab the leather loop I used to unlock it, and in a desperate second it swung inward so I could launch myself through the portal.

As I scrambled in, something caught at my boots behind me, so I pushed forward with my wet hands fumbling and failing to close the door completely. Cursing, I pulled my feet inside and kicked clear of the frame as the door opened after me.

I slid backward until my shoulders struck the far wall, then violently shoved a chair aside as I drew my pistol and aimed at the open door, praying the powder was dry. I slowly drew the long knife with my free hand as I waited, realizing grimly that with the devil-dog, my single shot would have to be lethal.

With only sharp steel after that, then we both would die. I grinned at the blade then raised my eyes to watch.

The world outside had grown darker as the storm descended, and now lightning gleamed on the splash of water I'd dragged into the yurt. Any moment the devil-dog would round the doorframe bristling, bone-crushing fangs bared in its monstrous face, and I struggled to keep my breathing shallow, and the pistol steady in my hand.

One shot.

Lightning crashed, and I almost fired the gun when the sudden flash threw a strange shadow across the doorway.

I took a calming breath, and sighted along the barrel. Then the repetitive clicking cycled anew.

The shadow touched the farthest side of the doorframe, showing the deadly closeness of the animal outside. But something was wrong. Truly, the devil-dogs could not have such guile or skill at the hunt to climb up to the yurt, to wait just out of sight and now, the size was wrong.

A fearful shudder went through me as I thought of the wild men. Had one of them killed the devil-dog at the grave before seeing his chance with me? Did his devilish passions lust for my blood, to sink his great fangs into my flesh and kill... but my mind lurched away from the notion for only gibbering madness could prepare me for that!

The shadow flickered across the doorframe and inside wall as the distant lightning flashed again and again. But it was so small, the shadow, and the limbs cast there had no heft or mass. However that did little to allay my fears for a shadow was a poor gauge for actual size, and useless for divulging *intent*.

The sharp clicking noise continued. It was there again, repetitive, against the rushing fall of rain outside. But now, in this new location, I could better hear it. The clicking was too high, reedy, and almost insect-like, no wild man or devil-dog could make such a sound... perhaps my imagination... or I had truly gone mad.

For I was reminded of bats. The clicks were like unto the noises I had heard those night creatures make in the caves around the mountain castle—*back home*.

What was this?

There followed a quiet, quick scrabbling sound on the planks outside, and then I could see the first long filmy hair on the interloper's head, blown into view by the damp and gusty breeze.

Thunder boomed and lightning thrashed the sky, and the shadow moved as the thing crept into the doorway on all fours. Driven by fear, by its need for shelter, it entered and crouched in the path of my pistol.

I took a breath, and whispered the name of Saint Sarah.

The creature was pale and glistened with rain; its skin was like that of a salamander or frog, but pale—so pale as to be almost white.

Large almond-shaped eyes peered at me from a bulbous head. The orbs gleamed with crimson light, like they were warmed by an inner fire. The face was small and blunt—appearing human but unfinished, dwarfed beneath the large, rounded skull that rested on narrow shoulders.

The body itself was short and compact; its edges rounded by fibrous, tightly woven muscle. There was no abdomen to speak of; its ribs seemed to rock uncomfortably against the high, flat hip bones. These components combined to form a torso no more than ten inches in length.

The resulting truncated shape accentuated the thinness of the creature's arms and legs that traveled out from the body to elbows and knees before flaring slowly to form the extremities. The hands and feet bore very narrow digits which exaggerated the elongation further, resulting in an even more spidery appearance.

The pistol shook in my hand as I studied the thing.

Its eyes held mine, their warmth calming my spirit, and I recklessly set my weapons aside as the creature squatted in the doorway to watch me.

I did not know the face. It was raw—its components an afterthought—incomplete. Dwarfed in some way, each feature was in its place but there was little detail. The body was the same—without line or mark, like a crawling infant's, but this was no infant.

Tantalizingly familiar but who? What? It could be... It couldn't be. It could *only* be...

Master! First killed then kept in his special urn and carried many miles before a final drowning and burial, but now this—and how this? Oh Heaven, what magic have we wrought? For my love had come again, changed he was but brought back to life for me and me alone to care for—to love and cherish!

