

CHAPTER 1

Wallachia. The chapel at Snagov. December 1476.

Dracula pulled open the door of the chapel. Relishing his newfound strength he ripped it clean off its hinges. He strode out into the night. All eyes fell on him and he glared back at his people with real menace. They were on their knees in the cold and the rain praying for the repose of his soul.

He laughed at the irony of it. The heady aroma of blood filled his nostrils. The blood of his people. It almost overwhelmed him. He felt the vibration of it in the ground beneath his feet as it pumped through their veins. With the taste of blood still in his mouth he would have to have more.

The smell of the blood of the dead reached him too. It was a repugnant scent. He realised then that only the blood of the living could satisfy his thirst. That was the price of immortal life. Lucifer warned him if he did not drink he would die. In taking Gabrul he realised that to drink he would have to kill. But the kill was good too. Looking at the crowd before him he did not care how many would need to die to satisfy his needs.

His people gazed at him in awe. Some noticed he had recovered fully from his injuries. They were no longer visible on his body. Others observed his naked state and skin that looked deathly pale. The green pupils of his eyes almost glowed in the dark. Two grotesque fangs hung down over his lower lip. They were long and sharp and a touch yellowed. His penis stood erect and long too. It twitched, filled with the blood of his recent kill.

“Thank God,” one of the few women gasped. “He is alive.”

He shot her a stern glance. If she did not look so frail he would have taken her there and then. His eyes scanned the crowd for a better target.

Cheers rang out from the rear. Vlad Dracula, the scourge of the Infidel, was alive and well. It elated them to see him. Those at the front did not make a sound.

The Maglak warriors knew the scene did not ring true. This man looked like their voivode, but they knew he was not. They placed their hands on the hilts of their swords, ready to fight the demon that stood in his place.

He could read the thoughts of everyone in the crowd. At first it was a jumble of sounds. A thousand noises in his head. He put his hands to his ears to try and drown them out. The cacophony almost overwhelmed him, as much as the initial scent of blood. He had to fight the urge to run away, but he could not leave. The aroma of the blood around him was far too strong to ignore.

When he looked into the eyes of any one person their thoughts became images in his mind. He heard the individual voices behind them. *Perhaps it was something he could control after all.* He stepped forward towards the crowd. But then an acute scent wafted on the breeze to his nose. Fresh blood. He turned his head in its direction. His sharp eyes focused on a wounded soldier lying further back.

He walked slowly through the crowd. The marble floor inside the chapel had scorched his feet. Now he found relief from the cold ground. *How had Lucifer walked in there if I could not?* Perhaps it was not for him to know. He looked beyond the people to the frozen lake. A walk on the ice appealed to him.

He stopped in front of the abbot. It amused him to scan the mind of the holy man and hear his silent words. The abbot looked up at him, knowing he was a demon. He grinned evilly at the little man, sensing his fear, and drawing pleasure from it.

He thought of killing him there and then. But the blood of the soldier was too strong for him to resist. The scent grew stronger on the wind. He had to have it.

The people around him gasped. He vanished into thin air before their very eyes. In one bound he had leapt almost a hundred feet to the spot where the wounded soldier lay. He moved with speed that the naked eye could not match.

They looked about in an attempt to locate him. No one could see him at the base of the slope behind them. It was on the boundary where the island met the lake. Then one of the women screamed. The others followed the line of her arm as she pointed to the night sky.

The crowd looked up as one in horror. They saw Dracula hovering some twelve feet in the air above them. He had sunk his teeth deep into the soldier's thigh near to his wound. The soldier dangled upside down in his arms. He screamed for his comrades to save him.

Many of the men drew their swords. The bolder ones jumped up and swung them. When they did they found him just out of their reach. An archer removed an arrow from his quiver. He took careful aim and fired.

Without as much as a glance to the side, Dracula caught the arrow in his left hand. He held it there while he drank the soldier dry. The bloodless corpse dropped to the ground with a thud near a group of the women. They screamed as one at the face of the dead man. He looked up at them with eyes that could no longer see.

Dracula then turned to glare at the archer. The man felt a lump build in his throat. His limbs froze at the sight of those penetrating green eyes. He did not react when the arrow came back at him. It moved with real venom through the air. The vampire's throw drove it through his eye and out the back of his skull.

A chorus of screams rang out. Dracula hung in the air above the corpse and laughed. His people scrambled to get away from him. The urge to get off the small island overrode any other thought in their minds. They fell over each other in a blind panic, as the mass exodus moved to the frozen lake. Men and women alike slipped and lost their footing on the ice. The surface was slushy from the heavy rain. With the sudden weight on it cracks began to appear almost at once.

"Hurry!" someone screamed, as they looked down. "The ice is going to break!"

"Get off the ice!" another of the men urged.

With the need to escape the island so strong, few of the people heeded the warning. More and more bodies stepped onto the ice. Only when they all began to slip and slide on the surface did they realise the danger. Many tried in vain to go back. For them it was too late. The ice began to splinter and crack. Each new fissure filled the hearts of those on it with terror. Geysers of freezing water shot up into the air. In each spot the ice depressed and collapsed.

A thousand screams filled the air. In their dozens the people fell down into it. Their cries did not last. Each one of them went into shock the moment they took the plunge. Dracula watched as they disappeared from view. The freezing water snuffed out one heartbeat after another. He felt them succumb to their icy grave.

