

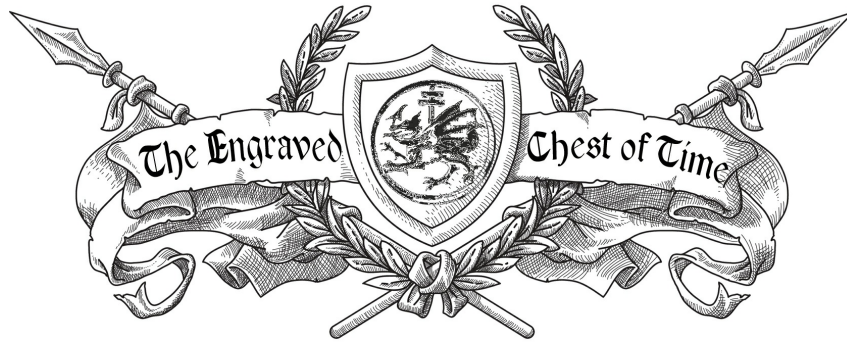
Vasile Lupasc

A movie poster for 'DRACULA'. The scene is set in a dark, stone-walled interior with a large arched opening. A knight in medieval armor, featuring a yellow and brown tunic with black leather shoulder guards and a belt, stands in the center. He holds a battle-axe aloft in his right hand and a large, ornate metal chest in his left. He is looking down at the chest with a determined expression. To his right, a man with a shaved head and a mustache, wearing a heavy, fur-lined brown cloak, is chained to the chest with metal shackles. He looks up at the knight with a pleading or desperate expression. In the background, through the archway, a stone tower and a cloudy sky are visible. A wooden barrel with a lantern on top sits on the left, and another barrel is on the right.

DRACULA

The engraved chest of time

VASILE LUPAȘC



*I dedicate this book, with gratitude and love, to my parents Silvia and Mircea - the only angels
that reveal themselves to me day by day!*

Cover Design: Vlad Gruia & Vasile Lupașc
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Răstignit între cruci (sau viața și dupăviața lui Vlad

Vodă căruia norodul i-au zis Țepeș) / Vasile Lupașc. –

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94(498.1)''14'' Vlad Țepeș(0:82-31)

At first, nothing is to be heard...a humming silence chips away the city's usual tumult.

Women, long-tolling bells, a baby crying...Then it all grows silent, but something is about to come. Something terrible... You can feel your ears straining in search of the first signs of that something...and still nothing...Hairs standing on ends, you remain suspended in time. Pigeons hover in the sky among palaces and cathedrals' outlines...Strange people in ancient outfits seem painted on the dusty air that fills the streets of long-fallen Byzantium. You feel as though you were a visible and material ghost, with fears and pains as real as any human's.

And suddenly, it begins!

At the break of the eerie silence, great noises sprang, swords and curses, death cries and victory songs, prayers and psalms; sounds of cruelty and horror...All stumble upon one another, seeking to break the perfect sphere of the crystal-like silence that still manages to oppose them. The terrible noises trickle along the edge of the sphere and surround you from a distance. They can barely be heard. Barely...

Then, from all sides, the silence sphere finally bursts, and another world takes over everything – over yourself more than anything else...

All Hell that you would not have dared imagine is now crushing your hands and ankles, pulling you in all directions at once. It grabs your hair until you grow tired of hearing yourself scream and it crushes your face against house windows and cathedral stained glasses.

And you see...hardly. You can barely distinguish anything through the thick blood splattered on your face from all directions. Children too young for torture fall slain, together with the weak and defenceless aged ones.

All women share the same fate. Then, there is slavery...

And when you think you have lost all strength, you are once again pulled away and knocked down noisily on to the cracked flagstones of Saint Sophia's last day.

The most horrifying Hell brought about by Mohamed Fatih's Muslims is upon us! The cathedral turns inside-out around you, its altar and great icons on the outside. It continues to spin madly around you, left locked inside, between its external tucked up transparent walls. Excited roars rise over the deathly moans of hastily raped virgins, the acrid smell of Muslim janissaries's urine defiles the sacramental goblets and your own helplessness...All for your eyes only!

How can you stop something that happened in front of your very eyes before you were even born?

What have I done?

It was more than a dream! It was a gate left open to another era. I actually witnessed the fall of Constantinople!

Liverpool, January 15th, 1978.



This morning, I suddenly remembered that dream of thirty years ago with the intensity of a vision. For a moment, the same feeling of a gate opening in time overcame me. Now however, I think it was but the idea well hidden in my subconscious that I am going to Dracula's country! Dracula's country...the phrase does have a cinema-like sound to it!

Will I ever become a famous archaeologist? Perhaps...

Am I a mystical person? Definitely!

Otherwise, I would not research this myth – meaningless to some, scary to others. Maybe I'll go to Romania and find nothing but modern buildings and shopping malls, or maybe I'll be devoured there by the vampires I secretly still believe in.

Or perhaps, I'll simply disappear and, in twenty years' time, somebody will find my diary and publish it who knows where, and the guys will have a beer – of course! – in my honour. They would sit at the same table that has been placidly hosting our endless history and philosophy discussions for the past ten years in Everyman Bistro, in my rainy Liverpool.

In a few hours' time, I'll be landing in Bucharest – the city founded by that fierce king of Romanians, Dracula himself! Who knows what will come next?

Best-case scenario, I will find the tomb of the king unsuccessfully searched for by the Romanian archaeologists for decades. And in the worst case...I will indeed find the tomb of this tyrant and then...

Liverpool, March 12th 2008

*„In those parts there once was a prince they called
Voievode, by the name of Dracul, a shrewd man, most skilled in all matters of war”
Mihail Bocignoli,
June 29th, 1524¹*

Climbing down from Predeal’s high peaks, the plain road stops all of a sudden, as though to hold its breath, just by the Ialomita river crook, above the royal city of Targoviste. Here, the spring of 1452 had come earlier than other years, flowery and fragrant. Even the misty mountain peaks, covered with ice and snow through most of the year, had their known or unknown paths shimmering with warm light which lead the people to merry singing and gayety.

At dawn’s break, the wives had taken up their daily rush about the courtyards and the village alleys, while the villages, neatly lain along the river courses or spread out on the sunny hillsides, seemed to whisper words of wisdom to one another.

As things had gone ever since the ancient time of the Dacians¹, first day of spring meant that unmarried girls would wear red and white interwoven threads to hand to the first lad that would cross their way. Be that as it may, the bonny lasses would still linger for a while at the fountain – never more than two or three hours at a time – until they would finally catch sight of the chosen one’s proud and slow-paced walk. Then suddenly, their business at the fountain would be done; even the yokes became lighter, and thus carried with more enthusiasm than “he” was supposed to notice.

The first lad encountered at the beginning of spring would be given the red-and-white March trinket. The village elders used to say that often, this lad happened to be Fate’s Chosen One for the girl that had given him the thread. This thread was believed to contain life and death interwoven through songs and incantations passed from generation to generation in every Romanian family. The elders also used to say that, if worn in battle, the red-and-white token would keep Death away from men, and bring them back home safe and sound.

On that March day, two strange men suddenly appeared about the upper end of Moreni, a mountain village whose people were renowned from Arges to Targoviste for their courage in battle. These men were not at all inviting for the girls at the windows waiting for the right moment to “casually” come out of the house. While the girls were not paying much attention to them, the men from the village seemed somewhat more interested. Great axes were hurriedly grabbed closer at hand, and behind the low fences, the uplanders stood up even straighter, never taking their eyes off the two travelers.

The shortest of the two, a shapely man, whose arms could easily bend heavy iron bars or twist the necks of those who showed them no respect, was riding a marvelous tall black horse, whose velvety skin shone in the sunlight. Neither the rider’s stance nor his army tunic – an old and vaguely red thing from the time of His Highness Mircea² – had attracted the uplanders’ attention, but rather the rare Turkish yataghan, not quite popular among the Christian Romanian villages at the time.

By his side, a tall even more massive fellow rode a horse similar to his companion’s. The broad shoulders and the lean figure revealed a man not older than 35 to 40. His face was shadowed by a wide-brimmed hat underneath which two lively eyes twinkled, never missing a movement. He wore a great sword tied on his back and on both men’s shoulders hung mighty bows which testified of heavy use.

As they were heading down the village lane, four bulky and axe-armed uplanders began to follow them. Right after their entering the village, the riders were forced to stop their slow progress, as the four men had cut in front and were now blocking their way.

‘Good day, folks!’ said the short rider in a high-pitched voice that made the children behind the fences burst into laughter. ‘And put down those axes, there’re no Turks afoot!’

‘We may drop them axes, sure enough, and your lordships may live to see it if you tell us your business ’round here.’

‘We’re just passing through, on our way to Targoviste, and we reckon we’d get there before the locking of the city gates,’ the rider answered in the same merry and benevolent fashion.

‘And how ’bout the yataghan? Seen many of them Turks speaking our tongue, and seen many Turkified Christians...traitors...’

The short rider turned white, and the smile on his face faded. He looked straight at the uplanders and answered in a husky voice:

‘This yataghan has sent many Turks on to the other side. I’ve had it since Giurgiu. Had you been there with the other Romanians, you’d have known!’

Behind the gathered crowd, a man not quite in the prime of his youth lay basking on the side of the road, gazing amusedly at the scene developing before him. Being of an uncommon countenance for that era, the villager’s hair cut short made him look more rather like a Roman soldier who remained there ever since the time of Trajan. His soldier and working man’s great shoulders were roundly shaped underneath a light buckskin vest worked in the typical uplanders’ flowery pattern. Without bothering to stand, the sturdy fellow spoke loudly, for everyone to hear:

‘That your yataghan’s sent lots of Turks on the other side, ’tis fair, but ’tis also fairer that with Christians you’re as gentle as a lamb, and I still haven’t heard of you not giving everything in your bag to a hungry Romanian. ’Tis also said that, when King Vlad lay fallen off his horse at Giurgiu among pagans, you jumped seven feet up in the air, the soldier’s yataghan in one hand and his head in the other; and that you cleared the field around you and killed one hundred Turks. Been there, I have, and I know it isn’t true. Jumping, you did, but for nine feet, not seven, and you cut off the Turk’s head later on, after you retrieved his sword. And had Ler and I not arrived, maybe there would be still a few of them pagans left alive.’

The riders turned to look in amazement to the place where the voice was coming from. The tall one took off his hat, and there appeared a face not at all overcome by age and to which a wide smile gave the beauty of archangels. The short rider burst into booming laughter and quickly dismounted his horse.

Marcu, leader of Moreni village, was the one that in so few words had told the tale of that bravery act accomplished by the three of them many years before, when they had served together in the army of Lord Vlad Dracul³; a deed that was by now known to all Romanians. Marcu was now making his way through the crowd and as soon as he reached him, he took his old companion into his arms.

‘Stroe, Stroe, I thought you’d forgotten us!’ the villager said, giving a bear hug to his old friend. ‘There was news that you perished in France, among strangers. At first, my heart seared at such news and I ran up on the mountain to mourn for you by myself and to put up two crosses like any Christian would. I first came by Zyraxes the hermit’s cave and he told me you were alive and well and on your way here. He sure can do many wonders, Zyraxes can, and only God knows how he discovers these things by merely sitting alone in his cave. But I reckon not even he could ever unlock the knotted tongue of mute Ler!’

The one in question, the tall rider, was known from Wallachia⁴ to Anatolia as Ler. He had also dismounted his horse, and judging by the kind and gentle look in his eyes, now wet with joy at seeing

his old friend, no one would have thought him the most feared among the four knights of Lord Vlad. Lads going to the army would sing about them, while men white with age would say the knights had also served in Mircea the Great's army, and even before that under his father, Basarab⁵. If someone more set upon counting the years would have ever said this meant more than one hundred and fifty, the elders would simply gaze at them wonderingly and say quietly, furtively and with fear of not breaking any enchantment, '*Well, yes, they are come from **Beyond** and as long as they are around, we have nothing to fear.*'

The brotherly embrace between Marcu and Ler fully put things straight for the villagers concerning the business of the two riders, and the news of knights Stroe and Ler's return to the Kingdom flew over forests and villages, bringing reason for great joy into the homes of the Wallachian uplanders.

All were eager to invite them into their homes in order to take pride in such honourable guests. No one insisted for long however when the two riders left accompanied by Marcu to his farm. Not even half an hour later, the old soldier's courtyard began to fill with wives and young girls, all laden with baskets of goods: quinces kept over-winter on window frames, toasted cakes gilded with egg yolk, red apples, or long strings of roasted ready-to-pop sausages. Standing on the doorstep and almost completely covering the entrance with his giant's body, Ler was stroking the golden hair of a little girl no older than ten, who was standing timidly in the courtyard, basket of goods held firmly in her small hands. Turning to the other two, Ler whispered:

'You see, this is why we simply *had* to return...'

Feeling both happy and sheepish of such sudden attention, the girl mumbled words of "*thanks a lot, mister!*" and was off quickly, as though embarrassed of her kind gesture.

Along with six other villagers, the knights sat at the table, conversation and laughter flowing merrily, as though springtime had completely filled the small room's every corner. The manly laughter reached the backyard where Marcu's wife was out throwing seeds to the fowls. She was both laughing with them and with happiness of having a house full of guests and of living in times of peace.

However, everyone inside was perfectly aware it was not for story-telling and joking that they had gathered there. Secretly, each had decided to enjoy to the fullest their moment of peace and were talking lightly of blooming orchards, of their children outgrowing others', of passed events, of tradings and journeys and other whatnot... now and then, they would burst into laughter for no reason...

'But of little Vlad, what do you know of him?'

Ler's question, uttered in a low but powerful voice as though from Beyond, struck the villagers with a force of an early winter ice-cold wind. Wide smiles froze on men's faces and the full meaning of Ler's words began to sink in, crushing their hearts and rushing the blood up to their cheeks.

Ever since Lord Vlad had fallen at Bălteni, the three knights had to deal with reliving that nightmare everyday. They still could hear the Voivod⁶'s voice commanding them to at least save themselves. "*You are to run and never let the Kingdom in their hands. If Dan were to become Voivod, the Turks would enter here freely. You must live and raise the people again. And take care of little Vlad! Bring him back. He'll know what to do! Go, I'll hold them off a while longer.*"

Ler had stopped listening to him. A little way off in front, his large feet had rooted him to the spot and, eyes empty, he stood gazing at Dan's small army closely approaching at full speed. As he stood there, snow storm violently ruffling his long hair, he appeared rooted to the earth since the beginning of time. His sword, far too heavy for another, was howling with the blizzard. "*Go, I*

command you! It's me they want! They won't come after you!" the Lord cried, but his friends were smiling sadly and the train of thought was carrying them far back, to the city of Targoviste where they had lived so many sunny days, never again to come back to. For their King, they would have climbed down the stairway to Hell to have Satan himself judged, and if their last hour had arrived now, they were happy to be together to the very end.

"What will happen to little Vlad?" the Lord was crying as if enraged, in a way his men had never seen him before. *"You must go and find him! Don't you be the ones to betray me!!!"*

The heavy word brought the four knights back to their senses and, as though in a dream, they saw their Voivod running towards Ler and smiting him on the top of his head with the sword's hilt.

Marcu and Stroe helped their now senseless companion up on a horse. The Lord came towards them and pushed them to the only horse they had left after so many days of being chased by Dan and the betraying noblemen. They mounted their horses and turned to look once more at Mihnea, the fourth knight of the Voivod's guard. Having already run far ahead before the enemy line, he was furiously signalling to both sides, and fragments of his yells reached them through the blasts of wind and snow. They first thought he could not bear leaving Voivod Vlad and was despairingly attempting the impossible. But then, riding whip and spur, Marcu let out a blood-curling scream and Stroe, turning to see, had a glimpse of Mihnea knocking the Lord off his feet and thrusting a sword in his heart. The sky had crumbled down on top of them in great heavy shards of clouds and rage. Mihnea had just killed the Lord! Their Mihnea! Mihnea, their brother...

Together with the heart of Voivod Vlad Dracul, their hearts too had been cracked open in that very moment, and Mihnea's name would never again be spoken among them. What could have made him sell himself out? What had their friendship written in blood and forged in battle been traded for? It did not matter now... The villagers who knew their grief refrained themselves from mentioning those old times. Mircea, a wood handling man from Transylvania, was trying to chase away the weight of the stony silence that had settled in.

'And how is it that you only come back now?' he asked of Stroe, who was known to all as talkative and gifted in loosening the atmosphere.

'About two months ago, we were both in Venice,' he began, not really in the mood for it. We had entered the service of a condottiere⁷ that was more into commerce. We found it useful to work for him, since we always received news from back here brought by caravans and ships come from the Black Sea. There was a little rat of a Turk, coal-black he was, that had found refuge by the condottiere. He had fled from Edirne where he had worked as a jailor, guarding Vlad, son of the late Lord Dracul. From the black-man we learned that our prince had escaped and had attempted to kill Mehmet, the young sultan.

'The Turk had also run away to escape due punishment for being a blundering guard, but to this day he swears he was innocent, that the one he had been guarding was actually a *sheitan*⁸, a devil in our tongue, and not a man. This Turk also said that more than once, the locked up child would jump, biting everyone he could reach and smiting everyone maddeningly. He could never be brought before the sultan without first being heavily bound in chains. At hearing such news, I was so rejoiced that I saw fit to kiss the Turk on his ugly head, pay him two gold coins and flew back here. I reckon that Giacomo the Venetian is still wondering where on earth we disappeared. It must be quite some time since the prince fled, what do you know about it?'

'Three days ago, news reached us that Petru Aron came with Turkish flags and killed Voivod Bogdan in Moldavia,' answered Marcu. 'His son, Prince Stefan⁹, has managed to escape and it is said

that he has little Vlad with him. There's been no word till now that the prince is hiding there, so they wouldn't draw the Turks' wrath he had escaped from.'

In his typical silent manner, Ler rose to his feet and hung the sword on his back. The villagers looked at him in amazement, but none received any answer. It was but the ever genial Stroe who spoke:

'The speech of friend Ler here, a bit long really for such a trifle, has me also convinced. We're going to Moldavia!'

Stroe had already grown used to Ler and could understand him without the latter having to speak. He knew that he could always count on him with his own life and there had never been a reason for discontent between them. During their long travels, to compensate for his friend perpetual silence, Stroe would begin speaking and answering himself, as though the answer came from the tall knight. When bored – which was quite rare, actually – he would turn to Ler and pretending to be highly irritated, he would say, *"Why don't you just shut up, 'cause you've talked a horse's hind leg off!"* Happy with himself for making the other one smile, Stroe would also begin musing. For a short while.

The younger villagers who knew the knights only from hearsay and from what Marcu had already told them, did not know that the always quiet but quick-acting Ler had yet another reason to be in a hurry. It had also been ten years since hunted by the guard of the new Voivod, they had left Wallachia. It had been ten years since, upon fleeing, Ler had not seen his son whom he had left with Zyraxes the hermit. It was but the hermit and himself who knew that in the cave from Ogre's Peak there was a boy growing and learning the ways of the world far away from it.

To Ler, the climbing up to the cave seemed longer than the trip from Venice to Wallachia.

"What if he doesn't recognize me?" he said to himself, *"or what if he doesn't want to see me? What fault could a ten year old child have and how could he understand that he must lay hidden, far from his parents and far from the world? And what if..."* He pulled away shivering from the worried darkness that was trying to engulf him. While away, the dark thoughts crept only very rarely, allowing full reign to the flashes of sunny hope.

As he climbed up on the mountain slope, the huddle of his sometimes foggy thoughts combined with other ones, which were full of the fragrance of fir trees and the light of the flowers. Thus, he had the vivid impression that he was recognizing the very grass blades, and all the badgers that were scattering away from his path as he approached. It was still a three quarters of a clock's climb to Ogre's Peak when suddenly, Ler pulled up his reins and stopped, eyes staring forward, as though he had seen a ghost. A little upwards, hidden under the eaves of a great rock known to locals as the Woodpecker's Nest, there were two men observing them carefully.

Zyraxes looked just as ancient as he did ten years before, just as Ler always remembered him: white haired and white bearded, he wore long white robes, and a wooden staff, for which a crafted hand had masterfully carved the head of a wolf to its upper end. Standing beside Zyraxes, a tall young man, perhaps too well-built for his age, had begun to slowly climb down the slope towards Ler, as though in a dream. The knight had already dismounted and was staring incredulously at his son, only three feet away from him. He wanted to cry out for joy and reach out to embrace his son, but he greatly feared the boy's reaction, and it seemed almost too quiet right there on the high rocks. He felt ashamed for having brought a sword to such a sacred place. He decided to whisper quietly as though in church:

'Tudor...'

Cheeks flaming, the boy went down on one knee and kissed his father's hand. Then, as if his

father was returning from a few hours' walk, he said simply:

‘Here, father, I’ve made you a flute.’

And he handed Ler a wonderful horn flute in which the boy’s hand had laboriously encrusted a detailed pattern of flowers and stars, giving the instrument the feel of fine lace work. Greatly abashed and not used to such feelings, Ler glanced helplessly at Zyraxes. The old man was laughing quietly as though the two had combined some childish prank and began descending towards them, holding himself steady in his staff.

‘Why, Ler, dear son, you sure have got a lot to tell us!’

‘Lots, father, and not all are good things; it’s just that now...’

‘I know...Go, and take Tudor with you. Don’t be afraid, he knows everything a knight should. I didn’t raise him to have him stay here with me!’

The knight and his son bade Zyraxes a quick farewell and were soon on their horses again. They would have wanted so much to be able to talk to each other properly, to stay in the cave for a few days and watch the mist rise in the early morning over the forests, to tell everything to each other and make plans for the future, to listen to the great stone walls’ grey silence, to choose a place for their home...but such times had not yet come for them...

Back down in Moreni, Marcu and Stroe were fully enjoying the happy feeling of still being among their own and all the folk of the village had gathered in great pomp to escort them to the road leading to Targoviste. Marcu’s wife tied another bag with provisions to the horse’s saddle, to witty Stroe’s great delight.

‘Chew slowly so you don’t choke!’ he said, imitating the woman’s high voice. ‘And don’t bathe in the rivers naked, or you’ll risk catching a cold! If you get in the water, knot your cap, ’cause a wave might take it away!’

Marcu was laughing whole-heartedly with everyone else, but just to cut short the painful moment of the parting, he yelled:

‘Boo, you crazy, you! Don’t you start with it now! Your mouth alone would be enough to chase them Turks from the country. And if you drink a nice mug of warm milk and egg to clear your voice, maybe we’re lucky, and they’ll be running far over the Adrianople border!’

After that, he made his horse run at full gallop so that he could stifle sooner not just the villagers’ merry cries, but mostly, his woman’s hushed tears. For the last ten years, he had no longer been Marcu the knight from His Highness’ guard, but Marcu the farmer, and everything to do with farming and crop growing had already become second nature to him. The guards of the new Voivod did not venture easily into his village, and in Targoviste, all they knew of him was that he had disappeared. He had always known this day would come and he had been waiting for it. Not with fear, not with impatience. He simply knew that his soldier’s destiny would find him again. Now he was with Stroe, going down on the way to Wolf’s Crook where Ler was waiting for them, and from there, on to the royal city of Targoviste.

Everything was clear between them; there had been no need to settle a meeting place. They were heading to the place where they had always found shelter, hunted by Dan’s men; and as they rode in silence, their thoughts would inevitably fly to the gloomy, uncertain future now looming before them and before the country as well.

What had come of little Vlad, prince and son of His Highness Vlad Dracul? They had left him as a mischief-doing child, quite hot-tempered and boisterous in those days. How had he grown? If only he had kept his body and mind whole...Would he recognize them? Would he still want to take the throne in his father’s place? Mostly, why would he *want* to reign at all? Would he deserve their help?



The surprise waiting for them at Wolf's Crook was so great, that even Stroe found himself at a loss for words. From a distance, they had already begun to wonder who Ler's companion was and how it could be that he was travelling with someone without discussing it with them first. They knew him to be quite measured and suspicious. They had expected him to come back alone from Zyraxes' cave. When they got closer and saw the two standing beside one another, it became obvious for everyone that the person near Ler could never be other than his son. Just as tall and well-built as his father, the lad seemed the very image of a younger Ler. And if there were still any doubts, they were soon smothered by the knight's proud smile.

'This is my son, Tudor,' Ler spoke. 'Time's come for you to meet him! He's coming with us!'

Stroe had been long suspecting that Ler had a son or a daughter, but he had never asked anything. He had often seen his friend deeply sighing and staring for long moments at a time at children's games in villages and cities they passed through. He would stop sometimes and make toys for them out of a simple piece of wood or cloth. Then they would leave and he would keep silent for hours at a time. He only heaved deep sighs. No questions were asked in order not to reopen old sores and wounds that probably still bled. Now, the usually voluble Stroe seemed knocked in the head. Traces of intelligence on his face were difficult to distinguish during those moments.

'Bless you, kid...I'm yer uncle...your old man and me – ohh...how many Turks we've wasted in our days...they've had us too, but we've had them back!...even then we...'tis with you too that we'll...no need to talk 'bout it! Oooooohhh, father!'

'And your lordships must be Stroe and Marcu!' the boy laughed. 'Who hasn't heard about you? I was brought up with stories about your lordships, like all the children in these parts. I hope I won't be a nuisance for you on the road.'

'Answer the boy's question!' Stroe said fiercely to Marcu, while trying to get out of the mess he had brought upon himself at such surprise.

'Well, what did he ask me? He just spoke to you! Or you've gone completely loony already?'

'Never mind, 'cause I know a thing or two,' Stroe went on just as confused.

Ler thought it would be time to spare his friend from further torment and said smiling:

'Let's go! We've got a long way to Moldavia. We're going to pass through Targoviste to find out more.'

That was all it took for the chattering knight to pull himself together. Thoroughly.

'Say, Tudor, d'you know the joke about two boyar ladies and a peasant? Here it goes: they say that in Buzău...'

The boy was laughing his heart out and enjoyed every moment of it. More than the joking, he mostly loved being together with these great men as he had always ¹⁰ dreamed of. He had envisioned it for many sleepless nights in a row. Sometimes, he very much doubted and feared he would never get to see them. But then, he would snap out of it, angry with himself for such disbelief and he would start playing songs to forget all about it. In the silence of the night, his flute's sad ballads would be carried far away with the wind and many uplanders could swear they actually heard the forest weeping or fairies dancing.

Deep in thought, Marcu and Ler did not pay attention to their companions anymore. Things would not go easy for them in Targoviste. Dan's guards had not yet forgotten their faces, nor the

troubles they had caused to the new Voivod. A single rumour about their return would be enough to search the entire city upside down. During the latest years, news of Ler and his friends being back would come out every time some rebel killed a royal soldier. Then, the rebel would be caught and sentenced and things would settle down for a while. It was merely that people continued to believe. And hope...



Every year in Targoviste, first Sunday of March was a fair day. Craftsmen come from villages around and even farther, from Arges and Transylvania, would gather with merchandise hand-made by themselves or brought from some far off corner of the world. Happy to have reasons for long chattering, peasants from the plain areas would bargain for bargaining's sake with the quieter but not less intelligent uplanders. In the end, both parties would knock something off the price and would happily congratulate themselves for such advantageous dealings. There was often the case when the two traders would leave for home without a good share of the gain, after having made strong bonds of friendship before a tankard of wine, which was most generously offered by the Targoviste inn-keepers on such a fruitful day. The loss was not great, since each partner had almost everything he and his family needed to survive in his own yard. Moreover, they could easily elaborate a speech on their way home, which on such occasions would shut the ever-reproving mouths of the wives.

That day, two uplanders had entered the city through the northern gates, among the many boisterous merchants. They wore beautiful leather doublets, with rich needlework in live spring colours. The two merchants were in fact knights Marcu and Stroe, and the doublets were not really made by their hands not used to such craftsmanship, but had been bought from a Romanian from Fagaras, happy to get rid of his merchandise even before the beginning of the fair.

About an hour after the two had entered the city, another pair of merchants followed them through the same gates. They were hoping to go home with a good price for their large rolls of smoked cheese. Their slow trudge and their robes, dusty from the long road, as well as the slogans they used to praise their goods – as was common practice for every respectable merchant – would never let anyone suspect that in reality, the two were Ler and his son Tudor. The doublets and the cheese alike were sold for almost nothing, but this bothered nobody. On the contrary, a few commoners, that had long since met such unskilled merchants, were happily hurrying home, fearing the salesmen would change their minds.

At noon, the four amateur merchants were heading together to the Light of Wisdom Inn. The name was a bit too grandiose, considering that it was actually frequented by ordinary Targoviste folk for commenting on the latest royal commands or on the latest gossip of the city.

Innkeeper Sache, declared admirer of philosophical discussions, did rarely find interlocutors of the same rank, a fact which did not lead him to actual despair. On the contrary, he was actually happy when his inn *never* hosted a schooled traveller who had accustomed himself to theories other than those launched to eternity by the restless mind of the innkeeper's head. He sometimes liked to sit at the counter in a pensive manner, slowly rubbing his beard, eyes somewhere beyond the horizon. When he judged that by then, there were enough commoners admiring his serious pose and preoccupation, typical of only the greatest among wise men, he would heave a deep sigh and utter impressively, “*'Tis difficult, yes sir! Dif-fi-cult, I say!*”

That day however, luck had brought him an interlocutor that seemed to enjoy not only a well-roasted pork steak, but also some of Sache's thoughts' finesse. Sitting at his table from which he

would never have risen except for personally welcoming occasional highnesses crossing his doorstep, he had been trying for the past two hours to convince a merchant with a belly as large as his of the craziest idea: the theory of the earth being round was actually a great error of the scholars.

‘Ere’s how I see it: in them old days, when some Greek fellow, Aristotene by name, first said the earth’s round, there weren’t that many to believe ’im. He’s the only one who’s believing ’imself, see? The world was more serious then, yes sir, they didn’t have time for fooling ’round. All was fightin’ and workin’ their backsides off, day an’ night! Bu’ now? Now they’s going to them fancy universities an’ suddenly, they’s having ideas! If their ol’ man’s got lots of gold coins, what can they do, bu’ spin out loads o’ crap an’ get the whole world inna’ huddle! Others, poor souls, really b’lieve we live like that, like on an apple, see?’

‘Indeed,’ the big-bellied commoners murmured sheepishly, anxious not to upset the tenant. He did not really have any serious motive to contradict him. What did he know of Greeks and universities? As long as Sache was not asking him for money for the unbelievably delicious food on the table, he was well free to say anything he pleased!

‘Th’other night, I sat up deep in thought...yer know how I get no sleep when I set up to solve such difficult problems, an’ sudd’nly it hit me!’

‘They’s sick, poor souls,’ the big-bellied fellow suggested in a worried manner.

‘Yer not stupid at all!’ Sache approved, looking impressed, after which he continued. ‘Them that says the earth’s round, they just sit like that fer three days inna row an’ study. An’ they get ideas, brother! An’ mind you, they’s already dizzy with all that learning an’ I hear they drink a lot, too...an’ them ideas start swilling ’round in their heads like you do with a mouthful o’ good wine before sending it down the throat. An’ since man’s head is round, they’s believing everything they’s thinking in there becomes round, too. There you have it!’

The tenant did not get the chance to enjoy the reaction of deep admiration or deep worry now appearing on the commoners’ face, as his attention was suddenly caught by a voice he had not heard in a very long time.

‘Do you have a room for two weary travellers?’

