

**John Hunyadi and the Danestis have risen up against Vlad Dracul. They have defeated him and seized control of his capital, Tirgoviste. The city is now in ruins. Dracul's wife and eldest son, Mircea, are dead - murdered after the fall of the city. Dracul has escaped with the remnants of his army. Young Vlad has been released by the Sultan and given three hundred cavalry to go and assist his father. The previous night, Litovoi, the mighty warrior and head of the feared Vlach tribesmen, came to Dracul. He has pledged the support of he and his men. In the mountains they beat their war drums long into the night. It was a sound heard over much of Wallachia.**

## CHAPTER 18

**Wallachia. Vlad Dracul's camp north of Bucharest.  
December 11, 1447.**

Dracul's men struggled to meet their wake up call. Few of them managed a decent period of sleep. The Vlach drums had beaten long into the night. Neither Dracul nor Rodrigul slept much either. But they felt upbeat in spite of the disturbance.

The captain chuckled to Dracul. "Those wretched Vlachs. They love to keep the whole world awake any time they are happy."

"Yes, but it is better to hear that sound as an ally than as an enemy."

"Indeed. I wager Basarab suffered with loose bowels for much of the night."

Dracul laughed at he thought.

"He will know that if the Vlach are going to war, it is against him."

"Let him tremble in his boots," Dracul scowled, his mood changing again. "It will make the moment all the more sweet when I crush his skull!"

"My Lord!" a rider called out as he rode into the camp. It was one of the scouts Dracul sent out every morning whether he was at home or on the road.

"What is it?" Dracul asked, once the rider drew up alongside him.

"There is an army marching towards the camp!"

"Do you know from where this army comes?"

"It is confusing, my Lord. The banner is a Turkish one. I cannot be certain."

"It is your job to know these things! Stay mobile and keep me informed if you discover anything new."

"Yes, my Lord."

The rider saluted him and raced out of the camp once again.

Dracul turned to his friend. "Even if Murad was aware of the attack on Tirgoviste he could never have sent a force so quickly to my aid."

"We should exercise caution, my Lord. It could be a Danesti trick."

"Yes. I think so too. To lure us into thinking it is a Turkish force."

"With our guard down they might crush us where we stand."

The two men walked through the camp shouting their orders. In a short time they had their men armed and ready to meet any attack. The distant sound of horses met their ears. Dracul sent out two men to make contact with the approaching force.

They came within sight of the small army soon after. The young man leading the group drew his mount to a halt when he saw them stop further up the road. He too was wary of a possible trap. It occurred to him to send a rider of his own to meet them. Then he realised no one in his ranks spoke his native tongue other than he.

He decided he would have to meet with them himself. With his three best men at his side he prodded his mount into a slow walk.

The riders watched him approach. To a man they each shared the same thought. The one before them resembled a younger version of their voivode.

His schooling had taught him in such a situation to expect the unexpected. It was better to be cautious than dead. Yet he was sure the camp he was approaching was that of the great Dracul.

“Identify yourself, sir!” one of the riders called out.

He stopped when he was only twenty yards away. The two parties stared at each other for a few moments until he resumed walking his horse forward. “You identify yourself,” he said, a strong touch of arrogance in his voice.

“You speak our native tongue?” one of the riders said.

“I do,” the young lord said. “Being that I am a native it would follow that I speak like one too.”

The rider felt irritated at the way the younger man still avoided his question. “I need to know if you are friend or foe. If not I will have to view you as hostile.”

In a second the meeting had taken on a serious edge. The time for playing games was over.

“I fly the banner of the Sultan, Murad, for you to see,” he said. “You should know if this banner is a friend to your master or not. I cannot read your mind.”

The rider looked him over and then the large number of cavalry to his rear. The group all sported uniforms of the Ottoman cavalry. “My master would look on you as a friend,” the rider said. “You may approach, but at a slow pace.”

The young lord turned to his men. He signalled to them with a wave of his arm to follow. As requested his unit neared the camp at a walk. When they came in view of Dracul’s men he saw as many as fifty bows pointed his way.

Rodrigul mounted his horse and rode towards the unit. To come this far his men must have seen them as no threat. They had not raised the alarm.

“Identify yourself, sir,” he asked the head of the group. The man he addressed had lowered his face so as to obscure it from his view. He rode a little closer.