The eyes continued to glow, and the thin-lipped mouth opened wide to form a scarlet hole in which a red tongue vibrated and the curious clicking sound filled the cabin.

Lightning struck a tree by the beach, and the flash was accompanied by an explosion of wood and burning cinders that sent the frightened little creature sprinting across the floor and into my arms too quickly for me to recoil.

It pushed its round head into the crook of my shoulder and left arm; the wriggling fingers and toes bringing a strained laugh from me before I chuckled.

"Can it be you?" I asked, striving to hold the slippery body in my hands.

I was answered by more clicking sounds, and a ticklish nibbling at my shirt.

The lightning crashed again, and the creature shivered where it hugged tight against my chest with its little limbs trembling.

"Peace, now," I cooed. "You are safe with Horvat."

But the creature kept shaking.

"I must call you something," I continued, with my damp, cold back against the wall. "And yet, I well remember the warnings about your need for secrecy." I looked out through the open door as lightning struck the sea and rain thundered down. I suddenly imagined every kind of wild beast stalking toward us seeking shelter, so I shifted to my knees and slid over to close the portal and latch it.

The creature clung to me, its heart pounding so hard I could feel its cadence in my own breast.

"That's better," I said of the locked door, as more lightning flashes flickered through the windows. "Or we'll have the very king of beasts here for your coronation..."

I smiled at my own cleverness, pleased that I was speaking. It had been so long.

I caught the spindly creature in my calloused hands and hoisted him out in the dim light before me. Its long fingers and toes clutched my corded wrists in a fright, but the big, crimson eyes flared with something like excitement. I lowered it, and raised it quickly again, and its mouth fell open and froze in an expression of glee.

The *clicking* came with the creature's unfinished smile, but it kept its tight grip upon me.

In the next flash of lightning, I saw the gums inside the red mouth were bare and pink, save for a pair of needle-like protrusions at the upper jaw—the bone-like canines appeared to be of such a delicate construction, but knowing well this creature's lineage; I did not doubt the "fragile" fangs would be strong enough to tear the thickest hide.

And I grimly remembered the dead devil-dog by the grave.

"Oh, is it you then, my dear?" I asked the creature, drawing him close and hugging his cold, wet body to my chest. "Is it really you?"

I got up and sat in the chair I had knocked aside. Something in me had been so weary since I'd lost the master that now having found him again—if this were truly him—I felt the weight begin to lift, and the promise of purpose beyond my own wretched survival energized me.

"It must be you," I said, unable to imagine anything else.

The creature sat in my lap and looked up at me with lambent eyes.

"As I can only think of you as my lord and protector, I shall name you the word for 'master' in my own tongue so none who might hear it could ever trace the word

to your true identity, unless we should find rescue from this awful place, or come among our countrymen,” I said, pausing to clear my throat as a cooing noise came from the little creature—before it gave up a blast of rapid-fire clicking.

“It is an ignoble thing to use so coarse a language to name one so fine, you might think, but for one absurd moment in time your safety is more important than your history, and so I name thee Gazda...”

In my dearest heart I would have named him *gazdálkodik* also a name of my own tongue, as I had named him to myself in secret dreams, but I dared not take such license in his delicate state—whether it was true or a simple fantasy of mine. Those secret thoughts, I fear would be lost in time, and if I was to be remembered, I shall be content to be his faithful servant.

“Gazda will be your name,” I repeated, “until you tell me different.”

Chapter 9

FROM THE GYPSY HORVAT'S JOURNAL

10th October, 1894. *Survivors*

I realized that while Gazda's was a distinctly human face, it was an unfinished portrait. The skin was pale, almost transparent and showed blue veins and the fleshy masses beneath. His features were like a doll's with everything in the right place: eyes, nose, ears and mouth, but they appeared to be hastily drawn, like place markers awaiting the artist's hand.

Of course, as weeks passed his face and body slowly changed, and were clearly developing into something more human in appearance. The insubstantial skin began to mimic the varied surface of human skin, though it remained unnaturally pale in color and did not redden or tan in the tropical sun.

His thin, reed-like limbs and extremities developed contours similar to my own with fingers and toes growing knobby and wrinkled about the knuckles; the arms and legs bulged around elbows and knees and swelled at the forearms and calves. His fingernails also grew in darker than his skin, hard and sharp to the touch.