Eyes still in his plate, anxious for the voice not to have happened only in his mind, Sache’s quick thinking flashed with the usual speed of his fellow innkeepers: *“The voice cannot be that o’ knight Stroe, because he’s been gone for many years now. On the other hand, I still haven’t met another with a squeaky voice like his, bu’ stranger things have happened. An’ if they did come back, they couldn’t stop but ’ere! It must be him!”*

‘Of course, of course we have a room,’ he said, managing only with difficulty to hide his sudden joy. His eyes however were speaking for him and the knight knew immediately that Sache had remained the same trusted man in whom they could confide all their secrets, and who had helped them through many hours of trouble.

They went together upstairs, where the four knights got a more private room, one that was usually reserved for closer relatives or open-pursed nobility. Once the large nutwood door closed behind them, the tenant could no longer help himself and burst:

‘Lord God, how long have I been praying for this moment! Could it be that the bells will finally toll for Lord Dan? That it’s over with the high taxes and with our repression? This is why you’ve come, isn’t it? D’you need money? Just tell me how much an’ I’ll bring it! What d’you wanna’ know? ‘Ere at the inn, there’s still lots of soldiers and courtly stable men coming, an’ the nobles like it here, too. I hear a lot of most interesting things...anything you need!’

‘Thank you, Sache!’ Marcu interrupted, ‘I knew you wouldn’t let us down. You will be of great

help in the months to come. No one must know we are here. Say, what do you know of Vlad, His Highness' young one?'

'Yesterday, three soldiers came 'ere from the Court. After their meal, they asked for wine and didn't seem to be in a hurry to leave. One of them said that Voivod Dan was mighty happy about the news that Prince Vlad and Stefan, the son of Moldavian Voivod Bogdan, were being chased by Petru Aron's guards. Another claimed to know for sure that the two princes had managed to escape and take refuge in the Lower Lands of Moldavia, sheltered by some noblemen faithful to Bogdan. When I heard these things, I offered 'em another kettle of wine on my expense, to loosen their tongues. The rumors were many, but no one knew for sure. I'm not sorry about the wine; I'd have given 'em ten kettles, just to know more!'

'It's fine, Sache, this much is fine as well!' Stroe appeased him. 'Now bring us something to eat and a pot of Calugareasca wine! We've only got an hour to stay.'

The innkeeper asked nothing more, although he had an itch to. He would have liked to know who the young fellow that had not uttered a single word was. Maybe Ler's son? Probably...Why were the knights in such a hurry? Were they going after Vlad? To throne him? They could surely do it!

With his head full of troubling thoughts and questions, he swiftly moved his enormous belly toward the kitchen and yelled from the bottom of the stairs:

'Sofica! Set a hen boiling at once, hurry and wash some greens! Catalina! Where you at, gal? Where's your head? Go tidy yourself up! What's with that hair of yours? It's all ragged!'

Catalina, the innkeeper's daughter, was a lively lass, pretty and quick-witted, as if Fate had decided to bestow all her gifts on the girl. Sache had her to thank for half of his male customers. There were plenty of young men willing to wait for hours at a time for a smile from her, even if that led to their purse weighing less, as one should not keep a table without a serious order. Even palsied old men tormented by infirmities seemed suddenly more robust and willing to tell their adventures from times long gone by, in high and proud voices. The lass' young heart had not yet heard the calling of true love. She cared for one and all with brotherly love and had her fun at the expense of those who got overexcited. Sache, who believed that seventeen was just the right age for marriage, could not miss such an opportunity. The young lad accompanying the knights was no less than Prince Charming, and if he was indeed Ler's son, there was no need for dowry. He would have enough money for the both of them, if only he could be tricked into marriage. Sache would be beside himself with pride to have such a son-in-law! After casting his eye over the tables, he hurried towards the kitchen to prepare the knights' meal himself. Suddenly, the large pan started shaking in his hand as he stared through the door leading to the main hall. There were two men at the table in the back. He could not see the face of one of them, but he thought he recognized the features of Mihnea, Lord Vlad Dracul's killer, beneath his companion's thick beard.

Everyone knew of his unfathomable betray and the fact that he had switched sides for the Turks, and was living at Edirne, near the Sultan's Court. If indeed it was him, he could have but one purpose to be there: he had heard of his former comrades' return and came to betray them again. The innkeeper's heart, too weak for so much excitement in one day, was beating like crazy. "*If he sees me and asks to speak to me, I'll jump him*", Sache pondered. "*Or are my eyes playing tricks on me and I'm seeing knights all day long? I'd better sneak through the back and warn Stroe and his men. This is no joking matter!*"

He hurried through the back door, grabbed a ladder from the stables and fixed it beneath the window of the knights' room. He had not got to the third step when he was seized with an arcan¹¹ and dragged upwards in a less than pleasant manner, but much faster than he had planned to. Sache

unleashed a short squeal and, when he opened his eyes, he saw that Marcu's sword had no intention of leaving his throat. By the window, Ler and his son had fastened their bows and were checking the entire yard, while the door had already been blocked with the cabinet swiftly pushed into place by Stroe.

‘Why do you come like this?’ Marcu scolded him.

The innkeeper tried to answer, but the shock kept him from uttering more than a few faint, trembled sounds. The knight seemed to have no compassion for the fat man's condition and continued to press his sword on his pig-like neck.

‘Downstairs...I think that...’ he managed to babble.

Hardly had the innkeeper finished saying this, when they heard low knocking at the door and their former companion's voice seemed to scrape their ear drums:

‘It is I, Mihnea, open up!’

For an instant, the knights looked at each other in disbelief. Then Ler jumped out the window under his son's eyes, who was surprised to hear no sound of landing. Stroe, who had already understood his comrade's plan, was pulling the cabinet away from the door. A few dozen seconds of tension passed, and then the door sprang open and Mihnea burst in, projected through the air by Ler.

Mihnea, the traitor, the man with whose blood they had mingled their own throughout countless battles, their former brother, whom they had hoped to never lay eyes upon again after that terrible winter night, was now standing before them. There could be no mercy. They all wished they had never crossed paths with him again. Now, there was no other way.

But Mihnea seemed at ease and was even smiling. The thick beard he had not worn in the old days was masking his features, and one could hardly find the old knight underneath the ragged traveler's clothes.

‘Don't kill me before I get to speak!’ he said in a calm voice. ‘I'm not lying now just as I didn't betray you then. I'm not asking you to believe me. In a minute someone will be knocking at the door. Listen to what he has to say and then decide whether you'll let me live or not!’

The knight's eyes were grim and in their minds, the memories of brother Mihnea were mingling with the bitter recollection of his meaningless betray. Everyone was silent. The air was heavy with tension and it seemed to weigh on their shoulders and burn their eyes. They had rather Mihnea fought for his life and died bravely. But passive as he was now, their old comrade did not seem himself...

There were short knocks at the door and the traitor rushed to open it. The knights' hands gripped the hilts of their swords tighter and, fearing an ambush, Ler hurried towards the window, by his son, his bow at a ready.

In the door frame stood a young man – not very tall but broad-shouldered, which was not easy to find in others of his age. His wavy black hair flowed over his shoulders in heavy curls, and his large eyes – adorned with thin and arched eyebrows like those of a beautiful woman – brought to mind the color of mountain lakes mirroring the verdancy of pines. The aquiline nose and hollow cheeks somehow enhanced the unnatural size of the eyes. Yet the young man's unusual features blended harmoniously and conveyed an imperious and somber appearance. Beneath the dark clothes, unadorned and masterfully tailored, the supple body testified of a life of hardship, during which the battle for survival had chiseled the shapes towards perfection. His appearance was overwhelming to the knights, even though they were not easily impressionable people. It seemed that every surrounding object, light and sound had rearranged themselves in accordance to him. He was a king from head to toe.

Huddled in a corner, the innkeeper began to cross himself while staring at the young man that

seemed to be dominating the room, despite his moderate height. *"It's clear, I've gone completely mad!"* Sache thought. *"First the knights returned, then Mihnea-the-Turk appeared, and now Old King Vlad is here, too, but he seems different, cruel, I don't know exactly...It's all clear, the King must be long dead, and, anyway, he should look much older, the knights are away, Mihnea is at Edirne, so that's that! – I'm having a bad dream. It's all because of that pork stew I had last night! Should have stopped after the third plate!"* He pinched himself hard and felt it all the way down to his bones. So he was not dreaming after all! He swallowed noisily and decided he would better keep quiet and wait.

All at once, the knights went down on one knee and said with one voice:

'Long live the Prince!'

Right in front of them stood Vlad Basarab the Third, the son of their Lord, Vlad Dracul. They had left for Moldavia hoping to find him and help him seize the throne of Wallachia, as was his birth right. They thought they would have to endure a long and perilous journey to get to him. Now he was here and there seemed to be no hostility between him and Mihnea at all.



'Rise, men! This is no time for ceremony!' answered the young man in a resonant voice recalling his late father's. We cannot spend the night in this place. Three hours from now you shall be at the lake near the Hill Monastery. Then we'll decide if we shall work together.'

Marcu shut the door behind the two, and for the sake of prudence, gave up on the thought of watching them leave.

'It'll be half an hour's ride till the lake, we should get something to eat. In this room, at least we're safe from unwanted eyes', said Stroe.

'As if food was on my mind right now...'

'What, Marcu, your guts' singing helps you think deeper? You don't say! You can't think with a full belly?'

'Vlad hasn't joined the Turks, or else he'd come with an army, not in hiding!' said Ler with a broad smile.

His eyes were gleaming with joy, to Stroe's confusion.

'So why so full of joy? Speak your mind, don't just grin like a mute at a table of pies!'

'Wait for three hours and we'll see if we shall laugh or fight. Now let's eat!'

They sat around the low table; Tudor was stuffing his bag with food, which puzzled them all.

'What are you doing, lad? Suppose you ate while we talked to the Prince and were looking away, or what?'

'No, uncle Stroe, but since when haven't you seen Vlad?'

The knights' faces showed a trace of surprise and then Stroe answered:

'You're right, nephew! Why should we trust them? Just because Vlad is the Lord's son? Who knows what he's after? The same with Mihnea. We're going! It's always better to arrive first at a meeting with people you don't know! Leave no room to surprise...'

A minute later, their four horses were galloping on the road from Targoviste to the North, towards the Hill Monastery, built half a century before by the great Voivod Mircea the Elder.

The road headed on straight till the base of the hill before them, and the blooming apple and cherry orchards did not allow for any large ambush.

'Listen, Ler,' Stroe broke the silence. 'What's got into us that we didn't think it through? We're too old to be this happy to have found young Vlad. Lucky for us Tudor knew better. Are you sure he's

your son?’

Ler smiled briefly, as usual, at his companion’s joke, and drove his horse ahead, next to Tudor. Before them, they could see the lake surrounded by thick bulrush. He signaled his son briefly and they both started towards the other side of the road and then, after a wide turn, reached the lake’s northern border. Left behind, Marcu and Stroe reined in their horses, allowing the others to go round the lake.

‘What do you think of Tudor, Marcu?’ asked Stroe.

‘He’s tight-lipped like Ler, strong and today he proved to be wiser than us. He reminds me of his father when we first met him. He looked like a boy, but was wiser than the elders. I wish I were wrong, but I reckon we’ll soon see his skills in battle too...’

From the northern border, the lake seemed peaceful. Only the wind made the bulrush shiver slightly and whisper hidden words, lost in the wavy heat above the water. Ler and Tudor’s horses had been left behind, hitched a few hundred feet behind a mound, in the orchard at the foot of the hill; meanwhile, the two had crawled close to the lake, sheltered by the tall weeds.

‘From up in the nut tree, it seems we’re alone here, but we’d better look out!’ Ler whispered to his son.

This was the first time that father and son were together faced with a possibly perilous situation and his over-worrying led the older man to continuous advising. Tudor smiled calmly and signaled him to be silent. Then, to his father’s surprise, he started crawling rapidly, like a lizard, without a sound towards the edge of the water. He stopped for a second, half sunken in the mud. His blonde hair offered perfect camouflage against the ruddy gold of the surrounding bulrush. Without looking backwards, he signalled his father to come closer, then gracefully slid into the water, just like a fish, with not even a ripple forming around him. When he reached the shoreline, Ler took notice of the movements of the toads and birds; he was content to see they were not in the least agitated, like they would have been if there were any men around. He crawled slowly, carefully watching the rush-bed, which could easily hide considerable threats. He chose a safe spot and studied the tops of the bulrush meticulously. They were neither bent nor moving suddenly. He kept moving forward along the lake’s edge, watching out for any sign of danger.

He had gone round half the lake in this manner when his attention was drawn by a slight ruffle of the waves close to the shore.

‘There’s no one on the other side either,’ said Tudor as he came out of the water. ‘Zyraxes taught me to swim underwater,’ he continued, answering the question in his father’s eyes.

‘Stay here,’ Ler said, and headed to the side of the lake closer to the road. He let out a brief whistle and signalled his companions to come there.

Marcu and Stroe watched him walking away towards the mound behind which the horses were hidden. And then pressing the horses on towards the pond.

‘Tudor, my son, did you go for a bath?’ Stroe wondered as he saw that the young knight was soaked from head to toe. ‘When you’re keeping a close eye on someone near water, you should be ware of diving in some nearby puddle, even if it may be a better hideaway. If you’re attacked from behind, you won’t be able to move as swiftly.’

‘But you can keep a better eye on the borders from the middle of the lake. The enemy usually watches the roads, not the water!’ the lad answered with a faint blush.

‘You may be right, but how are you supposed to swim to the middle of the lake without being seen? Wait, it is possible! If you have frog blood in you and there’s no enemy nearby, it is!’

‘Zyraxes taught me how to hold my breath for minutes at a time, underwater or underground. A man’s will is stronger than his needs.’

‘You don’t say! You mean you can stay underwater for as long as you want without breathing? You should teach me, nephew! You see, I’ve had my eye on a nice place for a house, at the bottom of a lake. They say the fish are nice there, they help each other as good neighbors do; a basket of spawn, a sieve of seaweed...any way they can! I like that they don’t bicker too: as soon as one opens its mouth, it fills with water, and that’s it – not a word! So I’d like if they’d have me in their village, I’ve grown so tired of your father’s rattle! And as well...

‘Ho, Stroe! Let the boy speak, you’ve dazed us all!’ Marcu interrupted him with a laugh. ‘If what he says is true, this trick could save us a lot of trouble. We’ve only spent a few weeks alongside Zyraxes, every now and then, and still we’ve learned plenty of useful tricks. So figure how much Tudor knows, after being raised by him!’

‘Marcu will go beyond the road, in the orchard, Tudor stays here with me and you, Stroe, you go to the other side of the lake, towards the grove,’ Ler cut him off in his usual manner.

Although well-maintained, the road from Targoviste to the Hill Monastery was not used very often. The monks took it to solve some business in town, or travelers on their way to or from far-away settlements – at the bottom of the mountain or in the other Romanian country, Transylvania. The villages near to Targoviste – settled along the Ialomita and Dambovita rivers, like two belts around the capital – humbly kept their distance from the Monastery. Thus, the road towards the hills was not hard to keep an eye on, and warned by Marcu’s fox-like bark, the other knights could see from a distance the two approaching riders. A minute later, they could tell it was Mihnea and Prince Vlad. They were proceeding straight forward, without hiding, and without being followed.

When the two got to where the knights were gathered, they stopped their horses and dismounted.

‘Come closer, my lords! We shall continue our journey together,’ Vlad encouraged them in his grave, imperious voice. ‘Tonight we are to stay at the monastery; the men there are loyal to us.’

A little while later, they were all dismounting their horses in the yard of Hill Monastery. Few people knew that the monks here were more accustomed to sword fighting or hard battle training than to counting beads or the study of prayer books. Abbot Paisie, now an old man, had served under Mircea the Great as a bowman. After his sons’ death in the battles along the Danube, he had renounced the world, but only halfway through. He had kept his old weapons in his room and would not shun from making good use of them whenever some Huns, Turks or thieves out for prey came too close to the Monastery. After a while, Vlad Dracul appointed him Abbot of the Monastery, rather because of his warrior qualities, and gave him free hand to put together an army of ‘monks’. The new Lord, Dan, had a new monastery built at Targoviste and came to visit the old one only a couple of times; moreover, he showed no sign of awareness of what the monks of the Hill Monastery really were.

Stroe did not miss the monks’ haste and skill in unsaddling the knights’ horses, as well as the guards on the Monastery’s thick walls, and he joyfully remarked:

‘Yes, Fathers! That’s more like it! It’s clear you were bestowed on Saint George, the one that slew the dragon. Anyways, if I take a better look at your faces and arms as gentle as rocks, I’m mighty sure the others wouldn’t take you in. Amen!’

Inside the Monastery’s great hall, darkness had dared to fall a little sooner than outside, in the yard. The weak light, still creeping in through the stained-glass windows, was assisted by a few candles set into two great candelabras on the middle of the table. Fragrances of wax and frankincense, the surrounding silence and the trembled dance of candlelight made the expressions of the saints painted on the cold walls seem alive and somehow graver.

The Abbot sat at the end of the great oak table closest to the door. He knew none of the knights

would be comfortable sitting with his back to the door. He knew them to be suspicious; but, as a former soldier, he could easily see that precisely this lack of trust had kept them safe from numerous dangers. The Abbot decided to break the silence that was growing heavier by the minute, as none of the others dared to speak.

‘Two days ago, Mihnea and Prince Vlad came here to bring us much joy! Today you have the time to set things straight and, who knows, to work together for the Country’s well-being once again. It’d be a shame not to do so. I have other things to do outside, I’ll leave you now.’

Actually, there was nothing to do in the courtyard. The monks each knew their duties and were strictly organized. The knights realised that Paisie was offering them the chance to speak between themselves and were grateful for it.

‘My lords,’ started Prince Vlad, ‘I have spent plenty of time among you during my childhood years, and I know you would have gladly given up your lives for the sake of my father and the country. I also know you would have done the same if one of you were in danger. I can only imagine how you felt when my father fell dead by the hands of your brother, Mihnea. As I am not as gentle as you, I would have looked for him for years on end if I had to, and I would have cut him open. I ask you listen and trust me.’

‘Speak, Prince,’ said Ler with poorly disguised excitement in his voice, to the others’ surprise.

‘When I heard about Lord Vlad’s death, I was imprisoned at Egrigoz, in Anatolia. I refused to believe Mihnea was my father’s murderer. But then the rumours spread, and I learned Mihnea had taken refuge at the Sultan’s Court at Edirne. I was determined to escape and go after him, kill him and return to Wallachia. One day, though, Mihnea came into my cell and if it hadn’t been for the guards, he’d have died that day. He had on him a letter from my father to me. Here it is, it will explain better than I can.’

The Prince handed to Ler a deer-skin scroll containing Voivod Vlad’s last words. As he read, the knight’s face lit up. After he was done, he reached out to Mihnea and said:

‘Forgive us!’

Stroe grabbed the letter impatiently and started reading out loud:

*Vlad,
Fate had it you and Radu remained hostage to the Turks. You may hate me...You should. What kind of man gives up his children to strangers? Not long from now, you will be Voivod and then you will see that all the Country’s children are our own, too. If you had not gone, the Turks would have come upon us again and thousands of other children would have died. I had no choice.*

This letter is brought to you by knight Mihnea; believe everything he tells you. The great noblemen have betrayed again and I doubt I should live. I will try to keep Stroe, Marcu and Ler alive as well. It will be hard; they’re as stubborn as they are brave and quick-witted. Now there’s no one by my side but them. Not even they can resist an entire army. Keeping them close to me would mean sending them to certain death.

I ordered Mihnea to assume betrayal and contact Dan’s men, and when the moment comes, he shall kill me himself. Or else, no one will believe him. This is his only chance to join the Turks and find you. You should have him close to you and honour him like an older brother.

Someday you shall return to the Country and find the other knights. Be Mihnea’s pledge to them. Trust only them and together raise the people. Beware the powerful noblemen and fear not the Turk!

Be patient and look after Radu, he’s too young to understand the world.

Your brother Mircea is dead. I’ll soon be gone, too. Don’t try to avenge us! You shall make

*Wallachia a truly free and proud country, like your grandfather, Voivod Mircea the Elder, left it.
This shall be your revenge!*

May God keep you safe!

Vlad Basarab Dracul'



Bucharest, to a myth hunter's eyes, is a disappointment! Hardly anything on Dracula! You'd expect Romanians to at least take advantage of this great brand that cashes in billions of dollars worldwide! But no!

I'm starting to believe though that everything happens for a reason and that something is calling me onto the tracks of this terrible vampire-king. How else would you explain that on precisely the night I landed in Bucharest the news stations were all roaring the same strange and horrific subject: in Arefu, a mountain village close to Dracula's citadel, the people unburied one of their dead and stuck a maple stake through his heart!!! In the 21st century!

I'm leaving for that place tomorrow to see what's going on with my own eyes!

Bucharest, March 14, 2008'

The Monastery and its peace had long before been left behind. Prince Vlad Basarab Draculea, Ler, Stroe, Marcu, Mihnea and young Tudor had started before dawn on the road to the mountains and the passes towards Transylvania. The six men had stopped for rest in the forest at the foot of the Bucegi Mountains, leaning against the magnificent straight trunks of the glorious pine trees scattered among secular oaks and beeches. The sunlight, filtered through the trees into long streams, seemed to keep everything still, like in a peaceful dream announcing a cheerful and quiet morning.

On the way, the knights had learned about the long years of torment that Mihnea had chosen to endure in order to reach the Prince and help him escape. In the beginning, he had been tolerated as humble servant of one of Pasha¹⁴ Omer of Adrianopol's men.

Then, while continuously humiliated and treated underfoot, began to be asked for by the Pasha himself, to translate letters received from who-knows-where. With time, his knowledge and humility, but especially the bags of gold, made him one of the Pasha's trusted men. He had even got Omer's assent to speak to the captive Prince and try to turn him to Islam.

Mihnea had been spat on and cursed in the Prince's hold, and Vlad had sworn that the first thing he would do once he got out of his chains was to cut off the traitor's head. Then, with the guards who could not understand a single word in Romanian as witnesses, Mihnea had read the late Lord's letter to the Prince. That's how he convinced Vlad to come out for the daily military training, to learn the enemy's language in order to understand them, to know their weaknesses and their strengths. On a morning four years later, Mihnea handed the guards an order signed by Omer, which demanded that the young Wallachian – now cured from the madness that had until recently terrified everybody – be allowed to come to the palace, accompanied by Ahmed (traitor Mihnea's Turkish name). Later that evening, Omer was found dead in his room. Since then, no one in Adrianopol had set eyes on neither the Wallachian prince, nor the Pasha's trusted man.

Now, they were planning to cross over to Transylvania and ask for great Iancu Corvin's help; the former castellan was now Voivod of the Wallachians from over the mountains and also governor of Hungaria.

'His Highness Iancu cannot turn his back on us,' exclaimed Vlad with blazing eyes. 'He is now the Athlete of Christianity, as the Pope of Rome called him. He's been fighting the Turks for years. He will give me an army, and then, after I seize the throne of Wallachia, we'll head for Adrianopol together and crush the Pagans!'

'Your Highness,' Ler cut in, 'There's more. Mihnea doesn't know about it and neither do you. Maybe we ought to have told you sooner...'

'Speak, uncle Ler, and there's no need for "Your Highness," it's just us here.

'The troops that came along with Dan after Voivod Vlad and your brother Mircea were killed... weren't all his. And they weren't sent by Albu of Craiova. Iancu Corvin ordered and sent troops to get rid of your father.'

Vlad leaned back and lay on the grass silently, staring upwards at the firs' tops that were mercilessly rifting the clear blue sky. All his plans were now crumbling; all his hopes had been built on lies and unknown of betrayals. For a moment, he wished that the dust suspended between the arrows of light shot through the trees would gather itself up into a hundred years' worth and bury him alive. That he would die and be in his mother's chamber once again, to listen to her stories of beautiful princesses and magical dwarves; to hide in the stables and laugh at his father, who was

pretending to be frightened. That he simply died... He felt old and tired, crushingly tired.

Then, minutes later, he started laughing steadily, a bitter laugh that had nothing to do with happiness. He stood up slowly and called his horse, mounted, and said to the men:

‘My lords, in a year from now I shall be the Lord of Wallachia, as I am destined to be. I am now setting for Transylvania to find Corvin. Before joining me, I want you to listen. I know my father relied on you and trusted you with any secret. I know you never asked for payment and believed you were risking your lives for the country and not its Voivod. From now on things will change. I love you and treasure you as my older brothers. But only those of you who are willing to follow my orders without reluctance shall follow me. Five years from now, Wallachia will be free of Turks, of poverty, humiliation, theft and betrayal. I have only one thing to fear from your part. Your hearts are too big. Your honour, honesty and kindness are renowned. My lords, those are all over with! The war has begun! Today I, Vlad Basarab of Wallachia, have started the war against all enemies! In this war, I shall show no honour to the unworthy; I will lie and kill villains in their sleep, if I have to, until the time of the great battle comes. Until I feel it in my heart that things are right again! If you should leave now, I shall forever treasure your memory as good-hearted, brave men. If you stay with me, you will obey my commands until your last breath, no matter how hard they are. No questions, no hesitating. You have until we reach Piatra Craiului¹⁵. From there on I will cross over to Transylvania with or without you.’



The oaks and beeches left behind were fewer and fewer. The six riders went on through the tall, dark firs, toward the crests separating the two Romanian countries. Soon, large treeless patches started unveiling before them, watched over by towering rocks. The Piatra Craiului crest was half an hour’s ride away. The knights – riding behind the Prince – were watching silently Vlad’s determined and imposing figure, beyond which the Transylvanian border was now visible.

‘I mean, how could it be harder than it’s been so far?’ Stroe thought to himself. ‘As if when we joined his father’s army it was all dinners and balls?! True, we’ve never been ordered, but asked nicely. But who cares about that? Lord Vlad was an honest man and his wishes felt like our own. What did young Vlad mean? What harder tasks could he ask of us? I wouldn’t turn into a paid cutthroat, but how should you treat a man that lies and signs any treaty today, only to break it tomorrow? To rid the country of all evil would take two lifetimes, not five years like he said, but I’d sure like to try!’

‘Listen, Stroe,’ said Vlad without turning around, as if speaking to himself. ‘One day, a group of gypsies from these parts came to Edirne. They had stolen a bear cub; they forced it to stay with its feet on a hot plate and claimed it was dancing. They were shouting like savages and merrily begging for the coins the Turks were throwing. The bear was thin...It was so skinny the ribs were showing through its fur. But you know what, Stroe? It wouldn’t give up! It was dancing... Dancing on and on like in a nightmare that always begins and never ends. I couldn’t bear the poor animal’s torture and cut off its chains with a single sword stroke. Rid of its agony, the bear collapsed and seemed dead. Only low moans could be heard from its tormented and starved body. Then, suddenly, it started to rise. Trembling all over, it looked into my eyes like a human would and started dancing. Afterwards, he dropped dead... Do you see, Stroe? That’s what the bear, stolen from *this land*, wanted from us! That’s what he endured for. That it could dance when it wanted to and die free! FREE!!! I wonder, my

lords, when will the noblemen of this land understand that you either live free, or die? There is no other way... If they won't see it, I'll be the one to teach them!'

Stroe did not see it fit to answer. Vlad's words were too fierce. Fierce like a cornered, wounded beast that will not back off, even in death. These words burned with something the knights had never before heard. A ferocious, cruel and absolute thirst for justice. In that exact moment, it became clear to the knights that the young man before them would forever engrave his name on their country and the surrounding lands' history, that his destiny would be great and memorable, a destiny that would sink or rise along all the other destinies around him.

On the Bucegi plateau, the six riders dismounted. The dying sun had set fire to the mountain peaks ruffling all around, all the way to the Danube and the Great Sea. Prince Vlad stood unnaturally still and straight; it seemed that he was absentmindedly trying to catch a glimpse of the fortress of Targoviste, from way up there. Stroe pulled out his famous yataghan and stepped towards the mound where the young man was standing. The time had come for the five knights to make up their minds.

'Your Highness, you have my sword and my life. Say the word!'

'My life and my sword' said Marcu as well, repeating his comrade's gesture.

Then it was Mihnea and Tudor's turns. Lastly, Ler walked up silently, went down on one knee, and put his sword over the others', at the Prince of Wallachia's feet.

'Thank you, my lords. There is no turning back now. Tomorrow at dusk we'll be at Corvin's. I have to set things straight with him. And then we'll be heading for Valahia!'

The first night watch was assigned to Stroe and Mihnea. The others found shelter between three large solitary rocks that seemed accidentally dropped and forgotten at such great heights.

As usual, it was Stroe who broke the silence:

'At first, I thought he'd gone a bit crazy. Not much, just a little...'

'If you knew how much this child has suffered and kept to himself, you wouldn't believe it, Stroe! Sometimes, when I think about what must be in his heart, I get the shivers. I don't know how it hasn't burst by now. Much evil will be crushed by this heart and I fear that the people won't understand him. When Old Voivod Vlad went to Edirne to see the Sultan, along with his two young ones – little Vlad and Radu – I wished I had you by my side. Together we might have somehow managed to get all three of them out of there and back home. It was back then, surrounded by Turks, that I first thought Vlad would someday become our greatest ruler.'

'We shouldn't have trusted the Sultan's words...' said Stroe remorsefully.

'At first, they welcomed us beautifully, with their squeaky music, tents and turbans in all the colours of the rainbow, with fine sweets and fruits we didn't even know existed and soldiers lined-up like in a parade. After receiving Voivod Vlad's gifts, the Sultan made a sign and a servant approached them, holding a gold thread woven cushion, but there were chains on it, Stroe, not gifts, as would have been fit for a ruler. In chains, Lord Vlad looked at his sons, kept further away, along with other children. Radu had started to whimper softly and then little Vlad quickly covered his brother's mouth with his hand. He didn't want the Turks to see him cry! For a few moments, little Vlad's eyes met his father's and that's when everything went silent. Sombre with his large wide eyes, the child started walking slowly, maddeningly slowly towards his father. No one dared to stop him. Small as he was, his green eyes were blazing with hatred, making him seem fiercer than one hundred janissaries. All he whispered to his father was: 'Never shall the Turk's power be greater than ours!'

'And I haven't forgotten what I said back then, Mihnea!' spoke Vlad from behind them.

'Your Highness! You're not asleep? Maybe you should look for other helpers,' Stroe went on moodily. 'Until now, no one has sneaked up behind me without me sensing him. When did you leave

your lair?’

‘Don’t be upset, Stroe!’ Mihnea laughed. ‘While he was at the Turks, His Highness Vlad became one of the most skilled warriors I’ve ever set my eyes on. He learned from the Chinese fighters, brought from the end of the world, from skilled French swordsmen, from wild Turks and Germans as big as doors. He defeated them all and scolded them for having the nerve to challenge a great ruler.’

‘The time is here for the great battle. The one that matters...’ Vlad whispered as if to himself. ‘And I won’t go wrong anymore. It was my fault back then. God warned me not to go and I wouldn’t listen!’

Vlad was silent for a moment, reminiscing the times forever gone-by. And then continued absentmindedly:

‘I loved it in Targoviste, when summer heat opened the rose-buds... I would gather red petals in my hands and throw them at the sun. And then I would float alongside them, smooth and wingless... I felt like I was flying, slowly, and playing with the rose butterflies for hours, without ever touching the ground. The day before we left for Edirne, the petals turned to rugged boulders that crushed me. The remaining butterflies were squealing like hawks and pecking at my face. I reached out to protect myself, but the boulders kept falling. When I woke up, my mother was weeping above me. I never told her what happened. Maybe she wouldn’t have believed me or maybe she would have been too frightened. She was soft and kind. She couldn’t even bear to see orphaned puppies; she cared for every creature. I never told my father either. I wish I had. They’d have figured we shouldn’t go. I know they sometimes talked to God... they were humble and hard-working and good and brave. They were the last true king and queen. Along with them, the age of fairytales ended, my lords! We are now living in the age of the Beast! And she doesn’t listen to reason!’