It was then the other man showed himself. “That is no way to address your godson,” he smiled.

Rodrigul thought he was seeing things. “Vlad? Is that you?”

“Yes, Alin. It is I.”

“Dear God,” he gasped, suddenly overcome with emotion.

They dismounted in the same moment and threw their arms around each other in the embrace of long-lost friends.

“I thought I would never see you again,” he said, almost in a sob. “Dear God, look at you. A fine specimen of a man.”

Dracul watched on curiously. He still had not seen his son’s face. “What is going on here?” he called, walking up behind his captain.

“Go and say hello to your father,” Rodrigul whispered, as he let Vlad go.

Vlad came face to face with Dracul. “Hello, Papa,” he grinned.

Dracul stopped dead in his tracks. He looked as though he had seen a ghost. “Is that you, Vlad? My son?”

They ran into each other’s arms. Dracul held his son so tight that Vlad found it hard to breathe.

“Let me look at you,” he said finally, eyeing his boy up and down. “It is a fine man you have become.”

“The same as you, Papa.”

“Yes,” Dracul smiled. “The same as I.”

The order sounded out for a major hunt to commence. Dracul wanted a feast to commemorate the homecoming of his son. The Turkish cavalry tended to their horses. They then settled down for some much-needed rest.

“Are you hungry?” Dracul asked his son.

“Yes, Papa.” His stomach growled at the very idea of eating. He looked to the new fires the men stoked and imagined a boar turning on the spit. “We have ridden hard for six days with little food to spare. My men are hungry too.”

“Then we will feed them. But for the now, let us sit and talk.”

They sat around a fire that had burned since first light. Vlad rubbed his hands and extended them to savour the warmth. “Come and sit with us, Alin,” he said to Rodrigul. “You are my family too.”

“Are you well, my son?” Dracul asked.

“Yes, Papa. I am fine.”

“How have they treated you?”

“When I behaved myself they treated me well enough.”

“And when you did not?” Rodrigul wondered, with a fair idea as to what the answer would be.

“I received the whip,” Vlad told him, looking up from the fire.

“The whip?”

“Yes. The worst time came after Varna. Murad delivered that one with his own hand.”

Dracul gritted his teeth. “The swine,” he cursed. “I would cut his throat if I could see him.” He turned to his son. “Was it because of me?”

Vlad did not want to make him feel any worse than he already did. “No, Papa. I brought much of it on myself.”

“I know it was my fault,” he sighed. “And I am sorry, my son. I resisted the pressure from Hunyadi to take part in the conflict. I sent Mircea in my place. He fought nobly and brought much honour to the family.”

“How is my big brother?”

Dracul went quiet, a lump in his throat. Rodrigul put a hand on Vlad’s arm. “He is gone, my boy.”

Vlad did not realise at once what he meant. “Gone where?” Then it dawned on him from the pain he could see on their faces. “You mean he is dead? What happened? Why is my brother gone?”

“He was murdered in Tirgoviste before they sacked it.”

“Who are *they*?”

“Hunyadi, Florescu, Craiovescu. They all had a hand in it.”

Vlad took it all in, his face reddening. “What did they do to him?”

Rodrigul found it hard to answer. Vlad looked him straight in the eye. “Tell me, Alin. I want to know what they did to him.”

Vlad could see how much it pained him to say it. The answer he had to give was not something he wanted Vlad to know.

Rodrigul lowered his head before he spoke. “He was badly beaten,” he began, before pausing again.

“Look at me, Alin, and tell me. I must know.”

“He was forced to watch your mother’s execution. Then they blinded him and buried him alive.”

Vlad had to bite into his hand to contain his rage. “My mother too?”

“Yes. I am sorry.”

Vlad got to his feet and walked over to the trees. He had to lean against one of them to stop from falling. It was hard enough to lose his brother, but the added news of his mother devastated him. He did not ask what had happened to her. To know the truth about that would rip his heart out.

He was gone for a while. His happiest memories of his mother filled his mind. There were only good ones of her, although fleeting. With Mircea, he thought mostly of the games they used to play. And of how hard they trained to better each other. He whispered a quiet “thank you” to him. It was only the rivalry they shared that had made him excel into the fighting machine he had become.