All of these changes continued over our first months together. Evidence of Gazda's gender developed alongside the clarification of his facial features. His eyes became less prominent having shrunk back into his skull with the “glow” appearing only at moments in the shadow.

At all other times they were dark blue—almost black—ringed with plenty of white where they rested beneath full lids similar to my own. Nose and lips swelled to become childlike; his eyebrows were dark but fine and the wispy hairs that first straggled from his scalp were replaced by short black bristles.

Often Gazda would stare at me, curled up in a blanket well warmed in my arms and tight against my chest. He would study my face and reach up with his little hands and tug at my beard to bring me close, so that he could caress the stubble on my cheeks, rub my forehead and pluck at my nose.

I was amazed at his keen interest and the considerable strength in those fingers as he continued these investigations, for investigations they were.

His dark eyes ran over every feature on my face as his breath came slowly in and out, his small pale chest rising and falling.

It became apparent that the majority of energy little Gazda absorbed from his bloody meals was put toward this development of *physical* characteristics because his size did not change. While he became more human looking, he more and more resembled a child of one year in age.

Agile he was, and strong when he clung to me going about our home, when he scrambled on all fours, or climbed any surface with his fingers and toes like a monkey.

Like the monkeys that I have eaten, at least the way they appear as I watch their curious interactions in the trees overhead... playful and frenetic... and busy.

I say monkey, though it was plain to me that Gazda's continued development was directed toward a human in form.

Though a monkey he remained in mischief.

Gazda was energetic and curious. He had a fondness for all living things, and played with any creature that found its way into our abode. I watched on one occasion as he chased an insect quite fearlessly around the floor, only to become startled when the thing opened its wings to fly.

The poor fellow fell back on his bottom where he cried and clicked until another insect caught his interest.

Another time, he played so vigorously with a frog that had entered the yurt that the creature died from the interaction. From the limp and floppy limbs I guessed that every bone in its body had been broken, but I would never caution my young ward to be more careful. His strength was already well beyond the capacity of most natural creatures his size.

Besides, the frog's death had not disturbed him, for Gazda played with its corpse until I had to finally take it from him in pieces. He smiled and licked his fingers as I threw his unfortunate playmate out the door.

Gazda had been too nimble and quick for me to take out of the yurt at first, so I had spent the initial few days inside learning about him, his limitations, and hopefully, gaining his trust so that he might understand me if I warned him of any danger.

As he was a child by all appearances, and had no language but his clicking, and he made no effort to communicate more, I saw no reason to again remind him of his noble heritage.

I was simply amazed that he was there, that fate had altered our destinies so much, and then offered salvation once again.

It seemed to me that he had no memory of himself or if he did, the true knowledge was locked behind his inability to speak. So, I remained optimistic and remembered the master's book and how it warned of such a thing and the "child-mind" that he might return with.

Always, the book had spoken of his returning by degrees regarding life and memory, and so I could only think this was its most radical form, and I would remind him of his history when he was ready. At the moment, he was more

focused on playing with insects and frogs, and gaining a complete mastery of his own developing body.

I would teach him about his true self later by relating stories of his life, and by exposing him to the newspapers, magazines and books I had found during successive outings at beachcombing.

The printed material was obviously more flotsam from the WESTERNER and had held little interest for me as more than material for lighting fires, but I had been thrifty with it after the many sodden pages had been dried, and so enough remained to assist with Gazda's tutelage. There were illustrations amongst the material that might be a good place to start.

I had thought to retrieve the master's book and urn also, since both might benefit his restoration; but later during our first outing, I discovered that the grave had been refilled with dark earth by the torrential rains that fell during the storm when we were reunited. I would reclaim the treasures at the first opportunity, but was presently overwhelmed with the busy Gazda's early growth.

Finally, the need for food forced me to leave the yurt. At first Gazda had shown no sign of hunger, and I attributed this to his first meal of the devil-dog, which considering its size must have been filling, but I was reminded of my young ward's returning appetite after suffering a few painful nips from those sharp little canines.