‘It’ not going to be easy to deal with Iancu Corvin tomorrow, either!’ Stroe changed the subject, hoping to chase away the chills that had taken over him. ‘What do you plan to do, Your Highness? You can’t kill him, it wouldn’t be good to either...’

‘I won’t hurt him as long as he defeats the Turk. I only want to know what he has to say. To know whether the troops sent against my father were under his command. And why? Now go and rest, I wish to be alone.’

On the high Bucegi plateau, the stars seemed to be descending towards the ground, as if to cool down into the numerous mountain springs that were whispering their song to the silent night. Some lazier ones were snoozing in whitish lairs made up of sky dust. It appeared as though a Celestial Craftsman had plated the fir forests and the high surrounding peaks with Moon silver, out of love for the mountain scenery.

While pretending to be asleep, for a moment Ler feared that the silvery stardust in the Prince’s hair would never fade away, after that night. *‘Too much to bear for one man. And this is only the beginning...’*



Things are very different in Targoviste, Dracula's old capital! The city is beautiful, and the weather likewise!

The king's presence is felt everywhere! In the statues, at the Royal Court, in the park, and especially in the people's minds. The people of Targoviste are cultivated and stylish. They laugh ironically at the mention of vampires and don't joke about their king, who according to them was the greatest figure in Romanian history.

I unravel a thousand details about the life of a prodigious ruler, a military genius and I'm starting to wonder whether his story is even more fascinating than any myth of vampires and blood!

Targoviste, March 15, 2008

"But the Supreme Lord did not allow his religion to be covered with such darkness. Neither did he permit such a shame to be showered upon the true faith. The barbarians were routed by the most powerful Athlete of Christ, Iancu Corvin of Hunedoara."

*Pope Callixtus the IIIrd*¹⁶

The descent towards Hunedoara offered the six riders the chance to forget the last few days' tension, at least for a while. They were not searched for here, in Transylvania, and the people, be they noblemen or commoners, only knew them from tales. On the narrow, meandering paths scraping along the abrupt mountain sides, the knights were forced to ride in a line. Ler was riding in front, followed by Marcu and Vlad, and the convoy was closed by Mihnea, Tudor and Stroe. The large spaces between them gave Tudor the courage to ask:

'Uncle Stroe, isn't Vlad too angry to see Corvin now? What does he plan to do?'

'If I knew, you'd be the first to know, nephew!' Stroe answered absent-mindedly. 'Do you know what he said to your father last night? That "as long as he defeats the Turk, I won't hurt him!" As if one man or the six of us could ever harm Iancu Corvin!? The Turks've been sending entire armies and killers in disguise to whack Corvin for years, and as you can see he's not dead at all. I saw him once at Varna. He's as big as a mountain and stronger than a bull. Back then, even though his hair had started to go gray, no young soldier was a match for him! During the hardest campaigns, he walks along with the soldiers, sleeps and eats alongside them. When I saw him at Varna back in '44, I was by His Highness Vlad Dracul's side, waiting for the western knights – had they never come at all!

'All of a sudden, all the humming and the chatter of the soldiers resting by the tents came to a stop and a deafening silence took over the camp. At first, I didn't know why. All the men had stood up and were bowing. Through the rows of tents, Iancu Corvin of Hunedoara was coming our way. His long hair was flowing in the wind, as well as the black cape that he always wore during battle. The mist of the morning by the Danube bank kept me from seeing him clearly. I was eager to see Christianity's greatest defender, but I felt a little bitter, too. I had heard he was kind to the soldiers and that the men loved him as a father. But I saw that they were all looking down as he approached, like he were the Turkish Sultan. That's when His Highness Vlad told me, as if reading my thoughts: "No one can look him in the eye. At the European Courts, the messengers place bets, but none of them has managed to look straight into his eyes. And when he's angry, one's head seems to bow by itself."

'And did His Highness look him in the eyes?' Tudor was anxious to know.

'His Highness was the ruler of Wallachia and was not allowed to lower his head or his eyes. They looked at each other for a moment and headed for the Voivod's tent side by side.'

'But did you see his eyes, uncle Stroe?'

'Till he reached us, I thought I'd gone silly, the wind seemed to blow cooler next to him. His eyes are like no man's, yellowish black. But it's not the colour I want to tell you about. It's like an unseen fire shoots out of them and scorches you all the way to your soul. The wisest, the bravest and the harshest man I have ever seen have all gathered inside of him. You know me, I've never backed down in times of hardship. That was the first time ever my knees went soft. This Corvin has something inside him that makes you feel small. And there's no greater general in all of Europe. If, by some miracle, Christians stuck together and gave him a great army to command, there wouldn't be a Turk left in the Balkans. And this is the man young Vlad says he won't harm!'

'Vlad never got to be a child, uncle Stroe, and I reckon today it won't be easy on Corvin either.'

'True, nephew, as long as we don't tear each other to pieces. We have other enemies now.'

Soon, after having reached the foot of the Transylvanian mountainside, Prince Vlad and the five knights were able to ride side by side again. The day was dawning, along with a soothing spring sun that cheered up the horses and their masters. Only Vlad's expression kept getting darker and darker, his brows coming closer together, a sign of great distress.

Stroe had been struggling with himself for over an hour, while riding his beautiful stallion, trying to find the proper words to utter. He was not used to having trouble speaking. Now little Vlad was "Prince Vlad", which made him feel colder, like a stranger. The Prince's spirits as the castle of the great Iancu of Hunedoara drew nearer didn't encourage him to speak either. And yet, Stroe, as well as his companions, were worried about the inexperienced Vlad's reaction and the danger lurking for him at the castle.

'Your Highness, how do you think we should act at the castle? If Corvin is the one who sent the troops against your father, I doubt he'd be too fond of the son, either!'

'I won't ask him to love me', the Prince answered briefly.

Stroe looked at the others with a frown and saw their encouragement to continue talking to the Prince. They had to convince him not to take useless risks. Mihnea was the only one smiling with content; he was looking forward to seeing his comrades' surprise at the sight of not only Vlad's bravery and courage, but rather his maturity and wisdom above his age.

'If we learn that Corvin is indeed behind the murder...'

'Stroe! Stop worrying for nothing. If it were someone else, I'd be mad at him for thinking I'm still a boy. I saw your torment and I saw you're all waiting for the chance to tell me I'm wrong, that this is not the time or place for anger. I also know you're doing it for my sake and for the promise you made to my father. Did Voivod Corvin kill my father? I don't know and I don't believe anything, but the hate has to stop! I don't want to carry it on. If he agrees to join me in fighting the Turks, that shall be his retribution and I will ask for it on this very day. If he wants to chain us or end our lives, then God help him and his people. I won't show any mercy! Look, the castle! Let's stop for a minute to clean our clothes and horses. It wouldn't be fit to go see a great ruler looking like this!'



Built on top of a giant cliff, the Hunedoara castle seemed a vision straight out of a childhood fairytale. Dark, enormous, and greater than any neighbouring castle, it looked impossible to conquer. On each side of the mobile bridge, three hundred riders dressed alike, weapons and outfits gleaming, were waiting silently.

'I believe Iancu is planning to go on a hunt today,' Stroe whispered to Tudor, who had stayed by his side, behind the other knights quietly watching the rows of warriors. 'But I'm afraid he's gonna have to put it off. I don't think Vlad, in his present disposition, is willing to sit quietly chewing on a loaf of bread and wait for papa Corvin to return...'

All of a sudden, from the chests of three hundred strong men burst the common salute at the Hunedorian Court: 'Long live His Highness Iancu Corvin, the Lord of Transylvania!' Through the castle's dark gate, the Lord's imposing figure appeared, his horse impatiently stomping his hooves. Corvin was unlike other rulers and his clothing made that very clear. His outfit was made up of only a simple flax shirt, tight black pants and a pair of high boots. At the exact same moment he stepped on the mobile bridge, Vlad sent his horse galloping down the slope leading east towards the exterior end of the bridge. A second later, his five companions followed. Mihnea and Ler moved on each side of the Prince, ready to protect him with their own bodies against any threat. Noticing the knights' actions,

Corvin swiftly drew out his sword. At the same time, the three hundred men quickly regrouped before their Lord and took over the entire bridge with their bows ready.

‘Put your bows down, lads!’ Mihnea shouted, while driving his horse in front of Vlad’s. ‘His Highness Vlad Basarab, the Prince of Wallachia, wishes to speak to Voivod Corvin!’

‘Even if he were the Turkish Sultan, he still wouldn’t get his wish today’, answered Dragan, the chief of the Hunedorian guards. ‘Moreover, I should arrest you for your arrival alone. Why were you hiding and why are you in such a haste?’

‘My lord...’

But Mihnea didn’t get the chance to finish his explanation to the brave and moustached Dragan. From beside him, Vlad’s voice thundered:

‘Corvin! I am Vlad Basarab of Wallachia! I have come a long way to see you. Be kind and call off your hunt. There are other things to be done today!’

A sepulchral silence fell over the three hundred soldiers. No one had ever dared to speak to the great Iancu Corvin in such a manner. Even the Turkish messengers forgot their insolence and were intimidated by the fame and overwhelming presence of the Transylvanian Voivod.

Suddenly, the rows of soldiers split in two and from behind them appeared the dark and gloomy victor of Sibiu, Semendria and Ialomitza. His guards, without lowering their weapons, began to smile amusedly awaiting that terrible reproachful glare with which Iancu always crushed even the boldest and intemperate of men. Some used to say that his eyes housed the forest spirits he had intertwined his soul with, through the raven forever lodging on the royal blazon. But Vlad did not lower his eyes. Nor did he blink. After a few tense moments, the old Voivod started to glance a little sideways and softly lowered his head, under the overwhelming burden of Vlad’s *hate*.

Around them, the heavy silence became ever harder to bear, and the soldiers could not believe the events unfolding right in front of the Hunedoara walls.

‘Tell me, my Lord, did you have my father, the Voivod of Wallachia, killed?’ Vlad demanded in a low voice.

‘Had I...’

‘Tell me!’, Vlad growled fiercely.

‘No! Not I ... Come inside, we need to talk!’ answered Iancu Corvin, trying to hide the uneasiness that had overcome him through the callousness of his voice. This did not last longer than a moment though. Corvin’s expression opened up under the caress of a faint smile and, to everyone’s surprise, the Voivod of Transylvania spoke without any trace of irony:

‘Please accept our invitation to the castle. I hope we spend many hours in each other’s company.’

Dragan, the leader of the castle guards, signalled the soldiers to salute, as was the custom at Hunedoara, whenever some great European dignitary or high-ranked Turkish messengers were visiting.

Three hundred knights ranged along the bridge outlined an arch with their swords, a silent, cold and cutting one.

‘I’ve really done it now!’ cringed the moustached Dragan. ‘Time and again, His Highness Iancu commands me to receive, a lot colder than this, even the prestigious messengers that we need. So they know our power and that we won’t bow to anyone! But I liked this young one, I’ll give him that, it’s like he and Corvin are kindred; they don’t look alike but they seem to share the same dragon’s blood. And after His Highness scolds me, if I’ll ever met Vlad again, I will salute him, like the great man that he is. If it’s just me and him.’



Bathed in light, the castle's great yard offered Vlad and the five knights a very different view than what they had expected, judging by the outer walls' bleakness. The polished marble flagstones enhanced the power of the generous spring sunbeams, and their joint gleam found its way through the flower beds and the columns supporting the four wings of the castle. The arched entrance to the great hall was guarded by two soldiers seemingly carved in stone. Their faces betrayed no trace of surprise at the Lord's unexpected return. It was only after Corvin and the Wallachian knights had entered the great hall that the soldier on the right – short and fair – began to speak:

'This is a bad sign!' he said, while still staring forward. 'I reckon we're gonna go to war again, and quick.'

'I doubt it', the other one replied. 'His Highness seemed merry, at least in his own way, but he did look merry to me.'

'Care to bet on it?', ventured the fair one in a wily voice.

'Be gone, devil! You know I don't bet anymore. The other day you tricked me of my entire pay. And then, Father Claudius had me work hard for my sins. Never mind what I paid his Holiness to pray for me...'

'Two ducat's worth that the Turks are coming for us?' the boy insisted.

'Seems fair enough...' was the other one's faint response. 'But this is the last time!'

'No doubt about it!' the boy consented with a poorly disguised smile.

Inside the great hall, Corvin the Voivod of Transylvania, Vlad Basarab the Prince of Wallachia and his five companions sat around the gigantic nutwood table dominating the centre of the room. The large Venetian mirrors gave the room a pleasant impression of spaciousness and mellowed the graveness of the grand stone statues marking its every corner.

'You may leave, my lords!' Corvin uttered towards the five knights. 'I wish to speak to Prince Vlad alone.'

A second later, the Lord's expression betrayed a trace of surprise that risked to turn into anger. The five remained still and were showing no intention of doing otherwise.

'I said I wish to speak to the Wallachian Prince alone,' Corvin repeated his demand, his eyes boring hard into those of Ler, who seemed to have some authority over the others.

'You may go, my lords!' Vlad cut in, before it was too late.

'Your Highness', he said to Corvin, 'these lords are the knights Ler, Mihnea, Marcu, Stroe and Tudor, Ler's son. They receive orders only from the Prince or Voivod of Wallachia.'

'I see,' Corvin smiled, 'I see. I have heard many good things about your lordships. If half of them are true, than you are worthy of all our reverence. I should have known it was you. Only with such help could the Prince have travelled unharmed from Edirne to Hunedoara.'

'Prince Vlad could have got to the Moon if he wished to, Your Highness, with or without us!' Stroe replied, flattered by the great Lord's words. 'Now, if you will, we shall leave.'

No sooner had the door closed behind the knights, than Vlad began his succession of questions:

'Whose were the troops sent against His Highness Vlad at Balteni?'

'Mine...but they were bought by the noblemen of Muntenia that had a grudge against your father. I had sent them to plead with Voivod Vlad, so that he would fight by our side once more. He was beginning to have doubts, as you were in Turk's hands and he didn't trust my help. You should know, Vlad, the greater and more beloved a ruler is, the easier it is for him to fall prey to betrayal. Maybe

this is human nature... ‘

‘I’ll worry about human nature when I’m an old man! Now I want to know who was in command of Your Highness’ men and who was behind them in Wallachia.’

‘I took care of my traitors. They’re all dead; Wallachia is yours to clean. When the time comes, we’ll go together and set you on your father’s throne.’

‘Today! Today is that time, Your Highness, and it is mighty late! The country is falling to pieces and Dan’s men are selling it to the Turks!’ Vlad spoke with more anger than he would have wanted to display.

‘When the time is right, Vlad. When we know who is with us and who is against us, when...’

‘**The Country** is by me and I will be by it. That’s enough! The Land of Wallachia, my father’s Land that I watch over every moment of every day; my Land that needs weeding and caring for!’

‘And what is Wallachia, Vlad? Why not live here or anywhere else on this earth, without fear and honoured as you should be?’

‘It’s the heart in our chests, Corvin!’ Vlad answered with blazing eyes. ‘It’s the first and foremost important duty of all of us, from the most humble ploughman to me. The great mountains with their eagles and wolves that know no humility, and the golden fields of autumn, and our vineyards and most of all the people in it, who ask for what’s theirs and no more, who haven’t forgotten to laugh, who help each other and are good, even through these hard times. The people who have always known that a man should laugh in front of Death, the people I will fight with, shoulder to shoulder, and crush any army and any threat. This is Wallachia – MY GREAT DREAM!’

‘You flare up hastily, Vlad,’ whispered Corvin after a few seconds’ silence. ‘You flare up entirely and I love you for it, but you must learn not to let the fire inside you consume you and your people dear to you, those who stand by you. Don’t ask of them that they become like you. Because it will be too much for the, no matter how hard they try. You need to learn to keep this fire of yours from scorching you from the inside.’

Vlad remained silent, rooted in his terrible determination. His eyes were doing the speaking for him.

‘I will grant you command of one of my regiments,’ Corvin continued. ‘And not any one, but the one guarding the southern border of Transylvania, the Wallachian border.’

The young Prince’s eyes stopped staring into nothingness and slowly turned to Corvin. The beginning of a smile began to emerge from the corners of his lips.

‘I will keep my word, Vlad. Tomorrow morning I will present you to the Southern army, but you must promise me something. Promise me you won’t use my men, whom you will have absolute power over, to invade Wallachia and bring down Dan Basarab!’

Instead of answering, Vlad got up and headed for the door. In the door frame, he turned around and said in his unequivocal voice, now somewhat dissonant because of the coldness of the gothic chamber:

‘Your Highness, a man must keep his first promise. I cannot have two! And my word and my heart belong to Wallachia, now and forever! I did not make this choice, but had I the power, nothing would change!’

After the young man left the room, Corvin leaned back in his chair and, for a few seconds, remained staring at the ceiling, from where a faun, put there by an artful hand, seemed to stare back in surprise. And then he started laughing, and his laugh gradually turned in a roaring one no one had ever heard from him in a long time.

Behind the door leading to the hunting hall, the moustached Dragan, chief of the castle guards

and Corvin's right hand man, was fidgeting about in disbelief. *"I've never heard him laugh like this"*, he thought. *"If it's for smiling, he does smile often, even laughs, he's not a bad man, as sombre as he is, but to have him laughing like he is now... I wonder what's happening? I'll wait another minute or two and if he hasn't called me, then I'll go to him pretending I have business there; he's forgiven me worse."*

Hardly had he finished his planning that the Voivod of Transylvania's joyous voice resounded from the other room:

'Dragan!'

'Here, Your Highness!' the man answered and entered the room barely before the Lord had finished his calling. Corvin, eyes sparkling with joy, was looking at Dragan while trying not to laugh. Eventually, he failed and started laughing again booming, meanwhile still staring at Dragan who, the jester that he was, and not knowing what else to do, started laughing as well. This was too much even for Corvin and soon the castle was filled with the sound of their joined laughter. After a while, while holding on to the table, Dragan managed to ask between convulsions:

'Listen, Your Highness... why are we laughing?'

'Out of joy, man! Remember what I told you?' he continued in a sort of steady-merry manner that really became him, 'that I stopped believing that someone would come and fight by our side, someone who, like us, believed the Turk can be defeated? I had stopped waiting for someone with an honest heart and powerful sword. A man that could gather a whole people by him, a Lord whose reason and heart could rise an entire country and those around it. Sometimes, at night, I asked God for these things in my prayers, but my doubts overcame me... and he's come, Dragan!' he continued ecstatically, 'He's come! He's right as he should be, tortured, just, kind-hearted, even though he doesn't want anyone to know it, he doesn't know how to lie and from a young age he's been a better fighter than any king or soldier I've ever set my eyes on. He's come, Dragan, he came here, we don't have to look for him anymore! Two years should he stay with us, to learn the evil ways of the Christian world I still think he believes in and then nothing will bring him down. Only then can I die.'

The joy in the Voivod's voice died out and the grave tone that took over reminded Dragan that he was in the presence of the Lord of Transylvania, the great athlete of Christianity, as the western Princes and the Pope called him, in recognition of his famous triumphs over the Pagan Turks.

Outside, in the castle's yard, young Vlad hadn't heard neither the booming laughter coming from the great hall, nor the conversation afterwards, that was going to change the course of his destiny. In a gloomy disposition, he walked towards his five companions, haltered his horse and then, without a word, headed for the castle gates. The others followed, suspecting that things between Vlad and Corvin had become permanently severed. They all knew what that meant: a great opportunity for Vlad and the future of Wallachia – forever crushed. Everything would have been much easier having Iancu de Hunedoara by their side. His army and military genius – or even his fame alone – would have meant a clear path towards the throne of Wallachia, as well as an irreplaceable advantage in fighting the Turks that would surely come.

Stroe, 'shy' and curious as they all knew him, was the first to dare.

'Listen, Ler! After you drink, you should keep a close eye on your flask! You surely left it somewhere and Lord Vlad must have drunk from it; that's why he won't stop the chatter now!'

Vlad was about to utter a reply far harsher than he would have intended. But as they approached the great gate, the six men's attention was deviated towards something else. The mobile bridge was lifted, the gate locked, and in front of it ten guards stood smiling, but without showing any intention of stepping aside.

‘My business here is done’, said Vlad in his usual commanding tone. ‘Open the gate and lower the bridge!’

The ten guards’ determination suddenly weakened under Vlad’s words and especially his gaze. The oldest of them, that didn’t look much older than 19-20 himself, looked in confusion towards the balcony where only a few seconds before Lord Corvin had appeared. From up above, he was watching the scene with amusement and content.

‘If Vlad Basarab, the Prince of Wallachia and *general of our Southern army* commands, you must obey!’ Corvin said, enhancing the guards’ confusion, ‘but perhaps our young friend will change his mind and grant us a few more days of his and his friends’ presence, from whom you could all learn a few things. If you haven’t recognised them yet, these are the knights Ler, Mihnea, Stroe, Marcu and young Tudor.’

Neither the whispers flying through the castle yard from one soldier to the other, passing through chamber and even the busy kitchen, nor the curious and contemplating faces at every window and door had managed to impress the knights. Not that they would have failed to impress, had they been noticed. But the men’s minds were presently invaded by the new situation that the Voivod of Transylvania’s first words had implied. Vlad – general of the Southern armies! That meant the Wallachian border, thus the possibility to reach Targoviste much sooner than they’d have dared to hope only a few moments before.



‘We’ve never told this story till now, lest people should say we’re bragging, and also, it’s about some evil creatures and we fear their curses might touch those who hear it. Us, we have some herbs to shun such perils, but I pity you men, you’re too young to fall under such terrible spells. Well... I’d better not speak!’ Stroe play-acted, afraid that the soldiers might stop his chatter.

But curiosity had already taken over his audience; each and every one of them had already thought of an old woman who could undo charms, or some church to go to the very next morning, to give offerings that would keep them safe from troubles and evil spirits.

‘More than ten years ago, Voivod Vlad Dracul trusted us four with a great and mighty perilous mission: we were to go secretly, carrying a few bags of gold, to see one of the chiefs of the janissaries in Edirne and convince him to start a riot in the Empire’s capital. This was the easy part of it! The hard part was that we couldn’t walk on known paths and had to cross the Danube at Hell’s Swamp, a hidden place, where they said the Boar of Boars roamed; it was called the Sarsailuh¹⁷ – a cursed creature, cousin of Scaraotski¹⁸.’

‘Was it a boar, sir?’ one of the young guards asked with awe.

‘No! It was a hedgehog! Well, what do you think it was? It was *a sort* of boar, but wait! One night when we reckoned we had safely made it to the Danube bank, suddenly out of the water came a monstrous boar the likes of which I had never before laid my eyes on. As great as two bears.’

‘Really two?’ the young guard asked in disbelief.

‘And some great ones, too,’ Stroe went on untroubled. ‘As the beast came out of the water, we went down on the ground to see what it had in mind to do. At once, it rises on its two back legs just like a man, takes out a towel and starts drying itself up. That’s when brother Mihnea, out of awe, started to hiccup. That was it for us! The thing sees us and charges towards us. I, who was out in front, quickly jumped before it with my yataghan ready. The damned boar gets up on two hooves again and, just when I was about to cut off its fangs, hits me in the groin with one of its rear legs.’

‘Come on, man! What, now it was standing on one leg?’ the still sceptical young man insisted.

‘No, my brother! It had hit me with its fifth hoof, the one held hidden under its tail, so I couldn’t see it!’

‘Mister Stroe’, the young man kept at it, ‘are you sure you’re not ...’

‘Why don’t you keep your mouth shut’, an older guard – as tall as a pole and just as fat – interrupted the disbeliever, barely holding out the laugh. ‘I’ve heard of such beasts myself, but I’ve never had the courage to fight them, they were too fearsome!’

Actually, it had been clear from the very beginning for everyone – except for the younger ones – that Stroe was about to serve them one of the fancy and fabulous anecdotes that had made him famous just as much as the tales of his bravery had. No one had ever heard him speak of the latter, and those who knew him better were aware that beneath the fearless warrior’s jester mask hid a decent and even shy man. But he loved jokes and pranks; it was often these that helped him cheer up the people around him who, just as he did, knew few reasons of joy beside battles and the harshness of soldier life.

‘I reckon you are the wisest of these men’, Stroe thanked the tall fellow for his support, ‘and maybe you’d like to share with these young ones here the secrets of fighting creatures of the darkness. As the beast had laid me down’, he continued the tale, ‘brothers Marcu and Mihnea jumped at its head. When I came to my senses, the filthy thing was shaking like a flea ridden mutt and the knights were flying around, each holding on to one of the Sarsailuh’s ears. Just when I thought we were done for, the miracle happened!’

Stroe’s deliberate pause seemed to take effect. The men that weren’t laughing their heads off were waiting for the rest of the story with mouths wide open.

‘Brother Ler, who has lived to see more than all of us put together, quickly took out his ...’

‘...sword and cut it open!’, the young man grew impatient.

‘Nah! His hat! He knew from the ageless hermits that Boar of Boars will become as gentle as a lamb and do anything you say if you blindfold it...And then Ler, brave as you all know him to be, suddenly reached out with his great wide hat and covered the beast’s eyes. And then the unthinkable happened! The swine slowly squatted, groped around with its tail and hands lest it should sit on something hard and steadily lay down on its back. It went on shaking for a little while because of the strain, and then loosened up and started whistling slowly. Oh, boy! The thick hairy lips unleashed a tune that only a fairy could conceive. This was its last scheme and it almost got us. Unused to such dangers to the soul as we were, we were stunned for a second and then, enchanted, started dancing. Mihnea and Marcu were spinning and drifting around arm in arm, like I’ve seen people do only at royal balls. As for me... I suddenly started towards Ler and I couldn’t figure why *he* wasn’t asking me to dance!’

‘And was Sir Ler dancing, too?’ another guard inquired.

‘That’s just it, he knew from the beginning there was something wicked amidst, so he stuffed his ears with a sheep wool doublet torn it two, so that it’d fit better. You’ve all heard he’s quick-witted and skillful. Just like he was now! Whack! He slapped me senseless. You see, that was the only way to tear me away from the piggly spell! “*Rise, my brother, and jump the ogre, there’s something wicked here! Hold it tight while I whisper in his ear a spell that will make him obey, and for God’s sake, don’t let my hat drop from its eyes, or we’ll all be doomed!*”, he says to me. What else could I do? I fulfilled his command and mounted the pig. And then Ler lay down by the damned creature and started to whisper gently to its ear, like one does with lasses:

Lady piglet’s eye,

Pretty and fair,
Noble song,
For such a pig lord.
Let it be,
Let it become,
For the beast,
Four falls away,
Tiny piglets play,
Blushed and perky,
To have you content,
Lest you should revenge!
In your own yard dig,
With a proud lady pig,
Be merry and gay,
Till the end of days!
Ho!’

‘And did it work, Sir?’ the young man continued his string of questions.

‘It sure did! About a week ago I got a letter from the Sarsailuh. He said he married a she-pig from a Christian’s yard. They’re a bit upset because of their youngest son, who takes after his father and mooches about for weeks at a time, but besides that, they’re fine! He helps out the old ones in the village, takes counsel with the people about the daily chores and, for a year or so, he’s being going to the Sunday dance. Just like any other man, I tell you!’

The soldiers’ booming laugh, as well as the playful spring sun that kept rollicking with the bluebell and violet clusters in the castle yard, seemed to have been ruling over Hunedoara for ever. And had it not been for the weapons hung on the men’s shoulders and the horses – always ready for long marches and campaigns – one could swear that war had never touched this place.

But Stroe knew that the war was real and waiting. For him and his people alike. And precisely because of that he needed the men around him to understand and – most importantly – love him. That was the only way he could trust them in the heat of battle. And besides, he really loved to chatter...



At first, the soldiers of the Southern army of Transylvania were not exactly thrilled with their new commander. The gossip went that he had got this military rank solely because of his ‘Prince of Wallachia’ title; most of the men were certain Vlad would turn out to be a puppet from behind which Corvin would still hold the reins of government.

But as the days, weeks, and eventually months went by, the soldiers became aware of the fact that the young Wallachian possessed that inborn power over people that could turn someone into a king, even though born in misery. After only a couple of days under his command, the Southern Army had already become better organized; some of the noblemen used to passing orders around were offered higher positions, from where they could not bother anyone with the strategy innovations their Lordships had been working on but had not yet had the chance to apply. At the same time, some of the most skilled soldiers, both robust and wise, were turned into commanding officers overnight; during the now frequent war exercises, everything seemed to flow in a more natural way.

During the last few weeks, Vlad’s manoeuvres had become even tougher and what they would

practice the most were the city-defence techniques. Not before long, the rumour spreading between the soldiers for quite a while reached the cities and became certainty: the Pagans were moving towards the Orthodox holy-city: Constantinople!

In the Hunedoara castle, rumours were not paid much attention to; unless some facts testified that they might be *actual information*, they were not welcomed even in the kitchens, not to mention the great hall filled with noblemen and Lords.

But on that March day in 1453, the rumour of the Turks' advance towards the capital of Byzantium had just been turned into a precise and troubling fact by the scouts of Voievode Corvin: two hundred and fifty thousand Turks – divided into ten armies, using one hundred and forty ships, two thousand canons, coming from two directions – were closing in on Constantinople.

Around the massive oak table – carved in Venice itself by craftsmen famous all the way to the Turkish Empire – the great noblemen of Transylvania holding positions in the royal army were having a war council, along with Voivod Corvin. It had been known for a long time that even in Buda they were waiting for the decisions made by the Hunedoara councils, and that the defence or campaigns of the Hungarian Kingdom were organized according to these decisions.

As the custom went, Voivod Corvin was the one to speak first.

‘My lords, we now know for sure that the greatest army the Turks have ever raised will soon attack Constantinople. The Turks have had their eyes set on the Holy City for many, many years and not because it would bring them more riches and gold than other cities. No! The young Sultan, Mehmet, has understood that he will strike at the hearts of all Christians by bringing down Constantinople. It’s the Orthodox spiritual capital, and the Catholics see the city of the Golden Horn as the capital and symbol of what used to be the great Roman Empire. Usually, in such cases, we would present your lords with the battle plan as well... today we’ll proceed differently. I am waiting for your opinions, my lords, and then, after you hear what I have to say, we’ll decide which way is best.’

A moment of silence fell over the noblemen of Transylvania. And then everyone’s eyes turned to Vlad, the Prince of Wallachia.

‘Your Highness, great noblemen, I believe today’s discussion has dragged on for too long already,’ he started in his resonant and seemingly admonishing voice. ‘When the Turks attack a Christian village or country, it’s our duty to help the ones under attack. Yet, above this duty stands the one of each protecting his own country’s land and people. We must think it through and make sure that by jumping to the help of our Greek brothers we’re not leaving **our own people** defenceless. But now, the very symbol of Christianity is being threatened and we cannot let the people of Europe be consumed by the fear that the falling of the capital of Byzantium will unleash. Today, Constantinople is, my lords, our battle flag, our cross and the symbol of Christians everywhere. We cannot stand and watch it fall into the hands of Pagans! The Southern Army is ready to go help Emperor Constantine tomorrow,’ Vlad concluded, convinced everyone’s hearts were in the same place.