When he returned he saw the men skinning the first stags and wild boars from the hunt. He joined his father and Rodrigul by the fire.

“Are you well, my son?”

“Yes, Papa. Are you? You must feel their loss even deeper than I do.”

“There is nothing more painful than losing those you love. I hoped to have passed over before any of my sons. And my bride. A woman should always outlive a man.”

“At least I know who my enemies are,” Vlad hissed. “It has given me a few more names on my list of people to kill. And I will kill them.”

“If I do not succeed first then yes, I hope you would do that for me.”

“If it takes me ten or twenty years they will feel my justice,” Vlad vowed. “I swear that on my mother’s name.”

“Let us talk of happier things,” Rodrigul said, hoping to lift the gloom. “Tell us what you did in Adrianople.”

“I studied the Turks.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am my father’s heir,” he proclaimed. “I used my time there to prepare, and to know my enemy.”

Dracul listened and smiled. It made him feel so proud to hear such things.

“I studied them. The way they think, the tactics they employ in war, their language and customs. All there is to know about them, I know it.”

“That is good.”

“If I have learned one thing,” Vlad said boldly, “it is that Wallachia is alone. He who rules Her must stand alone to do it.”

Dracul nodded in agreement. “You are so right. That is a lesson I took almost fifty years to learn.”

“She has no friends, Papa.”

Rodrigul did not agree with them. “None?”

“None,” Vlad said, his tone firm and strong. “If Wallachia has friends where are they? My father is alone. With the exception of Moldavia I would not want any of my neighbours as a friend. I will happily go to war with any of them.”

“You cannot fight them all, Vlad.”

“Perhaps I can, and perhaps I cannot,” he shrugged. “I intend to make our country able to defend itself against them all.”

“It is sound logic, my son.”

“But it is the Turks I loathe most of all,” he continued, his voice taking on an air of real grit. “I will use them for as long as I hold their favour.” He stopped and clenched his fist. “The day will come when I heap misery on them. My name will be etched in their minds for ten generations when I am done.”

He had grand ideas. But to both men listening they sounded either unrealistic or unattainable. At the same time neither wished to take issue with it.

“If you manage that, then you will be long remembered.”

“I will not allow the toils of my father to be wasted,” Vlad promised for him to hear. “Nor will I allow my mother and brother to have died in vain.”

“You will be a great ruler, my son. Still, I am proud of you as you are.”

Vlad decided to change the subject. “Those drums I heard last night. I thought you were honouring my birthday, Papa.”

Dracul chuckled. “No, my son, it never even occurred to me in all this madness. But I am glad you are here for it. You have come of age at last.”

“I wish I was sixteen again,” Rodrigul mumbled.

“It is something we all wish for,” Dracul assured him.

“So the Vlach have joined our side?” Vlad asked.

“You know the Vlach war drums?” Rodrigul seemed surprised.

“Of course I do. I heard them as a child in Sighisoara.”

“It is a good memory that you have, Vlad.”

“Yes I do. Our enemies had best look out.”

“Yes,” his father said. “The Vlach have joined the fight.”

“The omens are good then, Papa?”

“You can be sure of that. The Vlach have not yet known defeat.”

“Do not place a hex on us, Alin. Yes with the Vlach, and Vlad at my side, the omens are good indeed.”

“There is one great thing about leading a Turkish army,” Vlad said. “It gives you access to the best scouts and spies in the Balkans.”

“Do not let the Vlach hear you saying that. They think they hold that honour.”

“Where are they?”

“Up high I would imagine. By the sound of those drums.”

“The Vlach never reveal the whereabouts of their camp,” Rodrigul told him. “It is a tradition of theirs.”

“It is to beat the spies and back stabbers,” Dracul said, a growl in his voice.

“Yes. A sound policy too.”

“Litovoi said they camped about two hour’s ride west. I expect they will move closer today.”

“You were telling us about your scouts, Vlad?”

“Yes. They collect a lot of good information. I must remember to use them when I am voivode one day.”

“Do you have any to share with us?” his father asked him.

“Yes I do, Papa. They tell me that Basarab has arrived at Oltenita. He has about two hundred men there and a further three hundred in Bucharest.”

“So where are the rest of them? Hunyadi marched into Wallachia with over a thousand.”