Since Gazda did not understand his weaknesses I was forced to solve the immediate problem of leaving him alone while foraging for food by developing a sling from sailcloth that would firmly catch up his arms and legs and keep him tucked safely against my chest. In this way, could we go about this chore, without me having to fear his escaping into the wilderness.

I tested the function of this device inside the cabin, and he found it good fun at first to be carried thus—until we went outside when I had quickly seen flashes of indignation as something caught Gazda's eye and he struggled mightily to investigate it, only to realize that he was a prisoner of the sling.

The angry clicking provoked by that discovery was nearly deafening, but the world around our little home was as easily distracting to the eye, so he accepted the sling if it allowed him access to the broader world.

He would have time to explore it physically when he had grown.

The wild men returned. The hideous, hairy tribe had taken to watching me and the yurt again. Despite the toll I had taken upon their thick hides using my dwindling supply of shot, they insisted upon scrutinizing my every move. They settled their entire group in, females and infants also, atop the rise at the edge of the jungle where they could eat my berries just out of range of my pistol.

They had grown used to the sound of the gun, and while it provoked a fright and retreat in them, they now returned to the fruit.

Since I could not waste the ammunition, I had to suffer while they raided my garden.

The big males probed the edge of my range, but I was reluctant to fire without a sure shot. I had grown to fear that they wanted access to the yurt, and so I would save my gun for close exchanges if they dared to come.

So I timed our expeditions to the actions of the wild men, and when their group moved off, I carried Gazda quickly as I went about our chores. This always had me worrying about him.

He had not remembered himself yet, and so was still terribly vulnerable in the jungle setting. I did what I could to keep him safe, but his curiosity often dragged us closer to trouble. Despite his physical development that had been ongoing, I still did not trust him in the forest, so I continued to carry Gazda bound up in a sling when I checked my snares for animals that would serve his needs and mine.

He complained incessantly about the restraint, but I had grown used to his struggling, and clicking. I had hoped that he would adapt to the sling, or come to understand it was essential to his leaving the yurt, but he had refused; so, I could not retire the device because his physical growth continued at a pace faster than his mental. He had much more maturing to do before he could go about the jungle at the speeds I knew he would be capable.

So we walked from snare to snare with a hand-woven basket in which I collected living and dead prizes from the twine loops. Occasionally, to quiet his protestations I would feed him out in the long grasses by pressing the throat of some creature to his mouth where Gazda's head protruded from the sling. That was a treat that usually lightened his mood and quieted his clicking, a distraction I did not need as I kept watchful for carnivores and the return of the wild men.

Usually I would hurry about our business, and take the captured creatures back to the yurt where Gazda would watch me prepare them. He would get some of the blood as I butchered the animals, and I would get the meat.

I had noticed that Gazda grew somewhat feeble between feedings and his skin could grow cold at such times. It was a less extreme form of what happened when I took him outside in the morning or afternoon, or if the sunlight fell upon him. At such times, he became limp—sleeping so deeply that there was little movement of his chest as he lay wrapped in the sling, much as a child might with his mother.

I would have used this lethargy to my advantage, except I did not know the long term impact of all the sunlight upon him. I knew in his previous life that while he could go about in daylight, he preferred the night when his abilities were at their peak. So, I did not want him in this vulnerable state to be often exposed to the sun's direct rays. Luckily, the thick jungle canopy and tall trees surrounding the yurt kept most of the sunlight from ever reaching us.

I was running short of ammunition and black powder from firing my pistol at those wretched wild men. They had returned and over a few days, several of the big males came through the long grasses, quite close to the yurt.

I fired through the windows at them when they neared, but they seemed to have developed an ability to predict my targets by watching for the angle of the gun. I think at best I may have grazed some of them.

Gazda *clicked* excitedly whenever the gun was fired and tried to glimpse the action through the windows, but I do not think he saw more than great black shapes in the green grass.

Later, after a final exchange with an enormous male who threw rocks at the yurt as I fired back at him; the tribe suddenly sank back into the jungle without a trace. It seemed that the group of them had left the berry patch.

As I have kept watch for them since, I have prayed that the sea would cast up one of those Winchester repeating rifles, or at least a bag of lead shot.

Still, as I had fired at the hideous wild men, and hoped to penetrate their hairy hides; I could not consider it a waste of ammunition. Surely, this time they had learned a stronger revulsion to the yurt and this clearing our home.