But things were otherwise.

‘Don’t rush, Prince!’ Corvin uttered and his eyes now looked empty and devoid of the fire they all knew. ‘Let’s see what the others have to say.’

Vlad did not insist, but a possibility he refused to consider was gradually finding its way into his mind.

‘What Prince Vlad says is true, and –’ Count Hevesy began.

‘What Prince Vlad says would be true in completely different times!’ Janos Kerrekés, the castellan of Oradea interrupted a bit too abruptly. ‘But today we must think twice. Can we gather two

hundred and fifty thousand men? Do we have the money and means to arm them and send them to Constantinople?’

‘And if we don’t go, will we have the necessary men and money when our turn comes?’ Carp, the leader of the Romanians in Barsa County cut in just as abruptly.

This seemed to be the signal they had all been waiting for to begin speaking. Opinions in favor of a campaign against the Turks were opposed by those demanding a policy of prudence and all of these were shouted at the same time; such blatancy had never before been heard inside the great hall of the Hunedoara castle.

Staring down at the encrusted wood of the table, Vlad raised his voice over the others’. But his voice sounded bizarre, as if coming from deep inside him. In a low tone and without shouting, he still made himself heard though the tumult created by the Transylvanian noblemen:

‘Your Highness,’ he said without looking at Corvin, ‘I have none else to answer to but your Lordship. After the noblemen finish talking, let me know. I, my knights and the Southern Army will be ready to leave whenever you wish.’

Janos Kerrekcs, unabashed as they all knew him to be, rose up and spoke much more harshly than he should have:

‘Is it that the young and inexperienced Prince of Wallachia thinks he suddenly knows better than us? You will not go anywhere until – ’

His words suddenly froze, as well as the superior smiles of the noblemen that appeared to agree with him. Vlad had already stood up and come closer, and was drilling into the eyes of the proud Count with his own large and seemingly surprised ones. He appeared to study intensely the white of the other one’s eyes, just like one of those mad scientists interested in the lives of bugs and butterflies. He was not saying nor doing anything; but out of him flowed a gigantic force and a clear, overwhelming intention to crush the skull of the cowardly Count. After a while that felt maddeningly long to Kerrekcs, Vlad said in the same voice that was low and threatening through its calm:

‘You need to learn how to speak to great rulers, Count! Or else, mistakes like the one you just made may shorten your already useless life. Now, sit down and continue your chatter!’

Drained of energy and pale as in the presence of Death, the Count found it impossible to protest and sat down quietly. No one uttered a word before Vlad Basarab left the room. The sound of the door slamming behind the Prince was the signal that triggered great Magnate Boksa’s foolish laugh.

‘The Wallachian set you straight, didn’t he, Kerrekcs?’ he roared pointlessly. ‘I believe that if he ever gets to become Voivod, he’ll have you working at the stables!’

‘You’re stupid, Boksa!’ Corvin intervened more acidly than he had ever done. ‘I’ve sat and listened and seen what we should do. I’ve called you all here lest more envy and silly talk should arise. Do you know what I should do? Out of the thirty six of you here, maybe eight deserve the honour! What does it matter that you have great fortunes and you attend the Buda assembly? How many of you have led the troops into battle? Seven or eight, like I said; the rest of you may win the war with the Turks only if the battle were held around the lavish feast tables where you negotiate the price of textiles, salt and wine. Now you’re going to tell me your position, one at a time. What say you, Dragan?’

Aware that the Lord had asked him to speak first precisely to punish the noblemen so fond of their ranks and privileges, the rattler captain of the guards put on airs for a little while before answering.

‘I believe, my lords, and here I make use of my vast experience with warfare, that us...all... whatever we were and whatever we did, must fight the Turks. So help us God!’ he concluded by

chanting nasally like the hypocritical priests do.

But deep inside his heart, Dragan was in no mood for joking. He knew Corvin's decision, but he preferred to wallop the roach-bellied noblemen, who did not appreciate this first vote in favour of war.

The other votes followed, which, just as Corvin had predicted, were mostly in favour of holy prudence.

'My lords, I am not the one who ranked this world and split it into brave men and cowards. Just nine of you were ready to risk your lives for the sake of Christians in danger. Something else weighs heavy in my decision. I had the same council a year ago, with emperor Constantine and his men. Back then, when another attack was on the way, there were voices on their side mentioning a treaty with the Turk...the same council will take place three days from now in Buda and a week from now in Venice and Rome. The same strife haunts the entire Christian world and is slowly eating at all of us. An army commanded by ten kings will never win against one led by a single general. Go and rest, lords; a heavy peace awaits!'

That night, Corvin did not go talk to Vlad, like he had planned. He was disgusted by the noblemen's cowardice and maybe a bit embarrassed to face Vlad...He lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling, until the break of dawn.

When the first sunrays tried to tear the deep dark shroud of the night nested between the castle walls, the Voivod of Transylvania came out of his room, drawn faced, and swiftly ordered the servant outside the door:

'Come down to the yard and bring six bags of gold with you!

The soldier refrained from showing his confusion towards such a strange demand and fulfilled it. He went to the treasurer, woke him up, and after politely returning the curses, agreed that it was mighty early for any order and went to the yard. To his surprise, Corvin was not alone: Vlad and the knights were just finishing getting the saddles and reins ready, which at such an early hour could only mean preparation for a long journey.

'Here, you have some money to last you on the road and help you manage in Constantinople. It will come in handy especially if the city falls and you'll have to buy your way out!' Corvin said calmly, as if he was talking to a couple of lads getting ready for the ball.

'Thank you, Your Highness, for the care you bestow on us,' Vlad said in a more disapproving tone than he had intended. 'But we have other "tools" to "buy" our freedom with, out of any hellhole, full of Pagans or not!'

'It's true, Vlad, that your swords and bows are among the best I have ever seen, but it's just as true that a man's strength stands less in his bravery and more in his skill in spotting the cowardly enemies hitting from behind! Go and learn how the Turk fights. But you are ordered to come back alive and tell me everything and then stand beside me against the Pagans!'

'I will return, don't you worry, Your Highness! I will return and make you keep your word! Fare well!'

The castle's great bridge was lowered along with the sound of heavy, rattling chains and woodwork. Neither this nor the hooves of the six horses resonating on the courtyard flagstones and then on the wooden bridge managed to disturb the deep and peaceful sleep of the noblemen that had stayed at the castle overnight.

The light of dawn had not yet won the battle against the shadows of the night, also nested between the ramparts of the Hunedoara castle...



The fortress built by Lord Dracula is absolutely impressive! Built on a mountain top, it gives you the vivid feeling that its one thousand steps can take you higher and higher, far away from our world, but always closer to that of the terrible Voivod!

The villagers all tell me the same story of Dracula and their village. After heavy persistence, I finally understand that if I really want to know everything, I have to walk further up through the forest, until I find a hut in the middle of a clearing. And if the strange occupant will receive me, I must measure my words carefully and be very, very polite. And most importantly, I must never ever stay later than sunset! This seems more like a practical joke designed for tourists, but I simply have to try.

I'll be leaving for there in the morning.

Arefu, near the city of Poenari, March 17th, 2008

„Day and night, sleeping or upright, the sultan was pondering how to proceed into battle and what other stratagem he could use in order to conquer Constantinople. With ink and paper, he would draw himself the fortifications and show to those more skilled how and where to place the cannons in positions and build defences and underground tunnels, the place where they could penetrate through the defence moat, and on which wall they could support their ladders.”

19
Ducas, Turkish and Byzantium History

It had been two months ever since the sultan's armies had begun unceasingly attacking the ancient walls of Constantinople – the last bastion of the dying Eastern Roman Empire. Messages to European royal courts had all returned with nothing but promises, but none with actual help from the mighty Princes of the West, and neither the peoples' heavy praying did anyone any good. Since they were worldwide recognised as close observers of human nature, the Greeks had long gotten used to the idea that no one from France or Germany would even think to come fight beside them. They also knew that, under the deliberately pious and worried faces of Polish or Hungarian Kings, there would actually dwell more than once a smile of secret joy. It was common knowledge that in 1054 the thoughts of greatness of two high prelates had thrown Europe into disunion. Since then, when in need, the Catholic and Orthodox brethren would only help each other with mere promises. When the stakes in war were easy to conquer, this was done with the smallest of risks for their fortune and their lives.

All of Byzantium was well aware that it would be its blood to wash away the many sins of the Christian world. The fear of a horrible death was surpassed only by that of an invasion by the Antichrist and his ever so close empire. What would become of the lands and people fallen before the heathen flood? How can one defeat the ravagers of the entire Asia Minor and most of the Balkanic Peninsula? What mercy can one expect from a sultan sent by Satan himself to burn down the churches of the Earth and destroy the whole of Christianity?

The Turks were unimaginably cruel and evil. Behind the janissaries held in cages before the attack, there would be the azaps²⁰ ready to kill anyone that would have dared to head back without an order. Behind the latter, there would be the spahijas²¹ on horseback, their eyes red with anger, their large yataghans lovers of death.

Every treaty with the Turks had proved to be mere scraps of paper, worthless for the sultans that took great pride in their cunningness and deceit. Christian villages and cities on their path bore great deep wounds, through which the blood of babies, beautiful women and fighting or peaceful men was slowly running to waste far away westward, to the heart of Europe.



In his green cloth tent, young sultan Mehmet, son of Murad, was receiving his generals without the usual exaggeration of etiquette. Neither the numerous pillows hemmed with golden thread and precious gems seemed very popular with the sultan. Many among the viziers²² were turning up their noses at this, firmly believing that Mehmet would never become a real sultan and that his bones would probably rot before the Constantinople walls. Others however, more experienced in battle, had had the time to notice that instead of soft carpets, now lay yataghans, short crooked daggers, and arrow quivers, and replacing the tapestries – meant to enchant the eye of the Master of the World – there hung maps and detailed plans, provided by his generously paid spies.

Zaganos Paşa, a tall and thin middle-aged man, looked more worried than usual and the tension written on his face appeared like an unspoken accusation for everyone present.

‘What’s the matter, Zaganos Paşa?’ Mehmet asked, gazing fondly at his old soldier. ‘It seems you would very much like to eat us alive. Have you perhaps lost faith in our victory? You, of all people? Or is it the fear of death that has got you too?’

‘Your Grace, the fear of death has got me many years ago, when I was fighting in Persia for your father – bless his memory. But it is not this bothering me now. One learns to live with such things. I do believe however that our plans of attack should be completely changed!’

Inside the sultan’s tent, the silence was heavier than ever. No one had ever dared to declare out loud that Mehmet’s plans were imperfect. After first approving with ironic smiles the words of Zaganos Paşa about his fear of death, the other spahija, all known enemies of the latter, were keeping silent now, holding their breaths for the sultan’s explosion that would mean Paşa’s end.

‘Return to your tents! Now! Zaganos Paşa, you stay here. You and I have got to talk!’

There was no trace of anger or surprise in the sultan’s voice. For everyone else however, it was crystal clear that Zaganos Paşa would not come out of the green tent alive.

‘You know, Zaganos, had you told this to my father in front of the other soldiers, you’d be on the bottom of a lake right now, and your family would rot in jail, without ever knowing the reason why. You have an unrestrained nature and I have been wondering more than once if I should kill you. But you always knew how to win a battle and the armies ruled by you have never returned without rich prey. This has kept you alive so far. With time, I have learned to cherish you and believe in you. You are a great warrior, Zaganos, but you know nothing of the world, of the royal court and of the people. You only know how to kill them. Now, tell me what you think we should do!’

‘Our ships can reach the bay without having to pass through the infidels’ wall of fire, oh Radiant One. You should have men sent in the forests out back to build great launching sleighs for ships and we shall pull them on dry land. The Christians will find out about them only too late and won’t reach them anyway. Give me 30,000 of your best soldiers and in three days, your Highness will have Constantinople at your feet.’

‘You, my friend, are insane, but it is with your insanity and that of the soldiers following us that I shall conquer this city! As a matter of fact, we are all mad men...What was Haidar Pasha doing here? Does he want more prey? Some say he is richer than me...what of Ibazer? Why is he risking his life in battle for me now? He wants to become my first councillor, although he’s well aware that his life will be more at risk than ever. And the janissaries...they are the most insane of all. For a bag of gold or for a beautiful woman they would kill or throw each other into the flames without blinking. And we like all these things, Zaganos. When have you taken a while to smell the flowers or play with your children of late?’

The sultan was silent for a while, abandoning himself to one of those short moments when an almost monarchic kindness would reflect itself on his countenance and in his eyes. Then, he went on.

‘You know, I once met a man madder than all of us together. He was a young Wallachian prince, imprisoned at the court of great Murad, my father. He would not come out for military exercise for anything in the world; and when jailors would drag him out by force, he would stand still like a statue on the instruction field. He heard nothing, he saw nothing. He would not mind the whipping either. One day, run out of his wits, he furiously attacked the prison guards, and since they had had specific orders not to kill the young prince, two of the guards ran away. Cornered, the third guard used all his strength to knock the Wallachian out with a cane and he too managed to get away. It was only that the rogue did not dodge, but instead he tried to grab the cane and strike in his own turn. In the fight, the

fool broke his arm! I was standing beside my father when the Wallachian was presented before him and – you’ll not believe it, Zaganos Pasha – he was laughing!

‘The blood and the sweat of pain was streaming down his ugly, sharp face and his eyes were boring into us like daggers. His mouth alone was laughing and there was a stench of death and a long lasting curse around him. He heavily lifted his broken limb to the sultan’s face and told him in a mocking fashion: *“Oh, Radiant Disgusting One, I cannot come out for instruction today. As you can see, I am a little struck. May Death strike you twice!”*

‘Murad was laughing and saying he was not going to kill him, because he wanted more fun and that he would tame him in the end. Maybe one day I will meet Vlad again – that was the rogue’s name – and then he will die by my hand. If he is not long dead already.

‘Until then, I will do as you asked, Zaganos Pasha, so that I could have the city in three days! Then, we shall go to Rome.’

Zaganos Pasha left the tent and, to the viziers’ great surprise, his head was standing where it had always stood – on his shoulders. *“I have one hundred thousand good soldiers,”* he mused, *“I have free hand from the sultan for my actions and I also have many enemies among the viziers, close. If I am to fail, I don’t think I will ever be rid of their intrigues and Mehmet’s rage.”* He was hurriedly heading to his tent and once there, he immediately asked for his spies.

‘Ibrahim, what news?’

‘Good ones, oh, Radiant One,’ answered the leader of Zaganos Pasha’s spies. ‘My men have sent only good news full of hope from within the city walls. There is enmity between the Christians. There are only a few Genovese ready to fight for the Greeks and that is because they have colonies here providing them with gold. They won’t receive any other help from elsewhere. There are a few adventurers from Serbia and the two Wallachias that have arrived a few days ago, but they are merely a handful of men. We have nothing to fear.’

‘You say too much, Ibrahim, and not all is well-measured. You must fear your own shadow in battle. This is the only way to win a war.’

With a quick gesture, he sent Ibrahim away and he began deliberating things. His plan was daring, indeed, but it was the only one capable of bringing a quick victory that would spare the Padishah’s²³ armies from long months of siege. Outside, the waning crescent moon was shining and to Zaganos Pasha, the entire night sky was a great Ottoman flag, fluttering for his glory alone.



Hundreds of Christians were listening to the evening service inside and outside Saint Sophia Cathedral in Constantinople. The air was filled with the ominous feeling that this would be the last service for many of those present. Few men were still there: only the elderly and young children. The others were busy mending the broken walls destroyed by the Turkish bombardments of the day.

Leaning against the wall of a formerly prosperous shop, Vlad Basarab Prince of Wallachia was patiently listening to the reprimanding words of his childhood teacher, Melis the Greek. Vlad’s father, Voivod of Wallachia had brought the Greek from Constantinople to school his three sons. After Vlad and Radu’s fall into captivity, Melis could no longer bear the loneliness of the castle in Targoviste and had returned to Constantinople. Now, they were seeing each other again, but the present circumstances were far from allowing them the natural joy of the moment.

‘What are you doing here, your Highness? What are you looking for? You’ve always had your

way! You think you can change anything? By this time tomorrow, this city will be a great tomb from one end to another!’

‘We shall see in a few days’ time, or even sooner, if I am to change anything or not. If I merely stand frightened and watch from a distance how the Holy City is destroyed by the Turks, then you can be sure, scholar, that something will indeed change! My honour as a Wallachian and a Christian will turn to dust! From here to Hungaria, kings, governors and lords alike are already making plans how to come to terms with the Turks, how to better satisfy them. Do not interrupt me, Melis! I know the Turks are many, I can see that, too! But you tell me, wise man, how many eagles does one need to destroy one thousand rats? The Christians no longer have any eagles left, Melis! Puppets rule their countries with the sole purpose of getting rich, and are under the firm belief that they can be rich and powerful in feeble and poor countries. They fight each other over a piece of land and completely forget about the people of that land! They will all either perish of fear or by the Turk’s sword! You say I cannot do anything here? Maybe not...but they won’t pass over me so long as all the Wallachians stand by my side! I’ve come here to see, Melis, to see and to understand why the Turk always wins; and when he wants to come for us, only then will everything I know and everything I have fall upon his head and crush him! This is how things shall be and no different!’

‘You have indeed changed, Vlad, there is no kindness left in you and your eyes are cold. At Targoviste, you used to be the light and joy of the palace. The courtiers were as happy as in a celebration day whenever you did some mischief and people in the city would say they were lucky an entire week after seeing you. What did they do to you at Egrigoz to turn you so evil?’

‘They did nothing to me, scholar. Actually, they helped me!’ Vlad laughed, then he went on. ‘They helped me see the world just as it is in reality: a paradise invaded by murderers. Do not think it was bad for me there! In the dungeons, I learned how to suffer and lie, bear and be strong and it was there that I found that no chain and no iron is stronger than our own bones. We only have to wish it! For now, let us go to sleep. We shall need all our strength for tomorrow!’

‘Your Highness, I saw you growing up and I loved you like my own son. When They caught you, I fasted for a whole week and I thought I’d go crazy. Who knows if we get to see tomorrow? Let me stay with you tonight!’

‘You’re a good man, Melis, but if you say you care for me, remain here tonight and leave first thing at dawn tomorrow. I shall be needing you again in Targoviste.’

Ever-present by the Prince’s side, the knights quickly arranged the night’s shifts. They had decided to remain vigilant even inside the city walls. There had been enough Turkish spies sneaked in before the beginning of the siege already and no one knew where and when they would strike again.

The odds had chosen Vlad and Ler in the first shift, Marcu and Mihnea at midnight and Stroe and Tudor in the morning, when dangers were always greater, called for by the sleep’s temptation.

It was well after midnight and a sleepless Melis came to join Stroe and his younger knight companion Tudor, who shy as a lass, did not dare ask for anything, although he so wished to know more of the Prince’s childhood. However, Stroe had already sensed the knight’s curiosity, and he could not have kept silent anyway.

‘Hey, sir?’ he whispered. ‘What was Vlad like when he was a child? We were mostly on the road with the Lord and didn’t see much of him.’

The Greek scholar was more than glad to come out of the melancholy that was overwhelming him and since the topic was one he greatly enjoyed, he did not wait to be asked twice.

‘Oh, sir knight, he was the best among the children and there was nothing he would not understand at once! And you know what I liked most about him? Once, for Christmas Eve, when he

had already grown a little and we had carol singers visiting the palace, he sneaked out around the back, took his little coat and went off after the singers. Two hours later when I found him, he was all flushed and his eyes beamed with joy. I scolded him a little, just so as to fulfil my duty and so that he never run away like that again. Do you know what he answered me? That I knew nothing of carols and without them, the world would surely fall to pieces. *“What do you know Greek, of singing out of love for mankind and the time to come? I shall tell my father to get all the noble men to sing carols for the people so they are lucky all next year.”* Sometimes, somebody much older and wiser seemed to be speaking from inside his small body ... then he searched in the bag an older carol singer had given him and handed me an apple and a bagel.’

‘It was nice of him not to let you starve after so much running around the entire Bourg!’ Stroe said jesting. The teacher went on, seeming not to have heard him.

‘At another time, on my birthday, he came to me saying he was sorry for upsetting me and for not reading everything I gave him. He was about nine years by then and he also offered me this.’

From his chest, Melis took out a piece of buckskin, skilfully embroidered with a few lines which he handed Stroe to read. The latter read it through in the feeble light and embarrassedly handed it on to Tudor in a quick and clumsy manner.

‘You read it, I don’t speak Greek,’ he lied turning away his head. The young man had long since got to know the knight’s kind heart; he knew that the tears Stroe was trying to hide were in fact bringing him honour and that was why he always searched the witty knight’s company.

On the tawed buckskin, a child’s hand had most carefully written a few lines in perfect Greek, which testified the elegance of time:

“My dear Melis,

I pray to God to give you good health and happiness! I also pray the whole world should finally understand – like you already did – that there is enough place under the sun for everyone; that the only fight which leads people forward is the fight for the knowledge of worlds seen and unseen; that we can find Heaven here, in our own world, and everyone can fit in. I thank you for receiving me into your world of flowers and I wish for you to have a voice and a heart for many days to come, to open great men’s eyes shut with meanness!

May you live a long and happy life!

Vlad”

‘Say, teacher, what do you think these Turks want after all?’ Stroe asked his voice shaky with spite. ‘What more do they want? I’ve always asked myself, why is man such a fool?’

‘It’s not difficult to understand that war leads nowhere, and a child like Vlad understood this well...it’s just that you need a few days to think about the way of things; a few days, no more. And you also need kind people to live with and whom to see happy. This is what the Turks lack: gentle people like you have who would smile when they meet, even if they don’t know each other; noble men who are kind to the peasants and who would tell them anecdotes and joke about the lord of the country. No, with them, the highest honour does not rest with those working the land – they don’t even have such people – but those who kill the largest number of men during wars in other countries. If you were to look at how much land they possess now, and how well they could live out of honest work and trading, you wouldn’t find too many arguments in favour of the sultan and his councillors’ well-renowned wisdom.’

‘Well, who in the world said they’re wise?’ Stroe said laughing. ‘If you ask me...’

‘*They* say so, Stroe,’ the Greek interrupted. ‘They themselves say so and force others to say the same through the power of their weapons. They have it in their blood the need to subdue, kill, and

wander from a place to another like beasts of the forests. When it comes to these pagans, the humble person cannot speak with those greater than him without bringing offerings and making endless salaams over and over again. People become brutalized this way and all they have left is their cruelty which they unleash over other nations in waves.'

'You know something? I scare myself the worst when I think of what we have right now. That is, what is just beginning to unfold...and it *is* beginning, Greek, it is beginning, like they have it here. After Mircea the Great, the boyars seemed to go mad. They would kill among themselves, they would envy each other, and they would absolutely loathe the peasants. And they grow ever larger in numbers and become meaner everyday. I'm not afraid of fighting the Turks, the Tatars or whoever you want! But I am afraid, scholar, that our people are beginning to embrace the pagan's way, that are souls are going rotten and we will all go to hell` in the end! Damn the Turks! I'll kill 'em all tomorrow!'

He was quiet for a while, and neither Melis nor Tudor wished to speak further. Stroe's anger had something prophetic and apocalyptic in it. Until then, they had feared the Turks, the fighting and the diseases. Stroe's words however had brought to their eyes something much more terrifying – a dark future – containing Romanians such as they had never known; it was a future that should never come!

Stroe rose to his feet and began pacing around. They had less than three hours of their night watch and they had to take full advantage of what little leisure they still had for resting. His friends were sleeping soundly, in a way only soldiers run through the fire of many battles can in such conditions.

Suddenly, Prince Vlad sprang upright followed in an instant by his horse. The knights' hands fastened over their swords even before their eyes opened. Before Melis realised what was going on, all the knights took fighting positions encircling the prince. The silence was complete all around; up on the battlements, the sentinels gave no sign of danger. Vlad Basarab answered to Melis' wondering gaze:

'Please, leave, teacher, I'll be seeing you in Targoviste. In less than an hour, the Sultan will be heading this way with his entire army. Today is the day for the decisive battle.'

'How do you know that, Vlad? Go back to sleep. You've had a bad dream and jumped up all of a sudden. It's nothing, you'd better sleep!'

'No, teacher, Vlad was not having a dream,' Ler answered in whisper. 'I feel something too. It's like a mist gliding unseen over our hearts. Satan will be very happy today. Few people will come out of the city alive.'

'Go now and take care of yourself! You, the others, never leave my side, is that clear?' Vlad commanded.

'D'you hear that?' Stroe whispered to Ler. 'He says never to leave his side! I didn't see any trace of fear on his face when he said it...d'you know what, I reckon *he's* protecting *us*!'

The two friends burst into laughter to Marcu's great surprise.

'What is it? What's gotten into you? Or are you positively gone daft!'

Since he received no answer, Marcu waved an impatient hand and went to stand beside Vlad.

The six knights turned around and began making their way quietly to the city walls. Hardly had they set on tramping along, when the guards on Constantinople's battlements sounded the alarm. Suddenly, there were soldiers marching in rows, followed by simple men, many women and even young children running towards the defensive walls. After so many days of siege, no one was shouting anymore, no one was cursing. The silence was unnatural and did not seem to fit with the streets' usual racket. Since it was his first time in a city under siege, Tudor was hiding well his anger and surprise.

For a moment, he was afraid he had gone deaf, only to realise the thunderous rhythm half belonged to his heart, not used to such terrible things. The other half of the rhythmic noise came from the sandals and boots hitting recurrently the flagstones of the streets leading down to the defence towers.

Like the other knights, Ler was moving soundlessly towards the centre of the city. For the tenth time that night, they checked their crossbows, their knives and swords. No one had time to talk. Far away, at two arrow-lengths distance, Turkish cymbals and flutes signalled the marching towards the fortifications.

The Ottoman bashibazouk²⁴, most of them unhappy Christians, lured by the war prey promised by the sultan, suddenly attacked sweeping in. Apart from them, all were aware that their purpose was no other than to tire out the defenders and to force them to waste their ammunition. Under the weak defence sent through the air by the arquebusiers²⁵, crossbow archers and the artillerymen, the mercenaries were attempting to climb the walls on wooden ladders and penetrate the city. None of them had reached there yet, although their flesh had eaten a lot of Christian ammunition. The sultan's plan was working.

The second wave of attackers began to back away, terrified of their companions' fate. From behind however, the Ottoman militia drove them forward with fierce strikes of iron rods and billies. Once again, the heavy boulders and the hot oil cauldrons the Greeks were throwing over the walls had the place cleaned up in an instant. For two full hours, cries of the burned or the crushed combined with those of rage and encouragement. With the break of dawn, that which still remained standing of the sultan's militia had ended its mission. The few defenders left were already exhausted and the hardest part was yet to come.

At about two hundred feet behind the walls, the knights were standing still, their weapons at a ready. Until then, there had been no sign from them that they would want to support the defenders in any way. Not even the curses of the Greek and Italian defenders managed to make the six knights move from their places. Tudor had begun wondering yet again whether something strange and out of the ordinary was happening to his companions.

'You see, Tudor, till now, the Turks have attacked with the least of their resources, with men who have no other purpose but to die and tire us,' Stroe said, correctly interpreting the green young man's wonder.

'Tis bad enough that their arrows sting as hard as those of the Turkish knights or janissaries' do,' Marcu added.

'Never judge with your heart alone, nephew!' Stroe went on. 'Every man has his purpose in a battle. Our purpose today isn't to defend a city already conquered, even if we were to send two or three dozens of pagans to the underworld. Maybe God will strike us too, and the day will come when we shall have to prepare our city of Targoviste for a terrible day such as this. For that hour to come however, we must keep ourselves alive and always a step ahead of the pagans. We must learn how they proceed and how we should stop them.'

Far off in the fields, sheltered by the rows of janissaries and spahija watching in perfect silence and discipline the battle beneath the walls, Mehmet and his councillors were quietly observing the entire deployment of forces. The sultan's face was more lined than usual and there was a new dimple between his eyebrows unfamiliar to his close ones only a day before.

'Have the ships of Zaganos Pasha arrived yet?' he asked of his councillors who were silently waiting for a sign from their lord and master.

'They have, oh Radiant One. Upon seeing them, we have heard many cries of terror from the

Giaours' city. Not even the Greeks, in all their cunningness, have expected such a thing.'

'Very well...let all infantry units set forth. We shall attack simultaneously all sectors. The Greeks must not be permitted to defend themselves in groups! I shall ride with 50,000 men to the Roman Gate. Karadja Bey²⁶, you shall attack between Blacherne and the Chiarisiana Gate!

Zaganos, you shall cross the bridge of ships inside the Golden Horn and you have till sundown to break down those walls for me!'

One by one, commands were flowing like ominous Death-foretelling waves. Slowly, the sultan's plan began to take shape for his servants also. As he had during the last council meeting, Halil Ciandarlı firmly believed that no plan – even less a plan which was risking everything in one decisive day – could not for anything in the world break down this damned Giaour city. And even if it did conquer it, *then* what? Infidels from all corners of Europe would fall upon them to free what the Orthodox called the Holy City. But he now knew there was no need for him to speak. The sultan's rage would have him sent in front of the executioner in the glimpse of an eye.

Once the sultan's commands were spoken, Islam warriors from the Ottoman camp began breaking off in lines one after the other. Janissaries, spahija and akinci soldiers, all auxiliary troops, the armies of Anatolia and Rumelia all began to swoop upon the ever feeble walls of Constantinople.

All the city gates were assaulted. One could hear angry and deathly roars, all sorts of curses in Turkish, Greek, Latin, or Romanian. Every now and then, the curses were muffled by some cannon thunder that usually accompanied the fall of another piece of the defence wall. After that, the roaring would intensify, angrier and more terrifying still.

'Gentlemen, let us go, too!' Vlad said calmly and seemingly bored. 'I wouldn't want later that our most honourable swords and arrows should hold grudge against us for not feeding them Turkish flesh, nor quenched their thirst with pagan blood!'

For the space of an hour or two, the Wallachians joined the defenders on the walls. Their precise arrows were greatly thinning the pagans' horde at Blacherne Gate, but the Turkish deluge kept overflowing with the same diabolical force again and again and again...The fallen janissaries were being stepped on by others like them and when these fell too, yet other Allah soldiers would follow, still trudging over Christians and Muslim brothers' corpses alike. All were in fact pushed forward from behind by an endless and unstoppable river of soldiers.

Keeping close to one another, the Wallachian knights were fighting in unison, as though a single twelve-armed body with one soul. On the outside, Stroe and Ler were sparing their arrows, unleashing them only when some pagan would rise menacingly over their group; from the middle, Vlad, Tudor, Marcu and Mihnea, covered in blood, were striking every pagan they could reach with their arrows and their swords, effortlessly and calmly, as though at a military practice.

Suddenly, a rumour flew like a shiver among the Christians and many believed everything was lost. At the Roman Gate, the brave Genovese Giustiniani with whom the Emperor had entrusted the defence of the city had fallen under a Turkish arrow.

'We're leaving!' Vlad commanded. 'In a little while, the Turks will be here over the walls, but before we go, we could do some more damage.'

The six men headed quickly towards the harbour gate of Constantinople.

'Mihnea and I will remain here, for we have something to get done before going home. You get on the first ship with a clear chance of escaping the Turkish barrage.'

'Oh, Blessed Lord, you can tell it to the Devil to go and leave you here alone!' Stroe intervened laughing, although it was hardly the time for such an outspoken sign of merriment.