“I do not know where he is,” Vlad said, feeling a little deflated.

“He will have returned home,” Rodrigul said. “He does not like to fight in the winter. I doubt he has changed that habit. Not this late in his life.”

Vlad nodded. “That is a shame. I would have liked a chance to fight him. But I do know the main body of his army is with Mihail Basarab about twenty miles east of here.”

“Mihail is leading the army?”

“Twenty miles away?” Dracul added in the same breath.

“Yes, if my source is correct.”

“I am sure it is. Alin, why do you seem so surprised?”

“I thought he and his brother were at odds with each other.”

“Perhaps he thinks if I am out of the way, removing his brother would be only a slight obstacle.”

“He would not need you gone to do that.”

“To take the throne he would.”

“I hear he does not care too much for the throne, Papa,” Vlad put in.

“They all want the throne, my son. The pursuit of power is what drives all men like us.”

“Who is to say, my Lord? He is a dangerous adversary. That is what we must take heed of.”

“Yes,” Dracul agreed. “He knows the art of war.”

“We need to prepare for him.”

“When the men have eaten. We will see him soon enough, have no fear.”

Vlad broke the dialogue between the two men again. “My scouts have seen the content of his army. And they bring good news.”

“What is that then?” Dracul asked, keen to know.

“The bulk of them look very young. I would think they have not had much experience. My scouts surmise that they are new recruits.”

“That is good to hear,” Rodrigul smiled. “Hardened men against boys. Our prospects are improving all the time.”

“Mihail is a great warrior,” Dracul was quick to remind him. “Let us not forget that. He will have them well organised, I am sure.”

“So what are your plans, Papa?”

“I have not thought them out yet.”

“We need a plan if we are to succeed.”

For the first time Dracul found him irritating. He gave him a quick glance before stoking the fire with a stick. Rodrigul put a finger to his lips to calm Vlad down.

“It was my idea to cross the Danube into Bulgaria,” Dracul said. “But that has all changed, of course.”

“Our force is easily a match for his,” Rodrigul cut in. “We have Vlad and the Vlach on our side. Victory is within our grasp.”

“Yes. I know it is a fight we can win.”

“We have about nine hundred men. Seven hundred cavalry and about two hundred foot soldiers.”

Dracul nodded at the figures. That many cavalry made for a strong force.

“I imagine most of the enemy is made up of infantry. We will crush them!”

“Do not forget to add the number that has defected,” Dracul said sourly. “All told I would say they number fifteen hundred to two thousand in the country.”

“We can still beat them, Papa,” Vlad encouraged his father. “They are not expecting us to attack them.”

“You want us to attack first?”

“Why not?” Vlad asked, growing excited. “If I ride on Oltenita I can scatter their forces. Then you and the Vlach ride against Mihail. The throne will be yours again.”

Dracul pondered the idea. “What do you think, Alin?”

“It is a good plan. If Mihail does have an army of raw recruits we could rout them. They might panic at the sight of blood. More so if it is their own.”

“Are you confident to ride on Oltenita?” Dracul asked his son.

“Yes, Papa,” Vlad said, standing up. “The best time is tonight. Hit the enemy when they least expect it.”

“Your men need to rest though.”

“They are tough, Papa. And well used to having it hard. If I tell them to ride they will do so.”

Dracul slapped his hands against his thighs and stood up. “Then that is what we will do,” he decided. “Once the men are fed and rested we will fight!”

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Constantin peered at Andrei through the flap in his tent. His wife sat behind him, her sewing to hand.

“What is bothering you, my husband?” she asked without looking up.

He turned to glance at her. “It is Andrei,” he said. “He does not seem himself these last few days.”

“I have not noticed any change in him.”

The elder grunted. “I have.”

“Then go and speak to him. If it will set your mind at rest.”

“Yes. I think I will.”

Andrei looked up when he saw the elder approach. He remained sat on a grassy knoll near to the campsite. Between his fingers he toyed with a blade of grass.

“Is something ailing you, my son?”

“No, Papa,” Andrei said, as he stood up.

“You would tell me?”

“Of course, Papa. I am a little confused, but well all the same.”

“What about?”

“I am seeing this man in my dreams. Well a boy. He is about the same age as I.”