The worst has happened.

The wild men had left with their tribe, but one must have remained.

A week after the last exchange with the beasts, I traveled along the line of trees to search for any remaining berries, and to clear my snares of small game and reset them.

I had Gazda bound tightly in his sling upon my chest. It was a day like any other, but my little ward had been unruly in a fashion similar to how he could be when a storm was coming.

But the sky had told me nothing by way of cloud or cool, so I set about my chores, and as I pulled living game from the snares, Gazda grew more excited in the proximity of the fresh food.

I found his curious nature most fascinating when we were safe within the cabin, but out of doors, it was a distraction that I feared would one day prove fatal.

So I kept my sword in hand as I walked, and my pistol was loaded and primed at my belt. We continued through the thick greenery atop the incline in a southwest direction and I soon got a clear look at the strange tree where I had buried my master.

I angled toward it, but could barely see the grave marker where I had left it at the roots because all the seedpods that had dropped had thrown up branches of their own, and were fast becoming a thicket.

None of the new saplings looked healthy either, though they were clearly pushing outward against their neighbors, and well on the way to forming a greasy barked and dark tangle around their parent. What also caught my eye was that the surrounding trees that came against the new saplings appeared dead or dying.

I cursed myself for I had yet to retrieve the master's urn and book in the months since Gazda's appearance. True he was a handful and took all of my attention, but with the delay and new growth, the chore now promised to be challenging.

Gazda squeaked, and started clicking. His little body struggled mightily within the sturdy sling.

"Hah, Gazda!" I said petulantly as I turned from the gravesite and started up the incline, moving through the long grass toward the berry bushes. "You must stop your fussing..."

The words were barely out before a great beast loomed up out of the undergrowth. The wild man's shoulders were four times the width of mine, and his barrel chest was thicker than a horse's. I raised my sword as the beast bared his enormous fangs and came stamping forward.

I slashed down with my blade, but it slid off the thick hair growing on the wild man's shoulder as the sheer mass of this hurtling creature struck me and Gazda like a rockslide.

Pain flared instantly in my stomach and hips and legs, and I cried out, just as Gazda started a shrill clicking that wound upward in speed and intensity until it became an insect-like whine. But it was only a sound that cut the silent trees around us as the wild man came storming down upon me again.

His gigantic fists rose and fell on my thighs and stomach like sledgehammers, and both my legs shattered with a loud report.

I had one hand raised to protect Gazda, and with the other I clawed at my waist for the pistol.

The beast leapt in again, his dark eyes gleaming with hideous malice. The rubbery lips rolled back from sharp canines, and his scream filled me with terror.

The wild man bit my left leg and savaged the flesh with his fangs, before he swung me tumbling over the ground toward the clearing.

I managed to get the pistol free, and then marveled that despite my pain I was still whispering calming platitudes to Gazda, as I struggled to free him from his sling.

The wild man charged me again, and I got the pistol up in time.

There was a sharp report and flash, and then the smothering mountain of muscle fell upon me.

Gazda was missing and night had fallen by the time I awoke beneath the dead giant.

My pistol shot had gone in through his left eye and killed him. In agony, I pulled my mangled legs out from under the wild man's bulk, but still I had the presence of mind to feel about on the dark grass for my pistol and then slide the weapon through my belt opposite the long knife.

I could not see my sword and its scabbard, and lacked the strength to look for them, so I dragged myself back toward the cabin.

As I struggled in the slick grass, I wept and raged and called poor Gazda's name. But I knew from the heat running up from my extremities that infection was starting already, and that I'd never live long enough to see my poor ward to safety.

Still, I could not give up, and finally came awake on the floor of the yurt. I do not know how much time had passed since I penned those first notes in my journal.

I must rest again.

I am so thirsty.

Gazda has returned, and he played with my journal pages when I opened it to write.

It is still dark but the light outside suggests that morning is near. He still clings to my chest, and steals the heat from me. I have been drinking wine from one of the shipwrecked bottles and I do not know how much time has passed.

Poor Gazda seems worried. The injuries on my legs are festering and I have not had the strength to bandage them.