Vlad's eyes shot fire at him for a moment, but then they seemed to agree with him.

Just as young Dracula had foretold, hardly an hour had gone by when the pagan flood flushed over the city streets. Christian fighters, women and children alike, all were falling slain under yataghan strikes or raised in the janissaries or spahija's spears. A wild war prey competition began between them. Each palace, church or manor was flooded by the raving pagans, who did not even bother to torture those hidden inside. They would simply execute them without hesitating, and would hurriedly begin stuffing everything that seemed valuable in their large, already prepared bags.

In the middle of all this tumult, a torn-and-bloody-clad spahija together with five other soldiers were staring fixedly at the river of blood oozing down the side of the alley. Now and then, he would voice a command in perfect Anatolian. Thus dressed and with his perfect Turkish dialect learned in the years of his imprisonment at Egrigoz and Edirne, Prince Vlad could never have raise the suspicion of any Ottoman scout, hired especially to discover Christian spies.

With difficulty, the six made their way to the high nobleman Iftimios' palace. Now, it was Pasha Ibazer's flag that fluttered in front of it. The tension between Ibazer and the Sultan was known in the whole empire, but so were the intelligence and efficiency of the Pasha's plans, plans that brought many important victories to Mehmet.

Vlad rushed inside and whispered to Ibazer:

'Forgive me, oh, bright one, I had had my eye on this house, but your lordship deserves it more than I do. Look in the cellars as well, that's where the infidels hide their treasures.'

'Alright, alright! Leave! Go somewhere else!' Ibazer snapped.

Vlad retreated, doing reverence all the while, and outside said to Marcu:

'Ibazer has taken his share. He's greedy and foolish. We shall work with him again.'

The apparently senseless words were uttered only loud enough as to be heard by the other Janissaries and Spahija in the street. Before they could make sense of things, the six had already disappeared into thin air.

It was clear they were infidels and that they had been plotting with Ibazer. Certainly, the Sultan would pay a good price to the one to bring the news of betrayal.

Before dark, Ibazer's head stood on a spear in front of the Saint Sofia cathedral. The young Sultan tolerated no betrayal, not even in times of joy and victory, and the Christians had just rid themselves of one of the most intelligent and temperate Turkish generals.



My journey is starting to be worth the effort!|

About halfway towards the mountain peak, far from any village, there's a hut where a hermit lives. He's a strange and very, very old man. He asks me to speak to him in Latin, as he doesn't speak English and my Romanian is close to nothing!

Strange demand coming from a hermit! He seems cultivated and, especially, he seems to know a lot about Dracula. Actually, he seems to know everything!

Arefu, March 18, 2008

Early in the morning, at cockcrow, the villagers around Hunedoara started heading merrily and impatiently towards the castle. His Highness Iancu had announced a great tournament, with the attendance of both the great Transylvanian noblemen and knights from faraway lands. Rumour had it the five Wallachian knights would also be present, along with their Prince – famous for their acts of bravery that had already started to turn into legends. Everyone knew the six men had just returned from Constantinople and they were all anxious to hear news of the terrible battle that had resulted in the falling of the Holy City into the hands of Pagans.

Ler was said to be able to skilfully throw knives at two different places at the same time, without there being any difference between the two's velocity or precision. He and Stroe had used for the first time what was now called the "Wallachian Cross" when, back to back, they would throw their knives – which never left their side – with diabolical precision in four different directions. Many enemies, who for a moment actually believed they had the knights surrounded, had fallen dead before they knew what hit them.

Many legends talked about Mihnea's outstanding sword fighting skills or Marcu's proficiency when in came to riding; it was said that the four knights had never been defeated in a tournament or actual battle. Young Tudor and the prince of Wallachia were the mysterious ones. Some said these two were not at all brilliant in combat and that it was only the protection of the knights that had kept them alive. But the day of the tournament had a couple of big surprises in store for some of these sceptics.

The contests started with the fight between riders carrying lances. Handsome and proud, the young noblemen launched towards each other for the glory of their family and the admiration of the young ladies, seated by Iancu Corvin's side in the wooden stands.

Lined up in one row, the large flags of the noble families made up a beautiful barrier between the fighting area and the audience. The cross coiled Dragon of the Draculesti flag stood beside the crest of the Corvinesti – a raven with a ring in its beak; to the commoners gathered there, this was an additional reason for joy. Finally, a Wallachian just like them was regarded with the highest honour.

But it seemed the day belonged to the Hungarian noblemen. Count Kerrekés was unstoppable and, one by one, all his opponents admitted defeat. With an elegant and somewhat hypocrite bow, the Count addressed the Voivod of Transylvania:

'Your Highness, please allow the young Wallachian Prince, whose bravery we've all heard about, to do me the honour of meeting me with the weapon of his choice.'

Deep inside, Vlad winced at the Count's irony, but stopped himself in time and managed to answer elegantly:

'Thank you for doing us the honour, Count, and I hope that one day we'll fight alongside in a real battle, against the Turks. That's where courage, together with the wisdom of generals, choose whether you live or die. But now, we have no wish for playing war!'

'Until the time of that battle you speak of, Prince, it's better you show your skills and convince us you are worthy of the honour of someday fighting by our side!'

The blood rushed from Vlad's cheeks for a second, but his answer was just as calm as before:

'I'm afraid that whether I prove something today or not doesn't make a difference. The Turks and their war are still coming; it will be easy for them to conquer us and rule this place and my Wallachia, unless we stay united!'

The disappointed murmurs coming from the crowd proved to Vlad that, besides his knights and perhaps Corvin, everyone else was now convinced of his cowardice. But Iancu had seen through his game and, most of all, was aware of the Prince's fighting skills. He realized that Vlad was avoiding fighting a much more inferior adversary, in order to spare him humiliation in front of his subjects and fellow noblemen. Vlad had come to Transylvania to seek help in his attempt to regain the throne of Wallachia; he had no use of the wounded prides of potential allies. The arrogant Kerrekes had no consideration for the fact that Vlad and his knights had just returned from the siege of Constantinople, where they had fought day and night; nor did he care about the words of high praise that every man in the Southern army had for Vlad.

Corvin's fears came true as the unabashed Count continued:

'With such a Prince, yes! It's very likely that the Turks will take over your lands soon enough!'

Frightened by Vlad's unrelenting stare at the nobleman in front of him, Stroe hurried to save the situation, if at all possible. He and his friends knew what that fixed, expressionless look meant: ***sentence to death!***

'Maybe your lordship will be so kind, as to grant us the honour of accepting *me* as an opponent,' he addressed the Count. 'That would be more suitable! It's right that a prince fight only those of the same rank as his.'

'A nobleman of the Holy Hungarian Crown is worth at least as much as a Wallachian Prince!' Kerrekes yelled with disgust.

'Choose your weapon, Count!' Vlad said in a low, whispered but very resonant voice, which seemed to flow out of him and enshroud everything around him; a hundred feet away, it sounded just as clear as it did next to him.

'Sword and shield, Prince!' the Count grinned with satisfaction.

Vlad bowed ceremoniously in front of Corvin, who whispered beseechingly:

'Don't kill him!'

Mihnea found the Prince's eyes and imperceptivity shook his head from one side to the other, repeating the Lord's plea. But Vlad's expression gave nothing away, which made the knights anxious.

Vlad swiftly jumped in the middle of the arena and planted himself five feet away from the Count.

'Ask your servants to learn the customs at the royal courts, Prince! They should have brought your breastplate, sword and shield by now!'

'The Prince of Wallachia has chosen not to use any weapons against your Lordship!' Mihnea announced loudly, so that everyone heard. 'And if you're afraid, you may leave now!' he concluded in an intentionally impertinent tone, to end the talking and tell the confused Count off properly.

'Fine,' he answered furiously 'if your Prince wishes for a good spanking, I'll give it to him. We've all been young and foolish! Sometimes these lessons prove instructive.'

'Let the contest begin!' Corvin ordered amusedly.

It was clear to everyone present that the strange fight could go on a single path: the armed knight will attack, and the Prince will try to dodge.

But before anyone could figure out what was going on, Vlad unleashed a blood-curling scream and charged towards his adversary. The Count barely had the time to raise his sword halfway, when he was violently kicked in the chest; before he reached the arena dust, he took another strike – a fist as heavy as a blacksmith's hammer – in the iron helmet protecting his skull. The Count remained motionless, contorted in an unnatural way. From beneath his helmet, a thin stream of blood trickled along the loser's cheek.

Around the arena, the silence was complete. No one was clapping, no one was moving. There had been something frightening, inhuman about Vlad's assault and scream; as if the Prince had suddenly grown to the size of ten men and had become fiercer than a beast sensing blood. The people gathered there had never seen anything like it and it took them a couple of moments to sober. One by one, they tore themselves away from the terror that had taken over, discreetly making the sign of the cross, trying to shake away the ice cold fear that engulfed them.

The frightened silence that chained the arena was disturbed only by the flutter of the flags beside the wooden stands.

Corvin alone did not seem surprised by what he had seen.

'My lords, let's be grateful to the Prince of Wallachia for the magnificent demonstration! He is, without a doubt, one of the strongest and most skilled fighters alive. Let's hope the good Count Kerrekas will survive today's battle and treasure the memory of having fought the Wallachian Prince, Vlad Basarab Dracula.'

'My opponent will live, Your Highness!' Vlad answered calmly, as if nothing had happened. 'We have with us one of the best medicine men in all the Romanian Country. What great news, Prince! But why haven't you introduced him to us before?'

'I have, Your Highness! It's our brother, knight Tudor.'

'Tudor? Young Tudor? Nothing surprises me anymore, but I was expecting such a gifted healer to be much older. Experience in such delicate crafts comes after many years, and his lordship seems a very young and talented soldier! You'll have to tell me about that, Prince!... it seems he'll have to care for the hand that threw such a dreadful punch, as well!'

A few drops of blood had trickled from Vlad's fist.

'Fortunately, Your Highness,' Tudor said timidly, 'the bone is unharmed! Only the skin is gone. In a few days, there won't be a trace of wound.'

'Interesting! Well done, young lord! You can tell the depth of the wound just by looking at it from a distance?'

'The wound and the way he struck, my Lord. Our Prince is powerful and he knows a few manners of hitting depending on the hardness of the aimed spot, so that he does little damage to his own bones, but great to his opponent. Even if he hits with full force the iron of an armour or helmet, his hand is safe from harm as long as he retreats it right away and doesn't allow the evil of the strike to flow back to his bones.'

'We shall go now. Go on with the contests, enjoy yourselves!' Corvin ordered. Then he put his arm around Vlad's shoulders and together walked towards the castle, like a couple of old friends.

'You must tell me about Constantinople, Vlad! Why did Mehmet win? How did he win?'

The two spent the entire afternoon and then the entire night in front of great maps spread in Corvin's work chamber. Sometimes, the prudence and experience of the old warrior managed to temper young Vlad's impetuous plans.

'You still believe in people, Vlad, even though you don't know it yourself! You still believe that people will be faithful to you as long as you protect them. It is not so!' Corvin knew that his words shattered somewhere in the air, before reaching the young Wallachian's heart. And he also knew that the future Voivod of Wallachia will remember them in times of need. But he did not suspect that betrayal will be so tightly connected to his name.



Around Hunedoara, flights of birds of passage had already begun to seam the rosy skies of late winter. Here and there, daring snowdrops had started spinning in their merry white and crisp green round dances.

Two years had passed since Iancu, now the captain general of Hungaria, had had the time to return to the castle. In the meantime, little had changed at Hunedoara. The military exercises were just as regular, the noblemen were still quarrelling, the peasants and the commoners were making up just as many anecdotes about the emperor in Buda or the Voivod of Wallachia and his noblemen. The great hall was the same, even the large statues in the corners kept on the same cold glaze and the same creases waved on their stone garments.

But on the Lord's face, time and worries had deeply dug new creases that mixed with more and more silver around the temples. The Sultan Mehmet had raised another great army and was now threatening to attack Belgrade. If the city on the Danube should fall, nothing would stand in his way towards Vienna and Rome. And yet, merely ten thousand soldiers had been sent from the Occident. And "soldier" was too strong a word for it. Monk Ioan of Capistrano had managed to gather – from Italy and the German countries – adventurers and poor men searching for their salvation through religious wars and the preys they might get their hands on. Pressured by the great Hungarian families, King Ladislau had taken away almost all of Iancu's power. Now he was no more governor of Hungaria and not even Voivod of Transylvania. He had been granted the title of Captain General of the Empire.

Tired and disgusted, he had asked to speak to Prince Vlad alone. During the last few years, he had hoped that the young man's fire had not burned out with time or the burden of troubles. Now he was standing in front of him, at the opposite end of the table, and seemed unchanged – powerful, determined and impatient to assail the whole evil in this world.

'I hear that you have mastered the skills of leading an army, Prince. The soldiers and captains are satisfied with your lordship.'

'We are glad, my Lord, to hear that you are content and that our soldiers have no complaints of us and our captains!'

'Last summer, when I sent you that reproaching letter, I only did it half-heartedly. You shouldn't have marched for Wallachia with the army I entrusted you, but...I think I'd have done the same.'

'I know that, every man would have. I wanted to respect your wishes and not bring down strife between our lands, but Vladislav-Dan Dan, who still thinks of himself as Voivod of Wallachia, sent Danciu and Pardoi to do away with me...They waited for me like cowards, hidden in the forest, while we were on our way to our villages in Fagaras.'

'And a lousy job they did too! Thank God you are alive and we still have your support. We sure do need it!...But did they get away?'

'They got away by running! Their time has not come yet. But that doesn't matter...Thank the Lord for our knights. Had I been alone, you'd be talking to yourself today, Your Highness! Seventeen of their men left their skulls on the side of the road. Ten more disappeared through the trees; had Marcu not stopped me, I would have gotten a few more.'

'Don't be upset, Vlad! Your mission now is to stay alive and make your way to Wallachia. Only there you will rule things as your mind and soul desire. When I first laid eyes on Marcu – with his overgrown hair, cut short on the forehead, and his hard working peasant's hands – I misjudged him. I had heard many stories about the others. Mihnea's quick-wittedness and stoutness are famous at the European courts, and even children in the most isolated villages know about Ler and Stroe. I saw

Marcu on the first day you arrived here and I was surprised! He kept some distance from you, as if shy. And then I noticed that every time Ler or Stroe or young Tudor moved towards you, Marcu would fill the space behind them, discretely and unobserved. He seems negligent and useless next to you, and not many experienced soldiers can tell what he's doing. Marcu guards those guarding you, Vlad! Without him, maybe you'd have long ago lost your famous knights!

'He's been doing that forever... When I first met him, it was Easter Sunday, in Targoviste. He was walking a few steps behind my father and the others. We had just come from Sighisoara and many of the noblemen were still openly planning to banish or murder my father. I wasn't afraid. With Mihnea, Stroe and Ler by his side, no evil could touch him. I believed Marcu to be some stable servant or some lad paid to clean their weapons and carry their bags. He would sit out of the way and slowly rumple his cap, just like peasants with business at the court do. He seemed silly, with his hair cut short and those coal-black eyes; like a Roman from my mother's tales.

'And then, his hands started moving swiftly and before I knew it, he pulled a dagger out of his cap and threw it towards the men gathered in front of the church. A second later, from behind Ler, a man with a cutlass in his hand collapsed – seemingly a commoner like any other, but whom nobody recognised. The knights rushed my father back into the church and Marcu, unseen by anyone but me, pulled another dagger from his belt and hid it in his cap, ready to be used again, if needed. With my child's reasoning, I said to myself that he was the wisest and bravest of the knights. Later, I said the same about Stroe, then Mihnea, and then Ler.'

'Marcu reminds me of a quiet, venomous snake, that you can't see or feel as it lays silently under a rock, unless you try to step on it. How was it with Dan's assassins?'

'The six of us had left for our villages in Fagaras. As soon as we went into the woods to Tara Barsei²⁸, Dragon, Ler's stallion, started to snort quietly, like it does to warn the knights about any dangers ahead. Calmly, Stroe said louder than usual, so that the ones we knew to be hiding nearby could hear: *"Let's rest, Your Highness, get something to eat, we've been riding since this morning and the horses need their strength."* We dismounted and grabbed the food bags, to use as shields against arrows, and pulled out our daggers. Then, Dragon snorted again shortly and callously and looked in the same direction as before. Six of the villains fell right away before they even realised we had spotted them, and immediately after, four more joined them on the way to hell.'

'Just four?' Iancu laughed. 'Don't tell me two of you missed, or that mercy kept you from it!'

'No, Stroe, Ler and Tudor's daggers, as well as Mihnea's hatchet hit their targets. But Marcu jumped me like a fat man does with free food and knocked me down.'

'I've thought about these men many times. Always ready to protect us with their own bodies... What'd we be without them?'

'Sometimes they reprimand me like I were a child, and I love them in those moments! After the scuffle in the forest, I pretended to be upset and quarreled him for knocking me down. Do you know what he told me? He said: *"You know what, Vlad? Why don't you just go and...! When you're Voivod in Targoviste, then you can argue, until then... Why didn't you get down on your belly when you saw the danger? A Voivod must be alive and wise! And then brave..."*

'That means he was really scared! They love Wallachia as much as you do and want to see it freed. You know that only with them by your side will you get there and deliver your Country.'

'Only when we return from Belgrade, Your Highness! Then I'll stay in Wallachia and our countries will be the wall Mehmet will crush his evil skull against.'

'No Vlad...' Iancu whispered weakly, suddenly gloomy. 'No. You're not coming to Belgrade. And I won't be coming back...'

‘I don’t understand, my Lord!’

‘If the Turks get past us, they will make for here as well. You shall guard our Southern border and only when you hear of my death will you go into Wallachia.’

‘That’s many years from now! I shall be home long before you find your rest by Saint Peter’s side.’

‘I know what I’m talking about, Vlad! Death’s been circling me for so long that I’ve grown accustomed to talking to her. About a week ago, she came to me, but not in my sleep, as to old women, but to my face, in broad daylight. I was in the woods and I wanted to sleep a little, away from the castle and plots. My raven, that lets me know any time something is about to happen, came down from the skies and sat by my side, like a man. And then it started talking to me silently, like it always does. It enters my soul and that’s where I hear his words and where he pecks mine from. *“Bear another mission, Iancu, and then it may be over for us! We’ve had enough...”*’

‘Maybe it was a dream, Your Highness!’ Vlad said, trying to chase away the darkness that had started to poison the air around them.

‘It was no dream, he really came to me and it’s good that he has. How many men get to sort out their worldly affairs before they cross on to the other world? Back then I didn’t know what that last mission would be. Then I learned that Mehmet was raising an army against Belgrade. That’s how I knew my raven had spoken the truth. I will go to Belgrade and stop the Turk.

‘It upsets me that King Ladislau can’t see beyond the scheming of the noblemen that want my end. If I were to call once, the whole of Transylvania would gather under my command and who could stop me then? But it’s not another war that we need now! He made me Captain General!!! Captain General,’ Iancu repeated with disgust. ‘That means watch dog!...but I’ll guard him like no one has before. For it’s not them that we’re keeping safe. It’s our people from the cities and the villages. The merry men that laugh at any time and about anyone, the brave men ready to sacrifice their lives to Christ and their land!’

‘That reminds me, Vlad, do you know what I’d like to do now? To go to your city, to Targoviste, at Sache’s inn, to have some of his enchanted meals and listen to his pointless chatter. That’s why I came here first. To see the castle and my lands for one last time, to talk to you and Dragan, to fill myself with all these and take them with me to the afterlife.’

‘It’ll be another month or so before the Turkish plague begins. I think you could linger here for a week or two. The Belgrade garrison is sound and you have no reason for worry!’

‘I’m staying, Vlad, I’m staying. Go now. It’s late and tomorrow we’ll go together and salute our army here.’

In the castle yard, Marcu and Mihnea were waiting for Vlad to come out, as usual.

‘Marcu, send a man to Targoviste right now! He’s to take Sache and bring him here! No resting on the way!’



Ln Iancu Corvin’s chamber, the candles were still lit, although the night was well past its first half. He had tried to sleep, but could not. Not because some worries were troubling him. He had long before grown accustomed to them and had learned to take everything as it came, without being neither too frightened nor too happy about it. But now a strange feeling had taken over him. He was not tired. During the last few weeks he had gone from one side of Hungaria and Transylvania to the other, enough to last him for a lifetime. Finally back to Hunedoara, there was no point in feeling tired. He

felt he was at home for the last time and everything before him seemed more alive and meaningful than ever before. He grabbed the shaggy, thick wool cover and smiled, overcome by a strange sensation of absolute peace.

A long, long time before, he had held another wool cover just like it; Lord Voicu, his father, had taken him up in the mountains at the sheepfold of shepherd Gheorghe, a former brother-in-arms that had retreated to the heart of the mountain out of disgust with the too numerous wars. That's where he slept outdoors for the very first time, smothered between two shaggy shepherd dogs, careful not to disturb him with any sudden movements. He slept outside for a whole week, enchanted with the scent of hay and cool stars, with stories and the love for his endeared father.

Now, he thought he sensed the smell of curd mixed with egg and mamaliga²⁹ and felt like an innocent child again.

He slowly descended the steps to the now empty great hall, and smiled at the memory of the chills the large statues of holy warriors had given the child Iancu at first sight.

He felt strange and good, as if he, the strong adult Iancu was walking hand in hand with the tiny and fearsome Iancu, his heart filled with childhood anxieties.

Passing by the great Venetian mirrors, he caught a glimpse of his silvery hair, which seemed to have been placed by mistake on a head so filled with the yearning for childhood and its peace. With an indifferent wave of his hand, he went out amusedly.

'Is something the matter, my Lord?' one of the guards at the door asked in a low voice.

'No, Andrei, what would be the matter? I was missing you and came to see you!'

Andrei the guard curled his lower lip in astonishment and shook his head slowly, eyes wide open with surprise, the way you look at a drunk dubiously. He wanted to remain respectfully silent, but could not.

'Had I known, I'd have combed my hair tonight, my Lord!'

'Get out of here, man! You didn't comb it at your wedding! Your cousin Iordan had to go to church and pass himself for you; the priest wouldn't let you in, looking so ugly and rumped!'

He left the two guards laughing and wondering. He ordered the guards at the great gate that no one follow or wait for him in the morning. He was to return when he felt like it. The way he had not done in a long time.

The pale moonlight and the snow patches left behind and there filled the hills with silvery puddles, as if the moon had melted and dripped coolly on the ground.

Corvin wanted to descend to Gorgota village, and chat with some villager until dawn. He stopped for a moment and looked over the torpid village, watching the smoke columns flowing upwards. Inside, the hearths were no longer roaring all night long – a clear sign that winter was coming to an end – and the smoke would linger for a while above the chimneys, as if not knowing where to go, and then calmly flowed upwards, to ruffle among his big brothers – the clouds.

He planned to stop at the first house with a candle still burning. If there was one... Anyway, in two or three hours' time the people would get up to feed the animals. He leisurely guided his horse on the path towards the village. He was not anxious about the rattle that dogs usually make and that would have spread panic through the villagers at such hours. He had long before learned from a hermit that if you inhale deeply and think of the thousands of people that had cared for dogs before your grandparents' grandparents were even born, of mankind and dogkind of the centuries, if you *feel* the friendship between you – the MAN – and the serving dog, no hound will bark at you; they will all come by the fences nicely and wag their tails happily, as if they had known you since forever.

The cold didn't feel like cold anymore. He was numb with memories and his desire for peace.

All he wanted was to live, to be human, to have simple and meaningless things happen to him, but this desire faded as well. He felt empty, small, so small that he stopped existing at all. Everything else was real and great and alive and important precisely because he was gone. He felt the smell of the melting snow – had he ever felt it before? – the bitter-smooth taste of the leather reins wrapped around his hand.

‘Bless you, my Lord!’ he heard like through a dream, sensing all the way to his bones the love of the man that saluted him.

‘Bless you too, fellow! What’s your name? What are you doing here? Why aren’t you asleep?’

‘Akos, my Lord! How could I sleep? Rumour goes that you came back and you’re leaving to fight the Turk again. Us men talked last night and reckon’d we’d go with Your Highness. We know well you don’t have enough men...’

‘True, Akos, true...I don’t. The king won’t give me soldiers, but he wants me to fight for him. Ten years ago, all I needed to do was wish it and forty thousand men came under my command. Now all I have is you men from my villages, and that’s about three or four hundred people.’

‘There’s gonna be more, Lord! They came from Pacurari and Adamesti last night, from...’

‘Only a hundred of you will follow me, ten from each village. We don’t know how Belgrade will go and you’ll be needed at home, if the Turk should reach this side of the Danube.’

‘Forgive me, my Lord, I’ve lost my head! Come inside, if you don’t mind, I don’t have much, but I’ll find a chair and something to put on the table. Forgive us for not having more...’

‘Be at ease, man! What’s good enough for you is good enough for me, too. Hurry and bring two chairs and let’s sit here, outside.’

Akos did not answer, but went inside and came back with two plainly-carved low chairs. He disappeared again for a second and brought over a cloth, two glasses, a flask of tzuica³⁰, a bowl of pork-scraps and a round loaf of bread.

‘It ain’t much...’ the man tried to apologize for the meal’s simplicity.

‘It’s fine, it’s what a man eats!’ Iancu answered plainly.

‘Your Highness, at Belgrade...’

‘Forget about Belgrade, man! How was last autumn here? What’s new in the village?’

‘It was fine,’ Akos answered, a little puzzled. And then understood that the Lord was upset and would hear no more of wars.

‘My brother, Vasile, he settled down and built a house right here, by mine. He was in the army for a while, but they let him come back home.’

‘Who, man?’ Iancu asked, lighting up and ready to burst into laughter.

‘Vasile, my brother!’

‘Didn’t you just say your name was Akos? So you’re Hungarian?’

‘Wallachian, Hungarian, who knows anymore? Down here, there’s never been any strife between us and the Wallachians. That’s between the ranked ones! Us, the foot of the Country, go ploughing together and live our days together as they come, good or bad. I hear the noblemen have it against you that you be Wallachian. That ain’t right! My mother’s Hungarian and my father Wallachian from the oldest times. That’s why at home we speak both ways, now this and now that. And you know what, Your Highness? I never thought I’d split my mother’s head open because her name is Erzbeth and not Silvia or what else.’

‘And don’t think from now on either, man! It’s like you said, Wallachian, Hungarian, it’s all the same! At Medias, when the Turks had us surrounded and there was a price on my head, a Hungarian took my cape and let himself captured and killed by the Pagans. So that I’d live, the Wallachian that I

am. Only fools seek motive in the tongue you speak or the place where you were born. There's so much room under this Sun and in Christ's heart, that no matter how much we breed, there'd still be enough for all. You tell me, what does the Sultan in Constantinople care that we stay here and make the sign of the cross and eat what we have on the table?...But that's not what I wanted to talk about!' Iancu suddenly sullied. 'Farewell, man!' he went on, as he got up abruptly.

He went out the gate and took the upward path to the hills above the village.

He had wished to escape for only a few hours, out of the way of fighting, suffering and pain. He had dreamt on one night, just one, during which he could – openly, surrounded by simple people or in the woods, wherever – make love to Life shamelessly. To bury his face in her long and ever-scented hair, flowing on the shoulders of villages, to hold her tightly against his strong chest and feel her, for just this once, gentle and kind.

That night had not yet come for him. But he felt the other mistress was near, the one he had hated so much and laughed in her face and cursed her every time she would take away another companion, soldier of father. Now he did not hate her anymore. She had her purpose, and brought along, more than anything, comfort and peace...

For a while, he kept riding along the narrow paths and tried in vain to catch some of the serenity of the sleeping houses. Then he left the village, buried in his thoughts, just as he had come in, silently and secretly. Behind him, the frost was polishing the bluish night with a swordly sheen.



It was three days later that Iancu returned to the castle. Prince Vlad had sensed his heavy heart and knew that the Voivod was not wrong when talking about his end. God had allowed him too to foresee what was coming, be it good or bad.

Informed beforehand by the tower sentinels that the Lord was coming back, Vlad gave a few short orders, creating great excitement in the castle kitchens. Innkeeper Sache from Targoviste – renowned all the way to Buda and Constantinople for the magnificent dishes and the intricate and puzzling blather he served to his clients – had arrived to Hunedoara early that morning. He had slept for about three hours, and then started to put together a meal that, according to him, would be – for centuries on end – sung about by the gifted bards and by storks as well; the latter, although known to sing quite poorly, would go around the world and spread the news about such an outstanding event. He had brought along from Targoviste his wife Sofica, as well as their only daughter Catalina, whose beauty had become the talk in all Wallachian towns and villages.

Reaching the castle yard, Iancu briefly and cunningly inspected the state of the guards. Everything was strict and orderly, as usual. Only Vlad's eyes seemed somewhat brighter, without the darkness they had gathered during the last few years.

'Welcome home, Your Highness!' Vlad greeted him cheerfully. 'Right on time to have supper together!'

'Yes, Prince, let's go eat! I haven't had anything since yesterday. You come too, men,' the Voivod invited the few soldiers that had just finished guard and were chatting in the sunny yard.

They thanked him in unison and respectfully entered the hall where meals were served. Every time he was home, Iancu would eat along with his soldiers. Just like he did during campaigns, when he would sleep where they did and rest only when they did, the Lord preferred the company of plain soldiers; in return, the men worshipped him like *their* leader, like *one of them*, who reasoned and fought *for their* well being.

The tables seemed fancier than usual, but Iancu paid no attention to them. He sat and looked at Vlad questioningly.

‘Brothers Ler, Tudor, Stroe, Marcu and Mihnea will be with us soon. They said they wanted to help prepare the food today, but they had some strife with the cook, who wouldn’t allow them in his “parish”.’

‘What?’ Iancu asked in disbelief. ‘Sandor, the cook, dared to affront the knights? In here, every one must know their place, and if *they* ask for something, that means..’

‘Forgive me, Your Highness, but that’s not so!’ Sache said proudly, entering the hall with a plate in each hand. ‘When it comes to dishes, the cook must not only be gifted, but also know each one of them, talk to them, learn their tongue and know their needs.’

‘Why don’t you tell us about food, Sache!’ the Voivod said in surprise, leaning back in his chair, like a man content with all he sees and hears.

‘Well you see, Your Highness, just now I was sittin’ on my knees, troubl’d and wondering what kind of broth to make. I look at the carrots, no worries! They be sitting dumbly on the shelf, numb like after a wedding. I say to their chief: *“Hey, carrot, feel like a hot bath today?”*. An’ he says: *“Oh, I don’t know...”* You see, he was giving ‘imself airs. *“Hey! Mind yerself or I’ll let you rot there in the damp and I’ll go talk to your Godmother the Onion!”* I snapp’d at him. *“No man, I’ll do it, why wouldn’t I do it? Who else is coming?”* An’ I say: *“Well, there’d be a few: yer Godmother the Onion, like I said, she be coming; some parsley is already splattering in the pot and then will come some three or four chickens we unclothed this morning.”*

‘Is that so, Sache? That’s how you speak to food?’ Iancu wanted to know.

‘Don’t believe him, your Highness!’ Stroe cut in, his eyes blazing as if he were standing in front of at least a dozen Turks. ‘When we swooped on the kitchen, Sache here was down and done for! A rope of garlic was coiled around his neck and on the stove there were two pots waiting to jump and boil him. What can I say? Ler went for the bread, who was making herself into crumbles to throw in his eyes and blind him; in the corner, Mihnea was all tangled up with a naked chicken that had just *pretended* to be dead and now wanted revenge. She was pecking like crazy, like she was a bull and no less.’