“Today you become a man. It is your sixteenth birthday.”

“Yes, Papa. I know.”

“You seem sad about that?”

Andrei shrugged. “A little.”

“It is a time to look forward, Andrei. You will be a man destined to do great things. We have always known this, your mother and I.”

Andrei looked up at him. “Do you remember my birth mother?”

“Yes. I remember her well.”

“Would you tell me about her?”

“She was very beautiful. You remind me a lot of her in many ways.”

“Do I look much like her?”

“You resemble her very much. In looks and in your person, you are the same.”

He nodded quietly, as if thinking about her. “I am glad,” he whispered. He looked at the elder. “I remember her.”

The old man screwed his eyebrows. “You could not, my son. She passed over moments after you were born.”

Andrei looked him straight in the eye. “I remember her clearly. She stood over me in my crib and whispered goodbye.”

The memory of it brought tears to his eyes. He nodded that she did.

“I think of her often,” Andrei went on. “She is always with me.”

“I know,” he smiled, touching a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

Andrei looked past him to the trees, sensing her there.

“Who is this person? When do you see him?”

Andrei drifted for a moment. Images filled his mind. He saw the same man who haunted his dreams night and day. The man led a large group of other men, all on horseback. For a moment he felt the sensation of the wind rushing through his hair.

“I do not know, but I see him right this moment.”

The gypsies knew such things were possible. For that reason the elder did not question it. "What is he doing?"

"He is galloping hard at the head of a small army."

"He is a soldier?"

"Yes, Papa. I think so."

"Why do you think you see him?"

"I do not know, Papa. We are connected in some way."

"I am sure all will be revealed in time."

"Yes," Andrei sighed. "I expect so."

"Do not let it trouble you, my son."

"It does not. One day I will meet him."

"One day yes. But for today it is your birthday. Tonight we will enjoy a feast and much dancing to celebrate."

"It is his birthday too."

"Who?"

"The man I see. Yet he does not celebrate."

"It is you I care about," the elder said. "It is you that I love."

Andrei offered a trace of a smile. "I want to walk for a while."

"Do not be too long then. You must not be late for your own party."

"I will not be late, Papa. I promise."

The elder turned away. He left Andrei to wander to the trees. Andrei forgot him and disappeared into the brush. He felt even more so than before that his mother was near.

He had longed to see her his whole life. It excited him now that he might. Every instinct inside told him the moment was close at hand. "Mama? Are you here?"

Andrei stood still and waited quietly for an answer. His heart raced in his chest. It thumped so hard it drowned out even the sound of the breeze. When he heard nothing he ran through the trees. Before long he picked up the sound of a waterfall up ahead.

Soon it came into view. Andrei sat down on the riverbank and watched its perpetual motion. He enjoyed the sound as it cascaded down into the pool below.

"I am here," a soft voice whispered.

It sounded familiar. "Where?"

He scrambled to his feet and looked around. *Did I imagine it?*

"Look straight ahead."

He followed the direction of the voice. It led him to the waterfall again. He squinted his eyes hard at the falling water. Soon he could make out a faint shape through it. It hinted at the form of a woman.

Andrei stepped into the pool. "Mama? Is that you?"

A pair of hands appeared through the water. They were those of a woman. When he took them both in his they lifted him up and out of the pool. He passed through the waterfall and into a cave beneath.

His breath caught in his throat when he saw her. Her long dark hair fell about her face and extended down past her shoulders. He saw that her eyes were as clear and as blue as the sky, just like his. "Mama?"

"Yes," she smiled.

"I knew you were here."

"I am always wherever you are."

She put her arms around him and held him close. He closed his eyes and allowed her to run her fingers through his hair. It felt incredible to see her, to feel her, to smell her.

"It feels so good to see you, Mama," he whispered. "I have longed for this moment my whole life."

"As have I," she said softly. "It is so wonderful to hold you."

All thoughts emptied from Andrei's mind for a moment. He put his arms around her waist and held her tight. The scent of her hair filled his nostrils. It seemed familiar to him and made him feel at ease. "How are you here, Mama?"

"I was given permission to come and see you. Such opportunities are rare."

He thought about it for a moment. "Then there must be a reason?"

"Yes, my baby. There is always a reason."

"Then I am thankful to have some time with you."