But he is my good little helper, poor Gazda, and at times he has lain upon my shattered thighs and licked at the injuries to clean them. I am amazed that the little tongue acts as an analgesic, or it may be the wine—but I am growing numb there.

I could not shut the door. Crawling to it almost killed me from the pain, but its lower edge has become caught on something, and it will not shut completely. My eyes do not focus now, and I cannot see the obstruction, so the door is still open a crack.

I hope to feel better soon, and I can remedy this lapse in security.

It sickens me to write this, but I smell rotten meat. It must be gangrene. A pity there are no Gypsy virgins I could call upon to cure it with a sweet kiss.

Gazda is starving. I have not fed him since his return to the cabin, and there is nothing here to suit his needs. How many days have passed? How many days?

My vision swims and my breath bubbles in my chest.

I see now that at some point, I have put a splint on my left leg, the most mangled. Bone protrudes from the knee, so it was a worthless effort.

My flesh is yellow, and my fever is raging. The wine does nothing.

I, see also, that I have a blanket over my chest, and I have managed to reload my pistol.

I am feeling light-headed as I jot this note.

My little helper continues to clean my wounds. I feel his ministrations are like a thankyou for what I have done for him. It is not necessary, for I love him so.

He will die, after I do. Perhaps it is better that the door cannot be closed completely. He may get out, for he must be starving. But he cannot hunt for himself. He cannot set the traps.

The smell of rotten flesh within this cabin makes me nauseous.

At night Gazda crawls up onto my lap. He has taken advantage of my new lazy ways, and has begun spending hours curled up against my bosom dreaming his strange dreams.

But he must be starving.

Often now, it takes a moment to know if I am awake or asleep. My flesh burns and my mind is ablaze with fever.

Another storm approaches and the lightning terrifies Gazda. It seems it ever shall, now that he has come back to life only to die.

It is sad for me to fail my master so, with him just here. Here, climbing up onto my chest again where he nestles over my bosom. It has been his way to curl up there in the warmth, and fall asleep listening to the beat of my loyal heart.

He shivers so as the lightning rages. His eyes appear unfocused. It is his fear, or hunger driving him somewhere deep inside himself.

"I am here, little one..." I whispered, patting his bony spine.

I add these notes while he sleeps. I must have used my matches for a candle burns on the small table beside me.

Where is my tinderbox?

And then I came awake from a dream or vision in which my thoughts drifted in delirium until I saw the dark halls of home, and by a crumbling stair I watched the master's brides approach.

The looks of scorn were obvious on their white faces, and desire was crimson in their eyes, but they ceased their forward motion and would come no closer as I muttered, "I too have loved before, but not like this... Not for service! Nor for hunger. But for love alone! The master speaks to me in a way you would not understand, and I will die for him, but never will I have his kiss."

As I write this, I am blushing, for it seems I say too much about the master.

I am awake again, and the master's skin is chill and clammy beneath my fingertips.

Oh what a shame that he would return to life, only to die. If only I could protect him from the thunder that rages past the open door. At least that would provide some small comfort. Instead, I will lift my warm shirt and blanket that he can hide from the howling darkness under there. It is a small offering, but I have nothing else to give.

His eyes flash some subtle communication to me before entering the warmth between my clothing and my chest—an understanding.

Ah, his skin is cold against my own. But, he is settling down, and already his flesh is growing warm from my own.

I am glad I can give him this.

I chuckle now, penning these words for I can barely see the page.

My skin shivers at the touch of his cold fingers and hands, at the slippery chill of his thin body.

"I shall for a time be thy *anya*, for *mother* is another word for *faith*," I murmur, and then laugh, relishing the thrills his lips send over my skin as he kisses the ridge of muscle on my breast. *How I have longed for that kiss.*

The uncomfortable chill passes quickly, diminished by the dearness of little Gazda's flesh. Like morphia his touch heats the muscles beneath my skin and sends warm tendrils outward to calm my aching limbs, and it gives me a moment of clarity.

"Gazda," I whisper, and the hungry creature gave a click and guttural squeak of appreciation. Then I breathe, "Gazdálkodik..." Hopelessly, I knew. But the warm thought matches the heat I feel at my breast.

I patted Gazda's bony spine where it pressed up from inside my shirt, and now I set my pen aside, to rest awhile and listen to his heart.