‘Your Highness! Lord Stroe is in the mood for pranks! I confess I talk to my dishes in their own tongue, which these fine men don’t speak or hear, but...’

‘But what, Sache? I believe you!’ the Voivod cut in, barely containing his laugh. ‘But give us some of that food now, I’m starving!’

After Sache, Sofica and fair Catalina came in, both carrying plates and large trays, filled with Sache’s famous broths and pottages.

Wearing a blouse inwrought with flowers as blue as the sky, her black hair pulled back in the waist-long ponytail, the girl kindled the admiration of those present. Her broad smile, unveiling teeth like two strings of white pearls, failed to chase away the bewildered silence that had fallen over the soldiers at the table. Iancu was smiling as well, amused by the uneasiness of the men and scolded them joyfully:

‘My brothers, if I didn’t know you, I’d say your manners need a bit of polishing. A young lady’s beauty is to be admired discretely and with mouths shut. In this case, though, I understand, this young Wallachian’s beauty has no match in Buda or Vienna, either. I’d think she’s the Snow White of our fairytales. I see we are plenty of ogre’s here, Prince Charming is the only one missing!’

‘Even if he walk’d through that door now, my Snow White wouldn’t see him, my Lord,’ Sache chided her lovingly. ‘She got it to her head she ain’t going to marry...’

Through one of those tricks that fate loves playing on people, young Tudor walked through the door right in the middle of this conversation.

Unusually tall, broad shouldered like a man in the prime of life, eyes heavenly blue and a smile that would make the nuns re-evaluate their vows, Tudor was simply glowing.

‘Forgive me, Your Highness! I was delayed by Mister Dragan. He’s been so kind as to teach me about the skills of managing a castle.’

‘Well, do you see this one, Catalina? If *he*’s not Prince Charming...’

Sache’s gruffness set the men in roars, to Tudor’s bewilderment. Catalina, who was usually laughing along in such circumstances, blushed and softly lowered her head. Her mother did not miss this sudden change and said to herself: *“Well, will you look at that! She ain’t laughing like she used to! If I look twice, she couldn’t, either. Only archangels are as pretty as Tudor; as for bravery, I still haven’t heard of a lad his age to contest him. Help me, God, to get them two hooked up! If I miss this one, I’m going to the forest. A fool such as I wouldn’t deserve to live among people.”*

Sofica was torn from her thoughts and thrown into even sweeter ones:

‘I haven’t tasted such heavenly food in a long time! It’s clear that mister Sache and his lady are true masters, schooled from father to son in such a noble craft!’

Sache’s ears went red all the way to the tips and for a moment he feared his chubby wife would faint at having Voivod Corvin praise her.

And as he could not miss such an opportunity, Sache dared to quench his thirst for wisdom from the spring wells that were the minds of the two Lords. Not many times did he have the chance to be near *two* royal heads; and he thought they wouldn’t mind some philosophical discussions, either.

‘Your Highness,’ he addressed Corvin shyly. ‘Many years’ve passed since I’ve been trying to solve this mystery that’s been troubling my nights and tormenting my days. I asked simple ploughmen and enlightened travellers staying at our inn. Now I reckon I’ll find my answer.’

‘Let’s hear it, Sache, let’s hear it! Not even Lords have all the answers. What’s been troubling you?’

‘Well everyone know that if you put a boulder in a bucket, the water go up. That means that if you put a mount’in in a sea, she grow too, right?’

‘Well, yes...’ Corvin answered, both amused and interested.

‘You know what I reckon, Your Highness? In my judgement, if water go up, it must be the other way around, too; if you put water on land, it’ll grow, too, right?’

‘Come to think about it, yes!’ Corvin agreed, musing.

‘Then why, Lord, don’t we all grabs a couple of buckets, or even better, a wagon full of buckets and fill our land with water, to make it bigger. So that every man have his little piece of land, or even more.’

Two more hours passed without Sache finding his much desired answer. As usual, Stroe ruined everything by reminding everyone at the table that once the land dries up, it will shrink again or even more than before; once neighbouring lands will overlap, giving way to strife between owners. Then ideas started clashing among each other and no one took them seriously anymore. Except for Sache.

“I’m dealing with inferior minds!” he thought, upset to be the only visionary in that room.

Outside, in the castle yard, Tudor was showing Catalina how to take care of and manage a horse. How to hold the reins and put the saddle on. Ignorant of such manly matters, Catalina’s hand would linger for a moment in the knight’s coarse and strong one. No one missed them at the feast. But from above, from the window of the room given to Sache and his wife, two beaming and searching eyes were weighing their every movement.

“Look at how she pretends to know nothing! If Tudor knew that my rompish one rides better than most lads in Targoviste...But that’s fine, men should believe that only they know it all and watch over us, women!”

But to be honest, Tudor was not really interested in Catalina's horse-handling skills on that particular night. He was grateful that it was night-time and the moon had little power over the castle yard.

“Wonder why I'm burnin' up like this?” the young man thought. *“I must be as red as a lobster! Good thing she can't see me. And if I make my voice sound huskier, as though I were a bit older, I bet she won't even be able to tell my knees are shakin'!”*



The old man won't tell me his age. He says he doesn't remember...he looks at least one hundred!

He agrees to host me for a week or two in which time he could tell me Dracula's whole story. His sole condition is that I come by daytime and always leave at nightfall. Sleep...prayer – for me it's the same! I wouldn't go there by night anyhow!

His story is really captivating and...suspiciously detailed. He speaks to me of Vlad Dracula's knights, of the streets in Targoviste at that time, of Edirne, the ancient Ottoman capital...

I start asking myself questions of this hermit, but I'd rather not put them on paper just yet.

Arefu, March 19th, 2008

„And he hated evil in his country so much, that, if someone did something evil, be it theft or burglary or any lie or injustice, none of these men would be left alive. He could be a great noble man or priest or monk or commoner, even if he had great wealth, he could never escape himself from death.”
Slavonian tales of Dracula

From Hunedoara, the Transylvanian Southern Army split itself in three. First, two thirds of the soldiers, most of them Wallachian, set off to Sibiu, where, at Corvin's orders, everything was already prepared for maintaining such an army. Then from Sibiu onwards, half of the soldiers continued their way to Brasov along the peaks of the Fagaras Mountains.

People's fear, snivelling like a snake, was curling itself on from Edirne, from the Balkans, up to the Danube and upper still throughout the Wallachian and Transylvanian villages. But such insidious panic did not cause too many sleepless nights in the ranks of Vlad Draculea's soldiers. As was often the case in such circumstances, there had even appeared a few anecdotes on the Sultan and on his attempt of conquering Belgrade.

'You know, Ioan,' a foot soldier said to the companion marching beside him. 'They say the Sultan gets to Belgrade and there, Corvin comes out to face him.'

'Tell me,' the soldier answered in a wide smile, aware that there followed a new joke that would go round the entire army in a few hours.

'And Corvin asks: "*Who is it*"?'

"*Mehmet*", the Turk answered, turban in his hands like a peasant come with a heavy complaint to the emperor.

"*What do you want?*"

"*The cities of Belgrade, Wien and Rome.*"

"*Fine, fine, you can have them, if you pass over three brave tasks.*"

"*Let's hear them, Your Highness, I'll do anything!*"

"*For Belgrade, in less than an hour, you'll have to cross the Danube **drowning**³¹!*"

"*Consider it done, Corvin!*" the Turk answered, not paying attention to the Voivod's words!

The noble Catana, one among those who had remained faithful to the Draculea family, also a refugee in Transylvania and presently named captain of the column heading to Brasov, had stirred his horse closest to the witty soldier, impatient to learn the newest inventions on the Sultan.

There was happy laughter around the rowdy soldier and soon another warrior joined the discussion on a more serious tone:

'You know what I'd really like, brothers? I'd love to cross the border to Wallachia right now and throne His Highness Vlad as our Lord.'

'If such were the case, we'd have never split in three camps!' Another soldier came in. 'We'd have all gone down to Wallachia to fight Vladislav-Dan, though I'd really hate to start a fray with our own countrymen!'

'But that's exactly what we're doing, men! We're going to Wallachia!' spoke Captain Catana. 'Now is the moment for you to be told: we're ordered by His Highness to cross the mountains through the Bran pass to Targoviste, and there wait for the other two columns of our army. No one, absolutely no one must ever take out their sword at, or put fire to a Christian household along the way. Not even on the domains of the opposing noblemen.'

Let all our Wallachians know that Lord Vlad does not wish to bring danger to the Country, but only to reclaim according to tradition the throne of his father and grandfather, the Great Mircea, as is right.'

‘But how is that, Captain Catana?’ Footsoldier Costin asked in amazement, the one who usually invented the latest jokes. ‘If we’re to have a battle against Vladislav-Dan, the one who’s on the throne of Wallachia now, why would we weaken our forces by splitting in three?’

‘Not to worry, His Highness Vlad knows best what he’s doing! If we went together, Vladislav-Dan’s spies would find out and be on their guard more than ever. The Turks too would learn that there is fighting between the Wallachians, and the Country would remain discovered before an invasion. So, the entire line of the Southern Transylvania is protected. Apparently, His Highness Vlad and his army move to Hunedoara and then to Timisoara, and a fight with Vladislav-Dan’s armies cannot disturb us too much as long as we manage to get to Targoviste at the same time.’



Between the high peaks of Sureanu and Retezat mountains, the troop lead by Prince Vlad was neatly spiralling south to Wallachia. The young warm spring sun was mixing with the live fir trees’ fragrance on the mountain slopes – all were sources of stimulation for men and horses alike. As the column was getting ever closer to the Wallachian border, a new uneasiness was slowly overtaking the soldiers. None of them would have wanted an open confrontation with Vladislav-Dan, the Lord of Wallachia’s army, since that meant spilling the blood of brothers and cousins.

Leading the soldier column, knights Ler, Stroe, Mihnea, Tudor and Marcu were flanking Vlad, the rightful prince of Wallachia.

‘I know I’m asking you the impossible,’ the prince began in his deep loud voice. ‘But when we meet with Vladislav-Dan, try to finish him off as soon as possible. God help him not to do battle with us, to just leave the throne and escape!’

‘I believe not, Lord,’ Mihnea came up. ‘As far as I know him, he is not the bravest among men, but he truly thinks that hesitations and peace with the Turks are best for the Country. He loves Wallachia too in his own way. His greatest sin is lacking the necessary wisdom that a true Voivod needs to keep his Country free, just as ours has to be.’

‘I know that, Mihnea. Just to be at peace with myself, I shall send him word requesting his peaceful abdication as soon as we arrive to Targoviste.’

‘I’ll go!’ intervened Ler in his usual concise manner.

Realistic plans or dreams of war and peace were also being nurtured in the knights’ wake, at the back of the column, among the common soldiers.

The first day however went by without any incident, but as they were heading on to Targoviste, the villagers welcomed them less and less surprised, a clear sign that by now, everyone was informed of their arrival and that in the capital they were probably assembling a quick royal army already.

Vlad’s army’s unexpected descent south of the Carpathians had so far proved its efficiency. Villages and towns on the way had not yet received orders to raise arms against them, and since the Transylvanian soldiers were also wearing the Wallachian eagled-flag, there was not too much worrying at the heart of the Country. The next day at noon, Vlad’s three armed troops united themselves in front of Targsor, near Targoviste.

The Voivod of Wallachia, Vladislav-Dan of the Danesti family, was anxiously waiting news from his armies sent in the south, near the Danube. He had always known that, by sending the core of his armies at the southern border to defend the Country from Turkish forays on their way to Belgrade, he was actually leaving open the northern border with Transylvania, but no danger should ever come from there. Right now, the small army kept in Targoviste, closely gathered around him, was waiting

for the confrontation with the young throne claimer, Vlad, son of Dracul.

Not even Vladislav-Dan's trusted councillors, noblemen Trandafir, Costea and Spiridon kept themselves very calm about the matter.

'Lord, I shall go and deliver them a message,' Spiridon said gravely. 'Maybe I shall convince Draculea to set some terms, there's no need to spill each other's blood now when the Turk is watching so closely.'

'You'll waste your time for nothing!' Vladislav-Dan answered darkly. 'Draculea hasn't come this far for terms, and I shan't simply leave like a thief caught in someone else's yard.'

'But look, there's a white flag approaching from their side. Let's go meet them!'

From Vlad's army, neatly ordered on the fields outside Targosor, a rider was heading towards them for the usual term settlement before a fight. Accompanied by nobleman Spiridon, Vladislav-Dan went to greet him. As it was the custom in such occasions, Vlad's messenger was knight Ler, one of his closest men.

'Vlad, Prince of Wallachia, sends his kindest wishes of good health and happiness to Your Highness and to all people in Wallachia!' Ler uttered politely as was proper.

'We thank you, to be sure,' Vladislav-Dan answered irritated. 'But has he come to Targoviste with such a great army only for this?'

'No,' Ler smiled. 'For Wallachia's sake, the time has come for Vlad to step up on his father's throne. He sends his gratefulness to Your Highness for taking care of the Country in his absence. He also promises Your Highness that you may remain at Court with Your Highness' faithful men, in honour and noble privileges for everyone as it should be.'

'Tell your errant prince that his place is not in Targoviste and if he turns around right now, we shall not spill Christian blood unnecessarily and we shall not put our Country in danger at this present time when the Turks are so close.'

'Your Highness, there cannot be any word of peace if I return now without your Lordship's oath that you will freely renounce the throne of the Country, and that all Wallachian soldiers will enter willingly under Vlad Draculea's command!'

'I understand. As far as I see it, Vlad honestly believes that my terms with the Turks and the tribute I pay are simply signs of my weakness. I say his Lordship is mistaken in his all too warrior-like tendencies. And if the Almighty wishes him to become Voivod in my place, sooner or later all of you shall realize that it's better to keep an obedient peace with the Turks, than fight a short and brave war, out of which no good can result for of us!'

'I too understand, my lord, and I respect your decision. I would have preferred for Your Highness to have decided differently today!'

Ler turned around his horse and stirred it towards his camp. From a distance, he saw that Prince Vlad was already giving the orders to start the battle, without waiting for his account.

'I already know, Ler. Vladislav-Dan won't free the Country for me,' Vlad whispered, when the messenger approached him. 'It is obvious that he cannot win this battle, but he wants to fight. I would do the same. He is a brave Voivod. It is a pity he is not brave in all matters...make sure you kill him first, as quickly as possible. Without him, the soldiers of Wallachia will stop fighting. I need them alive. They shall be *my* soldiers tomorrow!'

The prince's coal-black stallion was impatiently scattering dust with his hooves. Storm had been a present to Vlad from Iancu Corvin, who had brought it all the way from Naples and for which he had paid the price of three healthy horses to an Andalusian merchant.

'Come on, Storm,' Vlad whispered calmly without any trace of the usual growl nor the coldness

his eyes bore when in times of hardship. He then bent low forward, his body becoming one with that of his horse, in order not to be thrown backwards during the animal's fantastic spring. In that same instant, they flew forward and the prince's five knights followed them at once together with the rest of the army.

Wearing tight black trousers and tunic, hair of the same dark colour flowing long to the waist, terribly well-built and strong, Vlad seemed an angel of punishment sent on Earth with the sole purpose of harshly judging all sins of mankind. In his right hand, he held a short spear whose use he had learnt while a hostage at the Sultan's court. In his left hand rested his titanic sword pointing downwards: straight, long and heavy; it was a sword that only he could use, and whose considerable weight had already given birth to numerous legends.

Facing them, Vladislav-Dan's sweeping rows were furiously approaching. Like so many times before, Vlad could only hear an eerie silence, but somewhere beyond there was a heavy rhythm of horses' hooves. Arrows passed him by whizzing silently, and from the open contorted mouths of the fighters no sound, no cry, ever reached him. Suddenly, in front of him the first adversary appeared: almost as tall as him, but not as strong. In one flowing movement, Vlad's arm sprang forward and pierced the Wallachian with his *kargi*³², then split him in half with a terrible strike of his sword. It was only then that he could clearly hear the soldier's death cry, and with it broke loose all the battle's racket with the clattering of crossed swords, broken bones and gushing of blood from open wounds, with cries and curses, with fears and foolishness.

The prince's black stallion was springing and biting – as though ill with rabies – every horse and man in front of it, helping its master clear his way ever closer to the place where Vladislav-Dan Voivod of Wallachia was fighting. For a moment, there was a large space around Vlad and none of Vladislav-Dan's soldiers was so bold as to head towards the terrible dark prince, seemingly invincible, and towards the five knights ready to bring down with their swords and flying knives anyone who would have dared to approach. Vlad let himself half glide off his saddle and grabbed the bow from a soldier already passed away. He aimed fast and fierce, ready to break the bow. Twenty paces away, the arrow pierced Vladislav-Dan's shoulder. Surprised by the sudden burn under his breastplate, the Lord turned a fiery look to where the arrow had come from. He only managed to see the second one, which this time ran through his neck. Misty-eyed, Vladislav-Dan got to see Vlad, son of Dracul, one last time, sitting up in his saddle eyeing him through the already stretched bow's sight. He then fell off his horse. Forever.

As is often the case, together with Vladislav-Dan, commander of the army, his generals' will to fight also collapsed. The noblemen faithful to the late Voivod approached Prince Vlad and fell down on one knee. Some of the soldiers followed suit shortly after, although the will to fight was still flashing in the eyes of many. The will to fight was still flashing in the eyes of many.

Raised up on his saddle, Vlad spoke for the first time to the soldiers of his Country:

'Soldiers of Wallachia, rise! Henceforth, I will not see your heads down! Vladislav-Dan was a good but weak Lord. I know he wanted only the best for our Country, but he did not show himself fierce enough for these dark times. I, Lord Vlad, great Prince and Voivod, ruler over all Wallachia, Amlash and Fagarash, I ask you – the true force of the Land – to stand by my side and together we shall free Wallachia of all injustice and perils. Stand by my side, dear ones, and I shall stand by yours for as long as God in Heaven will keep me alive!'

In the silence fallen over the fields outside Targsor, Vlad dismounted and headed straight to Vladislav-Dan's slumped body. Knelt beside the late Lord, a common soldier was fixing the young prince with a grim look.

‘Let us give him a Christian burial, your Highness!’ the soldier said slowly, with difficulty.

‘Do not fear, man, we are no savages and it is not out of hatred that we fought. Do you think I had a choice? Vladislav-Dan shall be buried in all honours fitted for a Voivod in the Hill Monastery and I shall expect all of you to attend the commemorating service!’

Vlad undid the black cape off his shoulders and covered the body of his old adversary. After that, he spoke again to the soldier near him.

‘What is your name, fellow?’

‘Parvan, Highness!’

‘Do you have a horse? Did you serve in Vladislav-Dan’s guard?’

‘No, My Lord. I am a common soldier, His Highness didn’t know me, but I believe it’s our duty to care for him now, in the hour of his death.’

‘Bring me a horse!’ Vlad commanded. ‘From this day on, Parvan, you shall serve in my personal guard! You shall receive your due payment and a piece of land for your loyalty. Are you willing?’

‘Of course I am, Your Highness! But be a good Voivod and never forget the Country’s needs!’

‘Don’t you worry about that!’ Stroe came in, two steps away from them. ‘That’s why His Highness Vlad has come back home in the first place: to cleanse our backyard of all rottenness and to protect it from all miscreants, inside and outside!’

‘Long live Lord Vlad, ruler of the Romanian Country!’ Mihnea cried, sensing the warmth that was beginning to embrace the soldiers’ hearts.

‘Long live His Highness!’ the two sides answered in one voice. For the first time, they had honestly started believing in a future they all had only been dreaming of, each according to his needs.



On the walls of Belgrade city, the bricks were a brighter red in the fire of the sunset. All day long, the spies had brought word from down the Danube of the Turks’ great numbers and their intentions. As usual, Iancu Corvin was spending a few moments alone on the eastern tower of the citadel. No thoughts of strategy or fears of impending battles were tormenting him now. The ominous thought of death had long since found nest in his soul instead; Iancu had already comprehended its meaning and its purpose. He only wished, if just for a few minutes, to be left alone every evening: to enjoy the throbbing life all around him: the Danube, flowing smooth and carefree, the birds warbling at nightfall, the God-made rolls of red and grey and yellow clouds on the night sky.

Behind him, a heavily sweating soldier cleared his throat nervously, not daring to disturb the General.

‘Speak up, man! What news do you bring that cannot bear postponing?’ Corvin asked quietly.

‘In Wallachia, Lord, Vlad Draculea has entered with the army your Lordship has given him and has disposed of Vladislav-Dan. I ask for your forgiveness, Lord, for such bad news!’

Corvin smiled serenely and, to the soldiers’ great surprise, he threw him a small bag of gold coins.

‘For your trouble, fellow, and for the news you’re bringing me!’

‘Oh, Vlad, your time has come!’ Corvin said to himself. *“It has begun! May God give you strength and wisdom to endure in such days of thunder! I know now that try as they might, the Turks will never succeed in Wallachia. Mehmet will be greatly surprised when he faces Vlad.”* the general murmured, losing himself completely in the bluish-pink mist rising above the waters’ of the



An hour later, the news of Vladislav-Dan's killing reached Targoviste, the capital city of the Wallachian Lords, and caused panic among the people. Who was this Vlad Draculea and what did he want? His father had been a good Voivod, but he had switched sides with the Turks for a few years, if not in spirit, then for the eyes of the world. It was still he who switched sides back to the Christians when the Turks were heading to Transylvania, that is, when he was really needed. The people of Targoviste did not remember him as a traitor, but as the Lord who had fought bravely by Iancu's side at Varna, who had saved the cities of Transylvania from disaster. Mostly, they remembered him as the Dracul – for the large pendant he wore on his neck representing a Dragon coiled around a cross, a clear sign that the Voivod was in the great Christian Order of the Dragon, together with the German Emperor, the Lord of Lithuania and many other worthy knights of the age.

The noblemen of the city of Targoviste were making their appearance at Court one by one, very worried and in a hurry, as was the case every time a new Voivod would shortly ascend the throne. Some of them, such were noblemen Izvoreanu and Pavel, had been waiting for years the return of the Draculesti family on the throne. Others, sworn enemies of the latter, had already begun their wandering to Transylvania and Moldavia, perfectly aware that they would find no mercy with the new Lord. Still others, the great majority in fact, couldn't care less about these things. They had kept their distance from any family of Wallachian Lords, and even though this did not exactly bring them great domains or fortunes, it did not compel them to exile at every other ruling change in Targoviste either.

In the Great Hall of Throne, the most important noblemen of Wallachia were waiting for Vlad's arrival, all neatly ranged on two rows. Everyone was chattering animatedly, asking without waiting for any answers, making comparisons and uttering most confidently criticisms on the future rule. There was a general hubbub like on a motley Sunday fair that reached the outside walls and grew louder and louder with every passing minute.

Caught up in their discussions, the noblemen did not notice that Vlad and his five knights had already entered the Great Hall of Throne. The thunderous slamming of the entrance doors had the waking effect of a gong and the noblemen's debating was suddenly broken midway. Younger or older, all beautifully clad in gold thread-embroidered mantles, Wallachia's high nobility were pushing each other and trying to get a glimpse of the young man who suddenly aspired to be Lord of the Country. On their defense, mention must be made that they managed to keep some order right and left of the narrow procession heading to the throne. The first ironic grins appeared on their faces. The young man in front of them seemed still green and his few years were not actually an advantage for the one who imagined himself a Voivod.

'Greetings, your Lordships!' Vlad spoke, while sitting himself on the throne of his father and grandfather.

No answer followed from the hall. The confused noblemen did not know yet how to address young Vlad. Voivod he could not become until they gave their accord on the matter. The army outside, as well as the fact that he had already sat on the throne without their consent, was proof enough that dialogue would not be the easiest thing to achieve.

'Greetings to you too, Prince Vlad,' finally answered Boyar Albu, one among the most influential noblemen in the Country and declared enemy of the Draculesti family. On some faces, grins grew wider.

‘Prince?’ Vlad retorted, he too grinning. ‘Prince you say, Albu?’

‘Your Grace should know that no one can be Voivod without first being chosen by the Country’s High Council and without the confirmation from the High Priest. There *are* others like you.’

‘But who confirms you as noblemen, your Lordships? The former Lords?’

‘Quite so, quite so! You do realise the problem, Vlad, don’t you?’

Albu was becoming more and more insolent and the young man’s apparent lack of reaction increased his confidence.

‘My Lord Albu, how many Lords have *you* served? And who named you in the Country’s Council?’

‘Me? I served under seven Lords and I hope to live and see yet a few more.’

‘How about you, Boyar Iacob?’ Vlad asked in an almost humble voice.

‘Who bothers to keep count? They come and go so fast!’

‘True...they come and go *too* fast...’ Vlad murmured.

The young Voivod’s calm, gentle, almost shy tone greatly pleased the Council nobles, giving them the firm belief that from now on, according to the momentary interests, it would still be them ruling the country rather than the Voivod himself.

The knights saw things otherwise. Stroe glanced sideways at Ler, and knew that his friend was thinking the same. Beneath their capes, they grabbed their broadswords, convinced that Vlad’s feelings, boiling on the inside, would soon burst on the outside, probably causing a brawl with the nobles and their men.

‘Who names the rulers, My Lords? And who banishes them? I know not of any Voivod who has ever left willingly.’

Vlad’s voice grew sour and his look lost its former softness.

‘There are twenty-three of you in the Country’s Council,’ Vlad went on. ‘How many of you have clear duties here? Just fourteen. How many of you keep armies on your estates? All of you! How many times have you taken sides and fought each other like fools so that one Lord or another would rule Wallachia? Have you ever thought you were forcing brothers and brothers-in-law from neighbouring villages to fight among each other?’

‘Why don’t you just quit with all that –’ Boyar Albu cut in, furious and upset, determined to crush the bud of rebellion in the young man who thought himself a Lord.

He did not get the chance to finish, as Vlad sprang from the throne, and kicked him in the chest so swiftly, that Albu did not have time to react. His neck clenched by Vlad’s strong grip, Albu suddenly lost all arrogance and could not hold back neither the violent trembling of the limbs nor the furious throbbing of the heart. Behind him, Boyar Iacob made for his sword, but Ler’s dagger whizzed by and stuck itself into his hand. The other noblemen took a step backwards, leaving an empty space around the Voivod: some, so as to show they had no opposing intentions, others for fear of the knights’ weapons now glinting out from their sheathes ready to strike.

‘Why, vermin, do you speak over me?’ Vlad growled at Albu, never loosening his grip. ‘What makes you think that a dog like you, white with scheming and betrayal, has any right over Great Mircea’s grandson and His Highness Vlad Dracul’s son? Did you stand by them against the Turk at Rovine, Varna or Giurgiu? Did you even bother to think what it’s like to fight for your own land? For the people who slave so you can stuff your face? For the Land of Wallachia and for the Voivod that gave you your estates?’

The man tried to answer, but at the first movement of his lips, Vlad’s fist struck him violently in the face, smashing his head against the Great Hall’s marble floor. No one paid any attention to the

nobleman now seemingly gone. All eyes gazed as though hypnotized at the young man on the throne again.

‘I shan’t judge you today, at the beginning of my reign, for your past deeds. There will be plenty of time for that. Or maybe I shall forgive all of you, but keep one thing in mind: from now on, you have a new ruler and you shall return to the ancient Lore! There shall be no more strife or schemes. No more Wallachians fighting other Wallachians; no more poor villages and towns; no more loafers and thieves!’

‘Your Highness, allow me to speak as one who knows the Country of Wallachia well.’

Cupbearer Izvoreanu’s intervention was full of respect and the title he addressed Vlad with was already beginning to sound natural.

‘Speak, cupbearer!’

‘Your Highness is young and passionate and many of us are glad to have another ruler from the Draculesti line, powerful and fierce. How do you expect us to get rid of theft or save the Country from poverty? I’ve travelled the world in my time, but I have yet to see a country without thieves, or where all towns and villages are rich. The Country is poor, your Highness...’

‘How is our country poor to you?’ Vlad thundered, rising to his feet. ‘No more of this! And no more of scarce troops! On my way here, I passed by rich lands, and uncared-for orchards, by rivers and thick woods. What does Wallachia lack? Nobles and simple people willing to do their jobs! Otherwise, we have everything. All we have to do is work and we will all be rich. And whoever refuses to take on the lowest and the highest jobs along with me, that man will seal his own fate! Let it be understood, your Lordships, that when a man has something to fight for, and when he sees his captain or nobleman or Lord fighting bravely and proudly, he too will fight till death and beyond! Only then will the Wallachians be undefeated! Now leave and think at what you have heard today. Tomorrow I shall speak to the people, let them know they have once more Lore and a ruler!’

Traditionally, only the nobles were summoned at Court when the Voivod would be changed. The town’s people and peasants from the neighbouring villages came too, but only because it was proper and because such change was also a reason for long evening discussions and new plans and hopes for a better future. For the last category of people, the changes would always come small and for the worse. Since Great Mircea, since the Turks got involved more and more in the affairs of the Country, and the quarrels between noblemen never ceased, worries and ever greater burdens fell upon the shoulders of the needy simple people. One would not see the nobles at labour!

There was word from the new Voivod that on April 28th 1456 all of Targoviste, and one man from every household in the surrounding villages, were to present themselves at Court early in the morning.

And thus, from as early as four in the morning, candle lights began to flicker in the windows of Targoviste homes. For most people, accustomed to hardships, the command was no good sign. Why should they all come? Did this mean that the Turks were on their way and the great army was assembling? Were new taxes being settled?

Soon after dawn, the people’s impatience and anxiety, poorly hidden beneath the festive outfits, filled the Royal Court of Wallachia. At Targoviste, for the first time in many years, came also the villagers of Moreni, a mountain village known to have openly held the side of the late Lord Vlad Dracul in his fighting with the rival family of Dan, even after his death.

Not before long, the nobles’ chariots began to arrive one by one, fancy and decorated according to rank. Their faces, swollen and worried, showed that many of them had not closed an eye all night long.

Lead by Boyar Albu, the most influential men in the Country headed straight for the palace entrance.

There however, their surprise was neither little nor pleasant. One moment before their entering the Great Hall, the door sprang open and out came Vlad Basarab, the one who, in spite of their will, already thought himself a Lord.

‘Good morning, good people!’ he greeted, his face lit up by a kind and beautiful smile.

‘Bless you, Your Highness!’ answered the gathered crowd immediately.

‘Good morning to you too, honoured noblemen!’ Vlad continued, amused by Albu and the others’ discontent. ‘What is the matter, Boyars? Could it be that you are upset that I greeted the people first and then you? Is it not fair that at least once in a while we consider those who work and fight for us? Is it not also fair that we should work for them and for our land in return just as our ancestors did before us?’

Albu’s reply was a deep bow and a fox’s grin.

“You’re not going to teach me what’s right and what’s not!” he thought to himself. “Just because you threw a greeting to these paupers and got the idiots to call you ‘Highness’ doesn’t mean you’re a Lord already. We’ll see who gets the last laugh!”

‘Sure, sure!’ he went on aloud, avoiding addressing the young man with any title. ‘It’s for them indeed that we endlessly work our minds and our hearts; for what would a country be without its people or its nobles who have always enlightened it?’

‘That is very true, Albu! A Lord must have subjects to rule in order to *be* a Lord. Otherwise, he is merely a hermit tormented by the illusion of greatness.’