"I am too. You are very special, Andrei."

"So are you, Mama. You gave up your life for me."

"That was meant to be."

"Why, Mama? Why did you have to be taken from me?"

"Bringing you into the world is all that mattered."

"I do not understand."

"You will in time. Much depends on you."

"What, Mama? Why am I so special? What is it about me?"

"That will be revealed in time. I am here for another reason."

They broke from their embrace. The beautiful floral scent that emanated from her, still lingered in the air all around him.

"Then tell me, Mama."

"I have come here to warn you."

Andrei felt a little confused. *Warn me? Does someone want to hurt me?* "What about? Is something bad about to happen?"

"You have become a man today. There are some things you need to know."

"What things, Mama?"

"It is the day of your sixteenth birthday. At sunset on the thirteenth day of each month *they* will be able to see you."

"Who are *they*?"

"The ones that would seek you out and destroy you."

Andrei did not speak. Although his mother was with him he felt suddenly afraid.

"They have great power," she continued. "From the moment of your birth they have sought you out. Your purity and innocence has shielded you from their eyes. But sadly that will change after today. For you are an innocent no more."

"Why do they want to hurt me?"

"You are all that stands in their way."

"Who, Mama? In the way of what?"

She fell silent for a moment and looked at him. Her eyes let it show that she feared them too.

"Tell me."

"Lucifer and his demons."

"The Devil?"

"His name is Lucifer."

"Why does he want to hurt me?"

"He wants to return to Heaven. Only you have the power to prevent him from doing so."

He could not believe what he was hearing. "I am but a boy. What could I ever do to stand in his way?"

"No, Andrei. You are so much more than that. You are so, so special."

Andrei stepped away and walked to the edge of the cave. "Why me?"

"Because God has chosen you."

He breathed a deep sigh then turned to face his mother.

"Do not be afraid, Andrei. You are not alone in this."

"So what do I do on the thirteenth day? If they can see me then surely they will kill me."

"You have to protect yourself."

"How?"

"That is what I have come to show you."

"Then I am ready to learn."

"It is always best to be near water," she said.

"As I am here? Hidden under a waterfall?"

"Yes. They do not care for water. There is none of it where they are. And water brings life, and life is something they seek to destroy. But you have to do more. Water alone is not enough to protect you."

"Then what else must I do?"

"Have with you a vial or a container."

Andrei looked about the cave. Some distance away he spotted a broken piece of an animal skull. "How about this?" he asked, picking it up.

"As long as it can hold water it will suffice."

He stepped beneath the waterfall again and held out the chunk of bone. The water filled it in seconds.

"Once it is full you need to say a prayer and bless it."

He knew she was on his shoulder so did not look around. "What is the prayer?"

"Hold your right hand over the water and repeat the words I say."

He carefully repeated the four lines of the prayer she uttered. Within moments the piece of skull radiated a brilliant blue light. He likened it to the same light he created when he healed Constantin all those years ago. It glowed so bright it illuminated the entire interior of the cave.

"Sprinkle it all along the entrance," she directed. "But be sure to save some."

Andrei dipped his fingers into the blue water. He sprinkled it at various points as his mother instructed.

Each spot glowed the same bright blue. He watched in awe as the points joined together to form a solitary unbroken line. It then extended upwards from the cave floor to the ceiling, creating a force field of great power.

"This has consecrated the ground," his mother smiled. "It ensures the area is off limits to even the most powerful of your enemies. Lucifer himself could not breach it without alerting those that watch over you."

Andrei stepped back, a little wary of it.

"Embrace it," she said. "It is the shield that protects you."

He looked to her and nodded. "What do I do with the rest of the water?"

"Find the central point in the cave. Then use your index finger to form a circle on the floor with the water. Create the circle from inside it."

He did as she instructed.

"Then mark the four points to the north, south, east and west."

"I do not know which is which, Mama."

"Close your eyes and allow your senses to guide you."

He looked up, not overly convinced.

“Go on,” she urged. “Trust in your instincts.”

Andrei closed his eyes and cleared his mind. Just as his mother hinted he would, he sensed each of the four points. When he was sure of each he marked them on the edge of the circle.