The chorus of sounds in his ears faded fast. The loud voices he could hear became whispers. Then, one by one, the icy water silenced them.

Only his loyal Maglak warriors and the monks remained on the island. They stayed, intent to fight this beast that possessed their master.

Dracula circled them from the air. He bellowed at them so loud it hurt their ears. "Run my friends! Run while you still can! It is him that I want!"

They turned to see the lone figure of the abbot. The little man shrunk further when he heard Dracula speak. All alone on his knees, he muttered a prayer to God

to give him the strength he needed to make a stand. His courage soon returned, for when the vampire gazed down at him he held up a crucifix to try and ward him off.

“Get thee hence, foul demon!” he commanded. His voice showed conviction he did not know he had. He rose to his feet and held the crucifix up higher.

The Maglaks looked at each other. They waited for one of them to make a decision. In the end they sheathed their swords and ran into the chapel.

Dracula returned to the ground to face his new enemy. The abbot stood firm, the crucifix shaking in his hands. It seemed he might drop it at any time. As the clouds moved in the skies above them the light of the moon shone against the cold metal. The glare stung Dracula in both eyes. He hissed at the abbot in anger, a long stream of obscenities flowing from his mouth. He needed to break the resolve of the little man and get the icon from his hand. It proved to be an object of real power when the one holding it believed in it.

He stepped back a few paces from the abbot. His eyes remained trained on him, as those of a hawk waiting to swoop on its prey. It encouraged the holy man to come forward. His fear clouded his logic and he pressed on. He felt sure he had his enemy on the retreat. When a large gap opened between them he broke into a run.

Dracula stooped down and picked up a large rock. He grinned and then hurled it at the oncoming man. It struck his right foot with real force and crushed every tiny bone below the ankle. The abbot cried out in agony and fell down. The metal cross dropped from his grasp.

In the blink of an eye his enemy was upon him. He grabbed the abbot and dragged him away from it. The holy icon remained there on the ground, no longer of any use to its owner and no longer posing a threat to him.

“Do you still feel as brave, holy man?” he taunted him. “Is your sweet Jesus going to save you from me?”

“Get away, you foul beast,” the abbot half shouted and half pled.

“I think not,” Dracula grinned. “Not before you lie dead on the ground.”

“In the name of Jesus Christ! Get thee from here!”

The words seemed to stun the vampire. He released his grip on the abbot and took a few steps back. A brief lull followed, though the abbot groaned at the pain in his foot. Dracula ignored him for a moment and looked about the area. It occurred to him that He might appear and save the little man. When He did not, he grabbed hold of the abbot once more.

“I would say He is not coming to your rescue, holy man. Perhaps He does not even exist. But I do, abbot. I exist. And I am the truth!”

He placed his palms against the abbot’s temples. The little man screamed at the slightest exertion of pressure. He felt Dracula’s cold breath against his neck. Fear gripped him inside. *Was this to be the end?*

“Worry not, holy man. I do not want your blood. It is your life that I want. Your precious Jesus can have your soul.”

Dracula increased the pressure. He heard the crunch of bone as he crushed the abbot’s skull like an egg. Brain tissue spilled as a mashed pulp all over his hands. It tempted him to eat, but he knew that he could not.

Through his conversion he knew certain things. The same way a newborn baby uses its instinct to find the nipple his instincts told him of his limitations.

He could not feed from the dead, unless it was his kill. Once the soul had left the body the flesh soured and the blood turned to poison. The Pope had blessed the abbot upon giving him his Holy Orders. Alive or dead, Dracula could not touch him. He could touch no man or woman blessed by the Pope’s hand. If he had drunk

from the abbot he would have endured a slow and agonising death. Consecrated blood would be acid in his veins. It would rot him from the inside out.

He heard the cries of thousands in the distance. It urged him to leave the island. He glided over the surface of the lake. The bodies of his people remained there, trapped beneath the new thin blanket of ice that had formed.

The sounds drew him back to the battlefield. He stopped in the spot where the Turks had ambushed and wounded him. The bodies of the dead lay strewn about where they had fallen. He trod through them, careful not to touch them with his feet.

All around the souls of the dead rose from their broken corpses. Dracula gasped at the sheer spectacle of it. He watched them rise up in the order they had perished. The souls hung in the air above each corpse. There they waited. Soon others would come and claim them.

Then they came. The White Ones and the Black Ones. They were the messengers and soul collectors from Heaven and Hell. A few of the Black Ones came close, but did not look at him. He held no interest for them.

He stayed for a time to watch. Those claimed by the Guardians of Hell screamed in desperation. They were aware now of the nightmare that awaited them.

When he came early, Lucifer spared Dracula this torment. He would not feel the agony of the Black Ones ripping at his flesh with their claws. Nor would he gaze into the fiery Abyss before they dragged him down. It sent a shiver through him.

One of the Guardians of Heaven drew close. Dracula stepped aside to avoid it. It was here to claim the soul of Ivan Olescu. He observed the absolute joy on the face of his old friend. The stresses of life and the pain of death had all left him now. It was a feeling Dracula knew he would never experience. The White One took Olescu by the hand and rose up towards the heavens. The vampire watched the ascent for a time.

Dracula did not find it a pleasant scene. He turned and disappeared into the night. When he had gone, Christ descended to the island and claimed the abbot.