Somewhat unhappy that Vlad had had again the last word, Albu looked for support from the other noblemen. He never got the chance to receive it however, because, from beside him, Vlad began to address the gathered people.

‘Good people, honest townspeople and villagers and you, too, My Lords! It is proper that my first word as Voivod of Wallachia should be for everyone alike, simple and great, rich and poor. I have not returned to my father and my grandfather’s throne for ambition or wealth. No one shall ever raise fortunes as long as the Country is said to be poor. Wallachia is not poor! I see it rich and beautiful, but blindfolded and burdened by both greedy and petty thieves, inside and out. As long as one single man steals in my Country, as long as one single man is idle, we are *all* guilty! God has given us everything we need and much more! It is enough to will it, and we can all live proudly, without worry or fear! Our mountains are covered in pastures and filled with game, forests and clear rivers; in fall, the hills seem to bend under the burden of too much fruit, and on our rich fields there is plenty of grain for three countries. Where does it all go? There is no time to reap these riches because of too many unjust conflicts between brothers! The great tradings, from the west to the east and back, crosses our country – but our own merchants cannot gather anything because foreigners have the privileges in our Country.’

‘Forgiveness, Highness,’ a bald peasant in the front lines of the crowd dared to speak. ‘But what can we do ’bout the thieves, ’cause we can’t catch ’em! And if we do catch ’em, we chase ’em away, but many times they go steal elsewhere. We’re not gonna kill ’em, are we?’

‘On the contrary, from today on we shall quash them like the many locusts ruining our grains! I know that taxes to the nobles and the Court are far too great. This makes some of you justly think that you work the entire year in vain. Because after you’ve paid your taxes you are left with almost nothing and hence it’s not worth it that you slave for others. In seven days’ time, a new royal order will cut your taxes almost in half. So that you enjoy the fruit of your work, live your lives well

tailored and clean and serve well your Voivod and ruler when the time comes! But the thieves and dishonest merchants or traitors shall be killed without mercy! There's no place for injustice and lies in my Country!'

In front of the royal palace, murmuring had long stopped. Crowds reaching till beyond the church were listening to the Voivod's words in perfect silence. There was doubt on some faces, but for most, hope had taken over the confusion they had come with early in the morning. As for the noblemen, the news of cutting the taxes in half had brought about even more anxiety than a heavy sleep nailed with bad dreams. Only the cherry trees in the courtyard and the other younglings were carelessly ruffling in the wind, caressed by the gentle April sun.

'Starting today, all of you should remember that the law is one for everybody, just like the kindness of the Voivod and God. It is proper that you should be repaid for all your good deeds, and forgiven for your bad ones. Lay your sweat and blood by mine, and we shall enjoy peace and wealth together!'

'Long live Lord Vlad Draculea!' shouted a group of Targoviste men who had managed to break away from the spell of Vlad's words and passion before others had. At once, the greeting burst from every chest at the royal Court, while the noblemen had no choice but to shout together with the crowd.

For the time being, any confrontation with young Vlad would mean suicide. The Voivod's wise manoeuvre of speaking outside, in front of the people, had made their vote futile. From now on, Vlad was Lord of the Country for all Wallachians. A Lord that the noblemen had to get rid of as soon as possible...

The day had passed quickly, like any day filled with news and excitement. After little, short and not very sincere thanks from the Lord, the noblemen were allowed to go to their homes, and the simple people saw fit to return to their chores as well, which were many and hard in springtime. There was still agitation in the Lord's chamber, although midnight was drawing nearer, indifferent to men's thoughts and needs.

The five knights were with Vlad. The plainly decorated chamber had but a table and a bed. There was a Venetian tapestry on the northern wall, on whose silk threading two minstrels and a princess seemed to look directly at the properly hung icon on the eastern wall. Sitting on the highly decorated courtly chairs around the work table, Ler, Stroe, Mihnea, Marcu, Tudor and Vlad showed no sign of the fatigue collected in the last few days.

'My dear ones, the hardship is just beginning,' Vlad said. 'God gave us strength to reach Targoviste, as is just. So far, we've known our enemies and faced them openly. But from now on, we must fear even those that seem to be our friends!'

'But they should fear us, too!' Stroe answered grudgingly.

'Don't you doubt it!' Vlad continued. 'You all remember that, before going to Corvin, I asked you – up near Piatra Craiului – to obey me no matter how hard the task would seem to you. The time has come for you to show your faith and gather your strength, because what I'll ask you to do is not easy.'

'We fear nothing and we'll do anything you ask, if it is with justice!'

'Justice you say, uncle Ler... Justice...Enlighten me, please, as one less wise than you, what is just? To let the tree in your garden die or simply cut off the ill branches?'

'To cut off, Lord, but cut only what is ill,' Ler answered, worried with the Voivod's tone and words.

'To cut off the rotting leg of the brave man who has fought by your side in war, even if you know he'll suffer, or let the cancer spread through his whole body and watch him die?'

‘To cut off, even if he’s not brave enough to understand it. To hold him and cut!’

‘Then we have a deal. Tomorrow morning we’ll ride throughout the Country. Where I find a thief, I’ll cut him. When I find an idler, I’ll hang him. Terror will sweep over thieves and criminals, so that, not even in their dreams, will they harm anyone again!’

‘You speak just, Your Highness,’ Mihnea cut in. ‘But let’s not rush at things, each man must be judged by his own deeds.’

‘We’re not rushing, Mihnea! But everyone will be judged by his deeds and our time. They know that Wallachia does not lie between friends. The Turks dream themselves masters here, so do the Hungarians. Maybe I’d forgive everyone, if we were surrounded by peaceful and benevolent peoples; but today, mercy for the criminals means hatred for the other people who honestly try to lead better lives through hard work.’

‘You know what I’ve learned in my wanderings? I’ve learned that paupers and beggars filling the cities are the first to sell themselves to spies sent by Turks or other enemies. For a gold coin, they would sell anyone; tell everything about the city, about the army, about the Voivod.’

‘Kill the beggars, Lord?’ Tudor asked, his voice trembling with sadness.

‘No, brother! We’re not savages! Not kill them, but give them land to work, to be honest men, to fend for themselves and not beg around inns and bridges.’

‘And what if they won’t?’

‘Then we shall treat them like thieves! Is it not theft when you lie around all day doing nothing while others work, knowing that, out of the goodness of their hearts, they will give you some of their rewards? The Wallachians are good generous people...Many won’t understand that I’m doing it for them, they’ll all misjudge me, but they’ll see that in two or three years’ time their country will be rid of evils and free!’

All five knights winced at Vlad’s last words. They all wanted freedom for Wallachia, but now was not the time for rushed actions. The noblemen were not yet all in favour of the new Voivod, and the country’s army was not well trained. A war for freedom from under Turkish influence would mean suicide and the turning of the country into Turkish province.

‘Freedom of the Country...’ Stroe murmured almost inaudibly.

‘Once again you think of me as a dim-witted child!’ Vlad replied lovingly. ‘We shall not quarrel with the Sultan now, at the beginning of my reign, but we shan’t pay a golden coin more to the Gate either. I believe that three years from now Wallachia will be strong and free from evils. Our armies will be trained and powerful, our Hungarian neighbours and Moldavian brothers will see that they can resist the Turk if they stand by our side, and together we can drag the Sultan out of Europe! But all in good time. Now, in order to have enough leisure to build from within, we must have peace from without.’

‘I’d say we send a letter to the Sultan as soon as possible, to show our friendship, at least till we grow stronger.’

‘You’re right, Mihnea! You know their tongue better than anyone. Write down:

“To the great and illuminate Sultan, Padishah of Padishahs and king of kings.

We send you word from Wallachia along with our best wishes for your health and long life.

We ask of your Highness for time to order things in the country and we ask for your forgiveness that we could not collect the taxes in due time. The Hungarian is upon us and forces us to stand up to him, to great expenses for the proper equipment of the army. We believe that we can send the tribute to the Gate of Happiness³³ by spring, as we should.

I, Vlad, Lord and Ruler of the Country of Wallachia, wish your Highness a long and

prosperous life!”

‘The letter must leave for Adrianople first thing tomorrow morning, with two of your men, Mihnea! They mustn’t stop on the way and be careful! The noblemen will send their own letter to the Sultan, against me. It’s best that my word get there first, that way the Sultan will at least have doubts about our intentions. He’s gotten used to flattery and cowards, and that’s what he must believe we are!’

‘Will he believe you, Your Highness? Do you think he has so easily forgotten the years you lived near him? Has the mark of your knife already been erased from the foul one’s thigh?’ Mihnea asked, grinning at the memory of Vlad’s deeds during his imprisonment by the High Gate.

‘He won’t believe a single word, but he will hope I have changed. He has no choice. Right now, his army is retreating after the defeat at Belgrade, and another war by the Danube is impossible.’

‘We should, my Lord, send another letter to His Highness Iancu. At least for the world’s eyes. So that he won’t be held responsible for the troops he gave us by the Hungarian Emperor!’ Tudor suggested shyly.

‘The letter is already on its way, Tudor! Corvin knew from the very beginning what we were going to do and, even though he never told me himself, I sensed that a strong and allied Wallachia would be good for him, if he’s ever to be Lord of Transylvania again. Now let us talk of the Country!’

Old plans were interwoven with new ones, and the impetuosity of Vlad’s age and anger blended with the knights’ wisdom and prudence. There was only one thing the knights could not undo: the cruelty with which Vlad had already condemned thieves, beggars and traitors.

Close to dawn, when the cool light was sneaking through the blooming trees, closer and closer to the windows, the knights went to rest for a couple of hours. Only Tudor had remained at the great oak table. From where he was sitting, he could almost see the whole of Targoviste.

‘Forgive us, God!’ he uttered, eyes red from lack of sleep and sadness.



Right after noon, about the time when people get ready for lunch, royal messengers announcing the new injunctions started to arrive in Wallachian towns and villages. It was the way it had always been when the Lord had to inform the people about new taxes or summons to war: with drum beats and news shouted by the village or town heralds. This time though, the news seemed to be good ones. Actually, the best they the people had got in a long time.

In the middle of Targoviste, close to the market where peasants from nearby villages brought their merchandise, a spindly drummer accompanied by a small, time-stricken old man, but with a mouth as big as a barrel’s, were delivering the word:

‘Hear ye, hear ye!’ the old man shouted, stooping as if to squeeze the very last sound out of his body, to the amusement of the audience. ‘Lord Vlad calls all those without land or a skill to earn their bread to the Court this Sunday! All will be given land or bound apprentices, as be their wish! Let all be theeeeeeeere! You that need tools for your land but can’t buy or make them yourself, come, too!’

Like any unusually good or bad news, Vlad’s bidding spread like fire throughout all the households and inns of Wallachia. But those that had no land or wanted something from the regency were few. Proud people as they were, the Wallachians had pretty much everything they needed around the house. They could have used some peace and smaller taxes to the noblemen and rulers, but that was not for them to decide. And thus, on that Sunday, only one man showed himself at the royal Court

in Targoviste.

Short but bulky, with arms and eyes of steel, the man did not look like some poor fellow unable to earn his daily bread by himself.

The guards showed him to the Great Hall of Throne, where the Voivod was waiting. The man greeted with a fine, dignified bow.

“The Christian standing before me used to be a soldier, and a good one, too!” Vlad thought.

‘What is your name, man? And what would you need?’ the Voivod asked.

‘They call me Izvor, Your Highness, but I don’t know my true name or where I lived. For a long time I roamed the mountains and the woods like a beast, not wanting to see people, not knowing why.’

‘Were you wounded in war? Are you healed now? My medicine man will attend to you today!’

‘Thank you, my Lord, but I bear no wound on my flesh. I have bad dreams at night...I see myself next to a woman and three cheeky toddlers. We have our own house and yard. I see them clearly, every night. Then, the Turks raided us, akinci soldiers³⁴ out for prey.’

The man spoke with more and more difficulty. His eyes filled with tears, but Izvor somehow managed to hold them.

‘Speak, brother!’ Vlad encouraged him in a soft voice that few knew him to even possess.

‘The Turk leading them...I see him clearly, too, he shot an arrow right through my woman’s – I know she was mine! – straight through her heart. And that’s when the dream breaks into pieces...’ the man stumbled. ‘I see blood covering my eyes and my babies’ heads stuck on fence poles.’

‘Where’ve you been until now, you don’t seem to be come from the woods of late?’

‘No, my Lord! A year has passed since I came to Targoviste and I’ve been working wherever I could find. I reckoned Your Highness’d give me a patch of land, so I could be abreast of people, even though I may not deserve it!’

‘Why should you not deserve it, brother?’ Vlad asked in an even voice. ‘Because you couldn’t defend your woman and children? Because you couldn’t bring down a horde of akincies? Or because you can’t remember clearly what happened to your family? You should know that akincies come in large packs and if your house happened to be at the edge of the village, or even farther away, you couldn’t have known they were coming. And you couldn’t have done anything by yourself! It’s not your fault that you lost your mind with grief! You will get land and place to build a house!’

‘Thank you, Lord! You are a kind man and a righteous, merciful judge! With Your Highness on the throne, I dare hope things will straighten around here at last.’

‘Go now, brother! You will get land on one of my fields! Go and work it! Find yourself a place among people again! Stroe!’

‘Here, my Lord!’ the knight answered sullenly, suspecting what was to follow.

‘Let the rest of the poor people in need of land come in!’

‘There’s no one else, my Lord!’

‘You mean there are no more poor people in my Country? That’s good! That’s very good...Send word to all the paupers and beggars that a week from today I will show them mercy as well, like I should at the beginning of my reign! They will all get plenty of food and drink and two gold coins each.’

‘So be it, Your Highness!’ Stroe answered glumly.



In the Targoviste slum, the news that the Voivod will regale the beggars had already been celebrated for two days. Half drunk, Thicksnout, the chief of paupers, was looking down with royal disgust on his “subjects”, from the head of a rough table filled with kettles of wine and junk collected over time. By his side, Fox and Takesall, two gruff beggars, were watching over their “captain”, lest any harm reached him. The three were accepted as chiefs by the rest of the beggars; it was them that at the end of the day got half of the money raised through the mercy of the Targoviste people.

Few honest people had any idea about the strict ruling that governed the world of beggars. And fewer still could have ever imagined the kind of wealth stocked in the huts belonging to chiefs of the tatters begging the streets every day. Most of the money came from Turkish spies that by doing so were keeping themselves safe from being caught and punished. And no one suspected the beggars of betrayal. No one, except for the new Lord...

‘Booooo, you dogs!’ Thicksnout growled nastily ‘Sunday next we’re all going to the palace! Put in yer bags what Draculea’s gonna give us, and then grab some chalice or whatever you can get yer hands on! He’s got plenty, he’s the Voivod, ain’t he?’

‘I reckon what I’m gonna do,’ uttered a rat of a man, short, skinny and without any teeth, with a wide grin on his ugly face. ‘After the feast be done, I get my good clothes and go to Sache’s inn. That’s where the rich people gather and maybe we’ll loosen their purse a bit.’

Thicksnout’s laughter – while slapping his enormous belly – was accompanied by the satisfied grins of the other beggars, about forty all in all. Among those that were not allowed to sit at the slimy table reserved to the “ranked”, there was a young man, face half covered by a shaggy old hood, barefoot and filthy, just like the rest. Soon, the young pauper got up and left unnoticed. A careful eye might have noticed his agility or the dagger hidden beneath the ragged cape, but it was unlikely that anyone could have ever suspected that in less than an hours’ time the young beggar would exchange his outfit for a Voivod’s gaberdine.

‘The beggars deserve no better fate, my lords!’ Vlad said to his knights, while changing outfits. ‘Still, I will ask them again on the day of the feast. The one who is willing to work shall live!’



On the same day, but towards the centre of the city, at the Light of Wisdom Inn, all the tables were full, as usual. Wealthy commoners and even some noblemen were cheering Sache up with their clamor. He was blabbering to himself in front of a great tin kettle in which he was putting together his famous chicken stew.

‘That’s right, peppers, start boiling, right here by the tomatoes, the poultry is on its way! I’ll be puttin’ the cucumber last, ‘cause he, wicked that he is, softens up in a minute and his crust is worthless, not to mention the core. A bit of garlic, some squash and – pop! the stew’s done! Next to it goes some...’

Sache was pulled away from his pleasant gastronomic observations by the silence suddenly taking over his inn. No one was speaking, no song was to be heard from at or under the tables. All eyes were on the door where now stood Mihnea, the old knight of Vlad Draculea, the new ruler of Wallachia. Everyone knew him by appearance or name and descriptions or legends going around the entire Country, about him and the other knights.

The thick and still entirely black hair reaching below the shoulders, the spiky and a little greyish beard and the cunning blue eyes blended harmoniously with the straight and brawny body that

only skilled warriors possess. His simple black, masterfully tailored clothes strengthened the deep impression Mihnea had on the people at the tables. Only his warm and serene smile, like that of a monk, chased some of the strange feeling of too much force flowing in the air.

‘Oh, what joy!’ Sache shouted. ‘Come in, Mister Mihnea! Welcome!’

‘Thank you, Sache, I’m happy to find you in good health and I hope you’ll find a seat for me among these fine gentlemen that are lucky to have before them your famous dishes!’

The knight’s embellished manner of speech was famous for being able to smooth even the most knit of brows; it was said to actually be the knight’s most remarkable weapon. Right away, proud of receiving such undreamt of attention, the soldiers and townspeople at the inn began to treat Mihnea as one of their own. Only two or three noblemen – half hidden in the dim light at the corner table – were making faces, a bit discontent with the people’s reaction.

‘What will you be delighting us with today, Sache?’ Mihnea asked.

‘Well, what shall I bring you, my lord...to start with, a steamy broth, snowy with cream, in which meat balls bathe merrily, dizzy with the sourly scent of peppers and fresh borsch. Then a stew in all the colours of the rainbow, stolen today at the break of dawn while the dew was still lingering about, from cucumbers, tomatoes, squash and bean pods, all gathered around two chicken breasts bursting with pleasure at the thought of coming before you; and, in the end, a little cheese pie, gilded with egg yolk and sanctified with a cross of raisins.’

‘Go, you madman!’ Mihnea laughed ‘Go and fetch them, my mouth is watering already!’

‘I’m going, my lord, I’m going!’ Sache squealed, disappearing behind the counter separating the kitchen from the dining room, but ‘God forgive me!’ he yelled turning around like a whirligig ‘I haven’t set your table! Sofica, bring another table for knight Mihnea!’

‘If the fine men here don’t mind, I’d rather sit here next to them, there’s plenty of room.’

The soldiers to which the knight had spoken, eight of them, were sitting around a large table in the middle of the room. Thrilled with the attention from the famous Mihnea, they quickly pulled their chairs closer to one another, brought another one and in the blink of an eye made room for the knight.

‘My lord, do us the honour of having a cup of wine with us,’ one of the men began.

‘Thank you, brother! To the new Wallachia and its Voivod!’

‘To the new Wallachia and its Voivod!’ all the people in the inn replied with raised cups.

‘Pardon our foolish question, lord!’ the soldier continued. ‘But...will Vlad Draculea truly be the saviour of the Country? He called for the people to give them land or what it was that they needed and we believe he is kind-hearted and cares for us, simple people, but we haven’t heard a thing about him since he was taken prisoner by the Turks.’

‘I’ve been with him all these years, my good men! And let me tell you this, Vlad Draculea holds nothing dearer than the throne and Country of his forefathers. Let me tell you a story from when he was still prisoners of the Pagans.’

For a few moments, the knight stared into nothingness, lost and gloomy, but then winced and was content to notice than even before he had started his tale, the people in the inn had pulled their chairs closer and were waiting anxiously.

‘We were at Egrigoz, in Anatolia. Back then, I was pretending to be loyal to the Sultan so I could be close to His Highness Vlad. After a few months of trying to persuade him to go out for military practice, through both pleading and threats, our Prince started to show his skills at archery and throwing the kargi; but only every now and then, when he felt like it.

‘One fine day, the Sultan wished to see his prisoner fighting one of his janissaries. But Vlad told the guards come to fetch him that he didn’t want to leave his cell. As they had to comply with the

order, the Turks, surprised that the Romanian was unresisting, tied his hands and carried him to the yard where Murad was waiting. Vlad was wearing a large shirt cut out of sacking, which made him look pretty pimping; neither I, nor the Turks suspected how much he had secretly trained and how strong he'd got. At the edge of the drill field, His Highness stopped and refused to take another step. By now, they knew whipping had no effect on Vlad, so the Pagans tied his hands to a horse with a long rope, then whipped the animal, to drag the captive in front of the Sultan.

'I was truly afraid, because the stallion had begun to gallop at full speed, scared by the tumult of the hundreds of amused Turks gathered around it. No man could keep up with such a strong animal and, after a few minutes, my heart was beating its way out of my chest. I hadn't really seen what had happened, as I was trying to find the Sultan and beg for mercy; I heard a thud and when I looked towards the field where Vlad was being dragged, all I could see was one big dust cloud. We all thought the boy had been thrown badly and trodden.

'But when the dust began to clear, Vlad's outline became visible, strong and menacing, like no one had seen him before. He was standing, with his fists still tied up to his chest and his head bent in fury. But the poor horse had been felled by our Lord's uncanny jerk and was now laying dead at his feet.

'Vlad's baggy shirt had been torn apart in the tumble, exposing the large and bulging muscles no one suspected the Romanian to have.

'He swept his eagle-like look over the thunder-stricken Pagans and shouted to them slowly, in his deep voice, without raising his eyes: "*Beware, you vile creatures! My time will come!*"

'And did he fight that day, Lord?' one of the soldiers asked.

'I wouldn't call it fighting...It was too short for a fight. At first, the Turk tried furiously to hammer at Vlad, but every time his blows hit only air. Before the fight, His Highness had hissed to the Pagan, grinding his teeth: "*Leave!*". But then, with his eyes wide open as if with surprise, Vlad started springing like a cat from the Turk's blows. Not with fear, but with disgust, lest the Pagan should touch him. No matter how hard the Turk tried to hit him, it was all in vain! A few moments later, Vlad's patience came to an end and shouted to his opponent: "*You dare touch a Basarab with your filthy hand?*" and punched the Turk in the head so hard that his head flew backwards, as if to come off, and the janissary crashed a few meters away, dead!'

'Amazing!' another soldier exclaimed enthusiastically. 'And how many janissaries has Vlad killed since?'

'None! The Sultan didn't ask anyone to fight His Highness for a while. And later, when I convinced him it was for his own good that he came out for battle practice – to learn how the Pagans fight and to strengthen his body and sharpen his reactions – Vlad would spare his opponents, but he would scold all of them for daring to fight a Basarab.'

'And you, lord Mihnea, how did you get the Pagans to believe you?' another soldier asked.

'I endured, that's all...'

No one insisted, but each and every one of them would have liked to know if all the incredible legends about Mihnea's cunningness and fantastic courage in the Pagan country were true. It was obvious that the knight's memories were not of the pleasant kind and that he was not willing to unbury them.

'I know that much was fabled about us,' the old knight continued 'but you ought to know that Tudor, Ler's son, is craftier than any of us.'

'Is that so, my lord?' Sache chimed in, sounding much more curious than he had intended to.

'Yes, Sache, don't be surprised. He's young, but gifted with all the gifts that Fate bestows on a

dozen lucky men. We haven't had only friends in Transylvania and Hungaria, but Tudor always knew – before we did – whom we should or shouldn't trust; and when we had to fight for our lives, Tudor – shy and soft-hearted like a lass, as we all know him to be – would turn into an untamed lion. He's got only one foible...or maybe that's his greatest gift. He never kills his enemies unless he has to. He hit many of them in the head, with his fist or sword handle, but was always careful to just knock them senseless, not kill them.'

'How so, my lord, not even those that drew their sword on him?'

'Not even those! His heart is filled with the great and true love of Christ! But don't think him feeble! We were once on a bison hunt in the Fagarash Country and, out of nowhere, Dan's men appeared. It was clear that someone had let them know when and where we'd go hunting. His father, Ler, had been hit in the leg by an enemy hatchet and was fighting with two titans as big as doors. His Highness Vlad happened to be a few feet away and, along with Stroe and Marcu, were hardly standing against most of the assassins paid to kill us. Around Tudor, four enemies were trying in vain to touch him with their swords. But when he saw Ler falling on his knees, our young friend turned from angel to devil! He spun quickly between his four opponents, unlike anything I've ever seen, and with a single smashing blow cut off the heads of all of them. Those that had swamped Ler shared the same fate.'

'Bravo!' Sache shouted ecstatically. 'I've always dreamt of such a lad for my...'

But he did not get the chance to finish his thought. Sofica's nudge had been stronger than the innkeeper's enthusiasm.

'And there's more!' Mihnea went on. 'After that, Tudor asked us to let the survivors flee. I thought it was from mercy, as was his nature. An hour later though, Tudor tracked them down through the forest, and let me tell you, he's better at it than any hound. Before sundown, we had reached the village where Dan's soldiers were gathered.'

'And did you butcher them, sir?'

'No! There were six of us, and we had no clue as to how many they were or where they were hiding! The bad thing was that there was a long way from the edge of the forest to the first houses, and they had guards everywhere.'

'They must've known they were doing wrong!' Sache condemned them spitefully. 'They knew His Highness Iancu didn't want them on Transylvanian ground, and they still had the nerve!'

'True! They were watching out for Iancu's troops coming to punish them. That's why they didn't venture far beyond the Wallachian border.'

'And what did Tudor do, my lord?'

'He turned his tunic inside out, showing the dark brown, muddy colour of the leather lining, and smeared his face with slime taken out from beneath some ferns. His Highness Vlad was doing the same, as if they had agreed to beforehand. They looked like forest ghouls, all smeared and hair pulled back. Then they started crawling slowly towards the edge of the village. You could hardly spot them in the dim light, but I tell you I've never heard of anyone being able to complete such a task. They seemed to be still, but they were moving, very slowly. They were like fog seeping under the grass, unseen and impossible to feel. They used every bush, every swell of the ground, to hide better.'

'When they were a few feet away from one of the guards, Lord Vlad jumped him like a lion and quickly wrung his neck, like to a chicken. Then he stood up straight, just like the guard had. The other sentinel looked towards the place he had barely heard a faint noise from; seeing in the poor light that someone was standing straight and naturally where his companion should've been, he must have thought nothing was wrong. Tudor continued to crawl till beneath the window of the closest house.'

Only two hours later – and two long hours they were! – did those two return, and we could leave. That’s how we found out that Dan was going to send another cohort to ambush us, the next morning on the road to Hunedoara.’

‘And did they, my lord?’

‘They sure did, but now we were ready for them!’ Mihnea answered laconically, cutting short a tale of bravery that could have taken hours.

‘And how’s it at the Turks, my lord?’ asked another soldier. ‘Is it true they’ve got two-headed horses and some of their men are pitch black?’

‘Ho now! How’s it to be?’ Sache put in frills, trying to prove how much he knew, as usual. ‘They has they’s strange ways, but not so much as you’ve heard. ‘Cause they is Pagan and don’t go to church, and even feast they’s eye looking at naked broads belly-singing...’

‘They do what, man? Belly-singing?’ one of the men burst into laughter. ‘You mean belly-dancing! I’ve heard of these things.’

Sache turned as red as a lobster, gulped and carefully measured his “opponent”. The man did not look like much, and his ragged coat had seen better days. As he could not allow such a man to contradict him, in his own inn, Sache went on, looking at the fellow with some kind of pity:

‘You knows I ain’t wrong! ‘tis like I tell it, the odalisques sings with they’s belly!’

The beginning of a smile appeared on Mihnea’s face, which made the innkeeper back down a little.

‘’Tis true that only of the finest in the Sultan’s harem...who...well...maybe two or three of ‘em...’

‘Give us a break, man!’ the pilgarlic kept on laughing, while having another sip of wine.

The man’s scoffing merriness proved too hard to endure, so our wise innkeeper serenely and proudly made up another whimsy that in a few hours’ time would circle the city and amuse the townspeople.

‘If you’d travell’d as much as I has and seen so many breeds of people, you’d know that some broads are skilled in such foul things and pucker the skin ‘round the belly, makin’ a sharp and high sound like our uplanders make when singin’ with leaves. Well, that whistling drives the men crazy!’

Upset with his clients’ ever more booming laugh, Sache got up and, with a royal wave of his hand, started staring at the ceiling, as if in deep thought. Then he said:

‘I’m leaving! Y’all don’t know nothing!’

Hardly had he started for the kitchen, when he suddenly stopped before the window facing the street and yelled like a madman:

‘Oh, dear God! The Lord’s comin’ at my place! His Highness himself is coming here!’ the baffled chubby man said, rubbing his hands.

The soldiers and townspeople jumped to their feet, not knowing what to believe. Never before had any Lord stopped at the inn, like common people. It had happened that one Lord or the another wish to have supper at some of the city’s great inns, but only after long arrangements and never without the company of numerous guards.

Before the people got a chance to come to their senses, the hefty figures of Vlad Basarab and young knight Tudor appeared in the door frame.

Vlad’s long black hair and thin arched eyebrows seemed matched by a skilled craftsman with Tudor’s blond hair and oblong eyes. It was easy to notice the deep bond between the two, stronger than brotherly love; the type of bond that comes once in a century maybe, between two people that need no words to understand each other and who feel connected even though they are miles apart.

Vlad and Tudor were two facets of the same soul, that blended harmoniously and forever.

‘Bless you, Your Highness!’ the people in the inn uttered in confusion.

‘Bless you, too, good people! Now sit down and carry on with your lunch! Sache!’

‘Here, my Lord!’

‘Join these tables and make some room for us! And bring us something to eat, we’ve come a long way!’

No matter how nice and friendly Vlad Draculea spoke, you could easily feel the authority of a powerful man, a man used to passing out orders.

The tables were joined hastily, forming a single long one at whose end sat Vlad, flanked by Mihnea and Tudor.

Right away, Sache returned with a large kettle of fragrant, dark-coloured wine.

‘No wine now, Sache!’ Vlad started, aware that he would kindle the curiosity or even disappointment of the soldiers. ‘As long as I carry a sword, I should not have wine or any mind-troubling liquors. Not even a cup! The sword, as well as the job we’ve all taken, must be respected!’

Confusion spread over the soldiers’ faces. They had never thought that it would be wiser to abstain from drinking when carrying weapons. It seemed to them that food did not go down well without wine.

Voivod Vlad guessed their puzzlement and began explaining, as though softly talking to himself:

‘I’ve often seen how brothers-in-arms end up fighting after a few kettles of wine. And it would have been better if they had left their swords at home. I have also seen guards between shifts losing their strength, heavy with wine in some tavern. Could they be trustworthy sentinels after a sleepless night, sprinkled with such alluring liquors?’

‘’Tis true, Your Highness,’ Sache cut in. ‘I’ve had me share of quarrels between soldiers here, but few.’

‘To those cut, it was enough! One quarrel is already too much for the Country’s army. Every man must know his duty at all times. On his days off, he can eat and drink all he wishes, but with measure! A clear mind can better enjoy the beauty of life or the taste of food! I want my men strong and skilful in battle! I want their women and children to have husbands and fathers, not weep for their men dead in fights they could have won or should have never got into!’

Even those that initially could not conceive a meal without wine started to agree with the young Voivod. Now the soldiers were looking at their cups in confusion, not knowing what to do.

‘Those that have had more than a cup, let them get up and leave!’ Vlad ordered briefly.

Fortunately, the soldiers had just arrived at Sache’s inn, so none of them was forced to leave the table they had the honour of sharing with Vlad.