“Stay on your knees while in the circle. It makes you stronger to be close to the ground. Then face to the west,” she said. “With the last of the water mark the Sign of the Cross on your forehead and on your breastbone.”

Once Andrei had done this, his aura became visible and surrounded his entire body. The warmth it produced drew sweat from his every pore.

“Doing this ensures your safety. Should they ever breach the outer barrier this second one will protect you.”

Andrei extended his arm and delighted in the brilliant blue that cloaked it.

“It is your aura that gives energy to the forces around you,” his mother advised. “Always keep your eyes closed and your mind clear.”

Andrei nodded gently that he understood. Then he closed his eyes.

“Never break the circle,” she warned. “Not until the next sunrise. No matter what you might hear, never break the circle.”

“What would happen?”

“That does not bear thinking about. Always come alone when you perform this ritual. The energy of another could negate the effect of yours.”

“I understand, Mama,” he whispered.

Andrei sensed her about to leave. “Before you go, Mama. I want to ask something of you?”

“Yes, baby. What is it?”

“The man I see in my dreams. Do you know who he is?”

She did not answer right away. In the moment she thought he would open his eyes she spoke. “He is your brother.”

Her answer took his breath away. She anticipated the next question on the tip of his tongue. “It is the truth. The man who gave you to me sired him also.”

“Who is that man?”

“His name is Vlad Dracul.”

Andrei did not need to ask anything more. He knew who Vlad Dracul was.

“Stay a little while,” she said. “Grow better acquainted with the forces around you. Then return to your loved ones.”

“Will I see you again, Mama?” he asked.

“I do not know,” she sighed. “I would say not.”

“Then know that I love you, Mama,” he said.

“And know that I love you too, my baby. Stay safe.”

Back at the camp the gypsies were ready for the planned celebration.

“We are ready to begin, Constantin,” one of the others said.

The elder shot him a sharp glance. “But we cannot. Andrei is not yet here.”

“Then where is he?”

“I do not know,” he shrugged. “He said he would be here.”

“Perhaps we should go and find him.”

“Andrei will return when he is ready.”

“He is not the only one to consider,” the gypsy argued.

His protest agitated the elder. “It is his birthday! We will wait until he returns.”

Helga stepped up to the two men. “We should go and look for him,” she said, siding with the other.

“Does my word count for anything any more?” Constantin growled at his wife, his face reddening.

“My husband,” she said calmly. “We all know how much you love Andrei. Still, he does have a tendency to wander and forget more important things.”

“I am sure what he is doing is important to him.”

“But he is one of a hundred, however special he might be. We should go and find him.”

He threw his hands up in resignation. “Very well! Go and find him.”

Ten minutes of searching and calling his name yielded nothing. Concerned now for the welfare of his adopted son, the elder joined in the search.

“Andrei!” he called, as he walked through the trees. “Where are you?”

“Over here!” one of the gypsies shouted.

They all ran in the direction of the call. The sound of a waterfall soon met their ears. When the gypsies gathered together someone pointed out the blue light from beneath the waterfall to the elder.

“So that is where he is?” Constantin sighed.

“What should we do?” one of Andrei’s brothers asked.

The elder shrugged, as he often did. “I do not think we should disturb him.”

“But what about the celebration? The food is ready.”

“I know,” he sighed. “I will call him once. Andrei!”

Andrei barely heard the elder shout his name over the din of the water. It prompted him to open his eyes and stand up. Once he stepped outside the circle it vanished. He staggered forwards and fell through the force field, his legs sapped of all their strength.

The gypsies saw the barrier disappear and a blue shape crash into the pool below. They each peered down into the water to see what it was.

Constantin gasped in horror when he saw the figure of his son floating face down in the water. “It is Andrei!” he cried. “Go and get him!”

Several of the men threw themselves into the pool. At least three of them reached for Andrei’s body as it turned to follow the direction of the river.

Andrei gasped when they lifted his face out of the water. The old man jumped in too when they dragged his boy over to the riverbank.

He clutched at Andrei’s face and shook him slightly. When Andrei opened his eyes the elder held him close and cried out with relief.

“Do not worry, Papa,” Andrei said weakly.

The elder looked down to see him smile. He hugged his boy close a second time.

Andrei breathed in a lungful of air and then whispered into his ear. “I am ready at last, Papa. To face the Dark Side.”