‘Don’t think that having too much to drink from time to time can do no harm. Not many know this, but at the Sultan’s court I heard a few great councillors talking about Baiazid, the one that dared fight our beloved King Mircea! This Baiazid fellow abjured his harem and took a Serbian wife. And this woman accustomed the foul to drink home-made brandy. Before the battle with Timur Lenk, the Tatar Khan, Baiazid had a few gulps of brandy, to strengthen his courage. He was so drunk that he mounted his horse backwards, his face towards the horse’s tail!’

‘It’s true what he says! I was at the Ottoman Gate and many knew it, but spoke of it secretly!’ Mihnea confirmed.

‘And when he was supposed to order his men to attack, the Sultan pointed the flag backwards, the signal for retreat. Those close to him knew they were to attack, but those further away started running back, as the flag showed. Thus, with the army broken in two, defeat could not be far.’

‘By the time Baiazid came to his senses, he was locked in a cage like a beast and walked through the rows of Tatar soldiers, so that every one could see the one who had thought himself master of the world.’

Nobody laughed, which was right. Vlad had not meant the true story of Baiazid’s end as a joke. As a result, the soldiers passed their cups to the other customers.

‘Drink to our Lord Vlad Draculea!’ one of the men proposed, feeling a little bitter at the sight of his cup passing into the hands of a round-bellied, rosy-cheeked man.

‘And to you men, as well,’ Vlad replied. ‘From today on, you are already better soldiers! I tell you that, just as our Voivod Mircea was undefeated, so shall we, as long as we stand united in obedience of holy matters and restraint.’

From Sache’s inn, the story of Vlad’s advice came out into the streets, roamed for a while among townspeople’s booths, around people’s homes and finally reached the Targoviste barracks, where it immediately became an unwritten commandment.

People started sensing Vlad Draculea as one of their own and that his wisdom was what made him Lord, above his strength and the Draculesti descent.



The same detailed story, about long-forgotten bravery and wounds healed by history.

Today, though, the old man managed to take me by surprise yet again. In the middle of his story, he suddenly got up and asked me to leave!

That's precisely what I did, because he seems an endless source of information about this Voivod and his times, and this is one opportunity I don't want to lose.

On my way downhill towards the village, I turned my head and, for a second, I thought I saw him running lively and agile like a young soldier, his bow ready, and disappearing in the woods behind his house. An illusion, of course...

Arefu, 20th of March, 2008

“... and those still young, along with their wives and young ladies, still in their Easter garments... they took them all to Poenari and had them work on the citadel until their clothes were torn and were all left bare-skinned...”

The Cantacuzinesc Chronicle ³⁵

Through the solemn silence of dusk, the priests' chanting flowed crystalline and rousing. It was the time of the Denie sermon³⁶ in Targoviste and in every home, from the main road to the farthest alleys, there were lit candles at the windows and in people's hearts. God's peace had descended over people, asking them to forget any old strife, at least for a week.

In the chamber of the new Voivod of Wallachia, there were candles on the work table; not out of some pious effusion, but rather to keep company to the two young men talking excitedly.

On the chair opposite Vlad's, his interlocutor had been absorbed in his own thoughts for a moment. The blonde hair framing the oval face with its soft features and clear blue eyes, made him look like a seraph or an angel sent by God to tame some of Vlad's hate before Easter.

'Why do you judge me, cousin Stefan?' the Voivod snapped.

'I'm not judging...' the Moldavian prince answered softly. 'I'm only keeping my promise to you!'

'Promise?' Vlad laughed bitterly. 'I remember it differently! We swore to help each other and the first to become Voivod was to help the other regain his throne. Not to foil each other's plans! Not to have you teach me what fear is!'

'I'm not talking about fear, Vlad! But of prudence! Now is the time for it! You want to split open the noblemen of Targoviste? Do it if they deserve it, but...'

'If? If they deserve it?'' the Wallachian Lord was enraged. 'They betrayed my father and buried alive my brother Mircea! You should know, Stefan, that I never treasured anything as much as I did them! Mircea took care of me when I was little...he was kind... he never knew how to scold me...'

The words were drowning in his mind before he could put them in order. The image of his elder brother Mircea, twisted, his mouth wide open, screaming for air, was haunting him every night. On the day he arrived in Targoviste, he went to his brother's tomb and opened the coffin. He found him buried alive, not killed by sword, in fair fight, as he had been told. His brother had struggled, but had been left to die asphyxiated by the noblemen now pledging their obedience to him!

He had seen their obedience's worth! Heartless dogs!

He let himself fall from his chair and curled up by the cold, white wall of the room. He remained there for a while, holding his head in his hands.

With Stefan, he had found respite to be himself, without the mask of power and flawless coldness. In front of his cousin, he could laugh or cry. Or swear revenge...

Stefan did not say more. He knew Vlad well. Years before, after having escaped from the Turks, he had come to them, at Suceava, and taken shelter at his father's, Voivod Bogdan Musat. Later on, after the Voivod's cowardly murder, they had both fled, hunted by Petru Aron's hordes; they had lived in forests, like beasts, for weeks. That was when Stefan had been truly introduced to that consuming fire that made Vlad go on day after day: fight, endure and, most of all, always win.

Continuously chased by Aron, they had fled to Transylvania, where they both had friends and noble families that supported their cause. He had grown accustomed to the passion in Vlad's words and his impetuosity. At first, Stefan believed him to be merely impulsive, but every time Vlad had kept his word, whether shouted in anger, or said in well measured calm.

But now, Stefan feared that the dream they had weaved years before, the dream of both

becoming Lords and raising their countries as one – united and powerful, over which no empire could tread – could come apart because of a hasty decision.

‘Don’t think I don’t know what I’m risking now, Stefan!’ Vlad said, tearing himself from the agony of memories. ‘Yes! Tomorrow I want to raise all corrupt noblemen and impale them as they deserve!’

‘But their armies represent more than half of the Country’s army! What if they rebel?’

‘No! The armies you call theirs are the Country’s! Thus they have to obey *me*, their Lord!’

‘And you think they’ll do it?’ Stefan asked, a trace of irony in his voice.

‘I do, Stefan! Because I’m the one who gave them their freedom; I’m the one showing them the way to a free, proud life, the way any life should be, whether a nobleman’s, mine or a peasant’s!’

‘I still say you cut them one by one! Lest they should all rebel at the same time! And not on Easter! It’s a sin, Vlad!’

‘Sin...’ Vlad whispered faintly.

Silence fell over the Voivod’s room again. Vlad’s large eyes were fixed on the icon on the eastern wall. From up there, Christ, bleeding on his cross, was also begging him wordlessly. He was *showing* him!

He managed to tear his eyes away, spiteful that he could not feel Jesus’ love, that he could not understand it. Through the window, he saw the great church in the royal court, gilded by the power of the numerous candles and the small, newly sprang leaves. They were shivering, green and shy, unaccustomed to the world, but understanding the chanting of the Denie sermon. Only *he* could not understand it!

‘Sin...’ he repeated. ‘Sin to impale those that murdered my father and brother! Sin to cut those that sell the Country to the Turk! Sin to free the people from the noblemen’s yoke and to give them back their minds and hearts, unbroken by humiliation and fear!’

His voice was becoming more and more resonant and passionate. Stefan realised that the decision had been made, although he felt that there was still a battle in Vlad’s heart; that the good and the evil were still overlapping, mixing together until they would turn into a final and doubtless resolution.

‘Or maybe you want me to forgive them? To forgive *death*! You ought to know, Stefan, what it feels like to lose someone that was the light of your life! What it’s like to lay on the ground, your knees crushed by pain. How the pain in your chest struggles to turn into tears, but you know you’re not allowed to cry! You should remember how dark is the day you understand that you’re never going to see them again, no matter what you do, and that you’re going to miss them till the end of your life! Should I forgive those who cowardly murdered two good people? Should I let live those that brought upon me the greatest suffering? It took me days to pull myself off the ground, sit up straight and prepare for today! To have them in my power and send them to the underworld, where they belong! I couldn’t eat for days and I was spitting my guts out from pain and pity for my father and brother. And you want me to forgive them??? Mind what you’re asking of me, Stefan!’

The Voivod’s features had become sharp and hard; he could not take his mind off the day he found out about the meaningless murder of his family. The day he was left alone!

‘You need the noblemen, Vlad!’ Stefan put forth his last argument.

‘But who made them noble? Was it not our grandfather and then our father? Which they then sold to the Turks or Hungarians or whomever, as it suited their needs?’

‘Not on Easter day, Vlad! Not on Easter! Don’t be a savage!’

Vlad’s eyes had suddenly lost their steel gleam and now were embracing Stefan with poorly

disguised love.

‘You pray silently and aloud, you pray to God and to me, for my sinful soul, dearest Stefan! I do not know how many others love me as much as you do! I think you are all I’ve got. You and my knights. That’s all!...few for a Lord! And I believe there will be fewer still, in the years to come!... Only those that understand me!’

‘I’ve read you like a book, Vlad! I know that you did those terrible things that frightened Targoviste out of love for your Country and people, not out of hate for thieves and murderers!’

‘And there will be plenty more terrible things till Wallachia is truly free! Until then, day by day, moment by moment, I will take upon me all that is evil in it, and take it with me to the underworld! My soul? I’ve long ago given it to the Country. Not even a thousand years of prayer will deliver it! Maybe I should be crucified, like Christ! Maybe then will some of my sins be forgiven.’

He was silent for a moment, prey to an apocalyptical vision. And then continued in a strong, untroubled voice, like a man that has nothing more to lose and chooses to fight till death.

‘But I am not worthy of the cross, Stefan, of its wood sanctified by the Saviour’s sacrifice! Many nights I myself like this: crucified between crosses, up in the air, nails of wind through my hands and feet; me and my knights, whom I dragged along in my ocean of sins. I can feel the storm ripping away shreds of our flesh and throwing it to the ravenous hounds, but the flesh grows back on and on, just so there is something more to tear, something to suffer. I feel pity for Ler and Mihnea and the others, but I see they are also content for ridding the Country of evils and that they endure *for her*! I know this shall be our hell! Crucified between crosses...’

‘You know of one love, Vlad,’ Stefan whispered, marked by his cousin’s words. ‘The love for Wallachia! I don’t know whether I should curse you or honour you like a saint. Saints do their benefactions out of love for people, knowing their path leads to Heaven! You have seen the destination of your dark road, but you keep to it, out of love for your people and land! I don’t know how many men would have the strength to go to Hell for their love! Perhaps God will forgive us the way he forgives everyone in His infinite mercy.’

Stefan had been in Targoviste for four days. He had come according to their agreement; they were to return to Moldavia together and reclaim his father’s throne. But they had not had the leisure to talk about it. He had found Vlad overwhelmed with worry and urgent matters. And bitterness...

He had had the chance to know his cousin’s impetuous nature and battle skills during the peaceful years in Suceava and the long hard years of restless roaming. Many a times had Vlad rescued him, risking his own life instead. Now, Stefan was heartily hoping to save Vlad’s soul and not let him spill blood on the holy day of Easter.

But it seemed that Vlad had already sealed the fate of the traitorous noblemen.

Stefan had long before finished the words that he hoped would change the Voivod of Wallachia’s terrible decision. He left him alone and retreated to his room.

He lit a candle and opened the beautifully carved window, in order to hear the priests’ chanting. The psalms reached him like a holy murmur, enshrouding the castle walls; they gave him hope for his cousin’s soul.

He spent the night on his knees, deep in prayer. He prayed for Vlad and also asked for something for himself:

‘And give us, God, at least one year without war and evil deeds, an interlude to stay here in this land You put us on and enjoy life together! Without knowing that we’re Lords, without ordering armies, without having to repair injustice!’

But sometimes, in this life, not even Saints³⁷ get what they ask of God...



On Easter Eve, 1456, the city of Targoviste seemed utterly deserted. There was no living soul on the streets, still with the breathless waiting for the Saviour.

A warm rain had washed the city early in the morning, thus preparing it for the sacred night to come. The rain's freshness still lingered on the streets, fawning on houses and gardens, reviving them.

Like any Christian, Vlad too dressed up for the Resurrection service³⁸. He did not choose the royal gaberdine though, but rather a simple merchant's clothes and a large-rimmed hat to cover his face. He and Tudor had secretly decided to go to a small church on the city outskirts. He just wanted to have his honest share of the sacred Light, without knowing himself watched and scrutinized by all the eyes around and without embarrassing the simple town folk with his presence.

Tudor wore almost the same simple clothes: a black woollen vest over his peasant shirt with sleeves embroidered in flower patterns. Beneath the vest, he wore a big dagger and a wide belt with his ominous knives all tidily ranged. He silently begged God to forgive such misdeed, but he did not let them go. He very well knew that the enemies of the new Lord were watching everywhere and every moment. He and the other knights had to always be ready, anytime, anyplace, even on holy ground. Not even sleep was what it used to be ever since they had come to Targoviste, nor was this mass a comfort anymore. He had made the decision to accompany the Voivod not for spiritual peace, but to protect him. He was going to cross himself with his other hand firmly grasping the knives and he was not going to close his eyes in pious humbleness not even for an instant. These were privileges only for the simple people or maybe only for the Lord himself. Peace of mind however was a very distant thing for him, Stroe, Ler, Mihnea and Marcu. Only after they had cleansed the country of thieves and beggars, had done war with the treacherous nobles, and then with the Turks, only then will they be able to drop their swords and suspicions forever. But there was a long way to go till that 'forever'.

They arrived at the Saint Vasile's Church about half an hour to midnight. The two stayed in the deepest darkness beneath a blooming cherry tree. The light from the church hardly reached them and they could not be recognized. Nobody minded them anyhow.

Inside the church, a nun, hunched from time and bowing, began to sound the wooden plate and outside, the nun's choir resounded everywhere, as clear as a bell. The people moved closer to the church door, crowding against each other, all heads lowered. Tudor alone kept his head up, carefully scrutinizing every Christian around them. Vlad sensed his friend's tension and his heart filled with pity and love for him. He took Tudor's hand in his and squeezed it gently like a younger brother's, softly whispering to him:

'Thank you, Tudor! And forgive me!'

Ler's son answered discreetly squeezing back Vlad's hand and smiling in a protective manner. Then, his searching gaze swept again over the large gathering around them. The bells began to toll powerfully and over them resounded the divine and joyful voice of the priest.

'Christ has risen! Christ has risen! Christ has risen!'

'Truly He has risen!' the people answered in one voice and in one spirit.

Then, the priests began the sublime chanting that announces to the world the Great Miracle of the Resurrection.

Christ has risen from the dead,

*His death forever ending Death,
And those in the Shadows
With Life He has gifted them!*

For a few moments, Vlad let himself dive completely into the perfect peace of the night. The priest was now reading the Scriptures, and Voivod Vlad had the vivid impression it was Jesus Himself calling out to them, telling them about forgiveness and understanding.

All around him, the night was shimmering slightly with the yellow light from the thousands of candles. As though from above, an ocean of teachings was falling down onto them, but nobody seemed to take anything in anymore. He wanted to throw away his commoner's apparel and yell to the people to stop whispering and just stand still and listen to the priest's sermon. The children's choir had begun its angel-like singing, but all around him, dressy old women were still chattering about cakes tastier than other years, about some neighbour woman who had not kept the fast, about ***all and nothing!*** Why were they talking about these things? Why weren't they listening to the sermon? A mumbled hubbub was swirling above the parish, as though to Vlad's spite.

He slowly walked away from the crowd, face still bent over the candle light flickering in his hand. He gazed at Tudor and heaved a deep sigh. The knight was the only Christian there without a candle. His hands always had to be at a ready for other type of work, less holy.

They hurried down the streets now lit from church to church and to the palace. Once there, Vlad mounted the staircase to Tudor's chamber and went in followed by his faithful friend. He took a cup off the artfully encrusted shelf and put it on the table. Then he left the burning candle in the young man's chamber. He wanted to thank him in some way, but he did not know what to say. What could be said to a man who renounced his own life and soul for him? He held him tight in his arms and whispered gently:

'Now you can sleep...it's all right, nothing's going to happen!'



On the first Easter morning, the Sun rose slowly on the hills bordering Targoviste, as if on tiptoes, a little afraid of the view that might welcome it. He had known for days of Vlad's plan to punish the rebellious high nobles. As he saw nothing amiss, the Sun got its courage up and rose a little more on the green hilltops, sending a few scouting rays over the capital of Wallachia. Then, boldening at last, he burst forward and flooded the city with his joy and warmth. From gardens and fields, lilac bushes seemed to greet the Sun with a jubilant "Christ has risen!"

The Easter morning did not find Vlad in church as would have been appropriate. The noble gold embroidered mantles and the high caps had transformed the service into a gala of greatness rather than a humble gathering of souls come to bring honour and praise to God and the Miracle of the Resurrection.

The Voivod did not enjoy this at all and had yet another reason not to attend the service: it had been at Easter time that the noblemen he now dissected with his eagle eye from under the arch of his window had murdered his brother Mircea. But *he* had not risen yet! Not for three days, not even for three moments, enough for them to say good bye!

He had feared this moment ever since he had taken Wallachia's throne. Now, the day had come! He knew exactly what he would feel like on Easter Day and he very well knew it would be neither Christian-like nor wise to dispose of the disloyal nobles, but he also knew that it was just for him to do so. And he would do it, too! He knew he could not bear to watch them sneering falsely in their

gilded garments.

Now, his cousin Stefan, gentle and kind as always, was begging him to save his soul. But what good did his soul do? To anyone.

‘Stroe!’ Vlad thundered, his eyes still fixed on the group of noblemen in front of the palace.

‘Here, Lord!’ the knight answered, entering the chamber.

‘Prepare me 30 pales! Now!’

‘They’re ready, Highness! I’ve had them prepared since yesterday. No one knows about them, just the five of us. Proceed how you know best, Lord! We are with you to the end!’

‘I know, my brother! And still with me you shall be to see this country rid of all evils and dangers!’

‘May God hear you!’ Stroe murmured, hurriedly stepping out in the courtyard of the royal palace.

Left alone, Vlad knelt before the great icon on the wall and tried to pray: without hope, without regrets, without passion.

All of himself wished to be able to stifle the obsession and rage that had overtaken him. His head hung lower than his body, which, although knelt, stood straight still, as though ready to fight. He felt as though frozen stars outside filled the sky, like a cold eulogy sung for his own anger that had not yet succumbed completely.

He thanked God for his living days and for having given him the strength to ascend the throne. Suddenly though, he stopped as if struck by lightning. He recalled his mother’s stories about the great king Decebal, the one who took his own days to prevent himself from becoming a Roman slave. From this story had young Prince Vlad learned many years ago that if a king became slave, his whole people is considered caught and made prisoner.

Was it possible that the curse he was preparing to take on himself would later recoil upon entire Wallachia *through him*? He could never allow such a thing!

He quickly thanked God, crossed himself rather shortly and hurriedly, and was out of the palace in the next moment.

Marcu was waiting for him at the gates as usual. He threw Vlad a quick glance and understood immediately. He sighed deeply relieved, then said:

‘What now, Lord?’

‘Now nothing! Stefan and I are going hunting! Just the two of us!’

“I’ll be hanged if you’re going just the two of you!” Marcu thought to himself amusedly. *“As if I or Stroe, or any of the others would ever leave you alone in the woods!”*

Vlad went to the stables and took his stallion. He hung his great sword on his shoulders, a hatchet on his waist, put on his knife belt, and he galloped out of the Royal Court. At the gates, he cried to Marcu:

‘Give news to Stefan that I’ll be waiting for him in the forest beyond the Monastery hill. Tell him I want him to come and hunt together!’

A little way off from the gate, Boyar Albu, now secretly named “The Great” by all the other noblemen, exchanged a quick look full of meaning with Parnia, his closest ally in their almost open war for Draculea’s disposal. Parnia was off quickly. He called for one of his servants and he gave a quick whispered order. The servant sprang from his saddle and also disappeared through the great gates.

Since he had entered Stefan’s manor, Marcu had completely missed all of these events. However at the highest window of the Chindia Tower Vlad had recently built, Ler had been all eyes

and ears, as usual. He turned to his inseparable friend and said shortly:

‘On his heels!’

‘Well, of course!’ Stroe answered in his squeaky voice. ‘Why should the Lord be the only one to hunt? We’re going too! And we’ll sure bring back some fine game in our tote bags, too!’

The knights had long since been on Albu and his close men’s trails. They were already well informed of Albu’s plans to kill Vlad and take the throne. He was rich – so rich, that he could afford to pay the other noblemen to accept him. He was old – so old, that he knew exactly what were the weaknesses of each among the other nobles who might be his rivals, and also, he knew how to take advantage of these weaknesses. Many a time had he named Voivod whomever it had pleased him. He had taken full advantage of the endless fighting between various throne candidates and he had controlled them like wooden string puppets. At certain times, he had even struck them in favour of one or another. He was intelligent and brave, but he had never known true loyalty or love for the country. Now, he considered time had come for him to become Lord of Wallachia in his own turn. So what if he was not of royal blood? Was he not the most respected and feared man in the whole of the Romanian Country? What, could he not start a royal line, as well?

Now he had found the means to waste Vlad without too much trouble. For this, he had prepared himself for a long time already!

The young Voivod had gone out hunting all alone and his servant would know exactly where to wait for him together with the five other hired mercenaries. The knights were still at Court and had received the order not to follow Vlad. Nothing could save the young man who thought himself master over them and over the country that the nobles hoped to suck dry as they well pleased!

What Albu did not know was that the five knights did not give a damn about Vlad’s commands when the question was leaving him alone, even though they usually obeyed him thoroughly. Their love and care for Vlad were far greater than the respect they owed him as a Voivod. And there was yet another thing that Albu completely ignored: the fact that two riders had already set off after the servant through the narrow gate behind the Royal Court, where one can see the ruins of Mircea’s ancient church even today. One was tall and blond, the other short, strong as an ox and talkative like a woman in the market place. They had never yet missed an enemy that they had every intention to pursue and catch.

Albu’s messenger was riding fast to Corbi, a small, almost abandoned hamlet, westward from Targoviste. There, the five German mercenaries, paid to take the Lord’s life, were waiting for him. This was a good plan. No one knew them in Wallachia and if the plan failed, they could not be associated in any way with Albu or other nobleman.

To the rider, the dusty road bordered with large burdock leaves, seemed more beautiful than ever! His mission was simple. He only had to take the message to the mercenaries, go back to Targoviste, and when Vlad kissed the dust, he would simply receive his due payment from Albu and live the remainder of his days in perfect peace!

When he reached the hamlet’s entrance, he slowed down to avoid suspicion and went directly to the last house near the woods. He dismounted, looked behind a few times to see if someone was watching him and laughed privately at his useless fears. There were but two families of old people barely making a living in this forsaken place. He noticed the neatly ranged horses of the Germans behind the first line of trees and his fears disappeared.

He entered the house, but his smile froze on his lips. In the faintly lit chamber, the five Germans lay dead, gone from this world, a knife stuck in each one’s throat. He wanted to run away, but heard the door slam behind him. He turned on his heels, dagger hastily at a ready to strike, but all he

managed to see was a fist straight in his face. Then everything went black.

When he came to, he realised he was in the worst situation possible. In front of him, Draculea's knights, Stroe and Ler, were standing before him. They had not bothered to tie him up. He still had the dagger by his legs, fact which made no difference whatsoever to the knights. He was absolutely no danger to them. He also knew perfectly well he had no chance.

'Hey, fellow, go into the woods, take a horse and ride wherever you see fit!' Ler said in a weird almost friendly tone. 'It's not fair to kill you today. We had no choice with the Germans. They were many and they're not accustomed to surrendering. You'd better run while you still can!'

'I never want to hear you've come back to Wallachia for as long as I live! Otherwise, it'll be *me* coming after you! And I won't forgive you next time! Get out!' Stroe spat disgusted.

At only a quarter of a clock's distance, on the way to Hill Monastery, Vlad and Stefan were riding shoulder to shoulder. They looked and most especially thought very different.

His massive body sitting up straight, his long hair to his waist, Vlad would appear to anyone from first glance as a perfect warrior.

Stefan on the other hand looked rather gentle and carefree. He was short, head a little over his cousin's shoulder, with shoulder length golden locks and large friendly blue eyes. Even when hunting he would wear his beautifully silk and gold braided shirt. He was quite proud of it and of his boots made especially for him in Venetian workshops. He used to say that a prince must look and behave impeccably at any time of his life.

At that particular time however, few would have suspected that young Stefan would live to become perhaps the greatest Romanian ruler.

'I know why you sent for me and especially why you left Targoviste today of all days!' he said to his cousin.

'Well yes, it would be obvious, I believe, for you and my knights that I did not want to see the nobles today; that I would not have resisted seeing their deceitful eyes and snake-like tongues!'

'You did well! Any important decision must be thoroughly weighed and not made rashly. This is how I shall do things in my Moldavia! I shall slay them one by one so as not to scare them at the beginning of my reign and make them my enemies!'

'And what if after you've cut the first the others will rebel against you anyhow? What if you have two treacherous nobles instead of one? And especially, what if, by letting them live, the others *will harm your country even more?*'

'I shall give them money and honours, but I shall take their soldiers away, little by little, and before they realise what I have in mind, they will be powerless. And so, Moldavia will become the most beautiful land in the world!'

'Second only to Wallachia!' Vlad laughed like he did when they were children and played Lords together.

'We're getting close to the forest, Vlad. Let's stop and prepare our arrows and bows!'

'You'll have no use for arrows at this hunt, cousin Stefan! We're out for bears. *This* is what I call a real hunt: when you're facing the beast alone and give all the measure of your strength; knowing that once in the forest, he will be hunting for you just as you're hunting for him! Arrows work for deer, but I pity its gentle eyes. I never kill it. A deer is prey enough for bears and wolves and other beasts.'

'Tzepesh the merciful!' Stefan laughed. 'Few would ever believe me even if I swore it. Then, so be it, cousin! We're after bears. We're leaving the horses here. Take your long knife and your sword. Let's go!'

The two headed to the heart of the forest, vividly green at the end of spring. Through the rich canopy of the trees, the warm light and the blue April sky penetrated downwards and everything throbbed with young life. New-born leaves and the dance of flowers around trees gave the fragrance of holiness and peace. After a while, the trees grew scarce, leaving space to bushes. They knelt down on the forest floor and crawled quietly, alert at every sound.

In the middle of a clearing filled with raspberry bushes, a huge brown bear was eating lazily, his fur chafing in the sun.

‘This one is mine, agreed?’ Vlad whispered to prince Stefan.

The latter hesitated for a while. He would have wanted both of them to corner the bear, he wanted to make sure Vlad would not perish in a trial never yet heard of. He knew of no one going bear-hunting carrying only a sword and a knife, but he had seen Vlad coming out unscathed from situations even more perilous. He decided to indulge his cousin, but remained alert, ready to intervene at any time.

‘Go!’ he whispered.

Vlad rose to his feet and slowly approached the beast before him. He kept his heavy sword a little behind him, ready to strike.

The bear growled furiously and sprang on two feet like a man. It was a head taller than the human in front of it. Its huge fangs, like sharp daggers, were glinting menacingly. It swiped a great paw at the hunter, but Vlad did not step back. He would always strike the hand or the paw that flung at him, be it in fighting men or animals. Where others chose to dart away or to block, he would strike back! It was the strange tactics of a brave and powerful man, of a true hunter that never stepped back from a challenge. The bear’s paw fell to the ground bleeding and Vlad, continuing his whirling spinning movement, gave fantastic speed to every cell of his body, and struck again the bear’s head with renewed strength. The beast stood still for a moment, dumbfounded by the force of the strike. Using this breathing space, Vlad thrust his sword deep into the animal’s flank. Then, he pulled out the sword, ready to strike again. The bear seemed as though turned to stone on its hind legs. It remained so for a few moments, without sound, without movement. Then, it collapsed on the forest floor lined with thick fallen leaves from last autumn.

Ten steps away from the scene, Mihnea and Tudor lowered their bows, perfectly hidden behind two great oak trees. They had been following Vlad without him ever being the wiser. They knew him well and had gone directly to his usual hunting ground. As a matter of fact, willingly or unwillingly, Vlad was never truly alone. The knights followed him everywhere, sometimes without anyone’s awareness, always ready to intervene, always ready to die for their Voivod.

Still cautious, Stefan approached the bear’s corpse. At first, he had been surprised at the thought of Vlad hunting without horse and arrows, fighting a head on, yet fair fight – till then unheard of. Now, he was utterly shocked by the way the short struggle had unfolded. The bear did not have even the chance of the deer that can still make its escape running. He stared at the Lord of Wallachia, not knowing how to react. He found his words with great difficulty.

‘I do believe you needed this fight, Vlad! Now let’s eat! We shall return to Targoviste in two or three hours, and you shall give the noblemen whatever fate you decide.’

It had become clear to Stefan that his cousin’s unusual strength needed to be released now and then. This eased the turmoil in Vlad, clearing his mind and his heart. In that moment, Stefan also understood that many Wallachian two or four-legged beasts would find their end by Vlad’s heavy sword.



The Great Hall of the throne was filled by surprised and distressed noblemen. Who was this Draculea to summon them in council on such a day? There could be no question of a Turkish threat; they were in excellent relations with the Sultan and they had paid the tribute in due time, without complaint. Now they were all gathered in Draculea's Hall, determined to teach him once and for all who the masters of Wallachia really were.

Vlad considered them all wordlessly from his beautifully sculpted oak wooden throne. Chin in his hand, head tilted a little to one side, he seemed a completely different person from what they had come to expect. He did not sit straight, did not demand order with his eyes or with his words as usual. Calmly, absently-mindedly, his eyes measured the nobles that had destroyed his family and had condemned him to long years of exile and errancy. They did not seem to feel any remorse for these things.

Silently, Vlad swept his eyes over the heavy stone archways that supported the walls of the Throne Hall, over the beautiful mosaic on the floor, over the flower decorated windows. This was the place where Mircea the Great and Vlad Dracul afterwards had accomplished their great plans for the Land's freedom. It was the same place where rulers before him had been sold for almost nothing by the nobles now standing in front of him and by others like them.

'My Lords, did you clean your mansions before Easter as is fitting?' Vlad asked all of a sudden.

'Is this why you have sent for us today, Your Highness? To ask what are our occupations in our own homes? Do you jest?' answered roughly Arvinte, one of the richest nobles near Targoviste.

'No, gentlemen! I do not jest! Not at all! But you have not answered my question! Did you or did you not finish the spring cleaning in your homes?'

'Of course we did!' Arvinte answered evasively. 'Every Christian does this in his home. Or is it perhaps that Your Highness did not see fit to do the same in your chambers and castle?'

The nobles burst into scorning laughter like the barking of an unfaithful dog.

Vlad however remained still, as though in strange numbness and said and did nothing. A while later, his echoing voice was heard again over the nobles' murmuring:

'My Lord Arvinte is right! I was not as diligent as I should have been!'

'Then perhaps it is time for Your Highness to leave and let someone worthier rule,' Arvinte said with unexpected courage in his words, now that he had the support of the other noblemen.

A tomb-like silence fell over the Great Hall of Throne, but the Lord's reaction did not come. He was perhaps too cowardly. He still did not have an army and he was no match for them, the great nobles. They were all present except for Albu. Upon hearing that Draculea had sent for them on Easter Sunday, Albu "the Great" had most hurriedly set off to his mansion. He would not obey the command of the presumptuous boy who aspired to be a Voivod. Or perhaps it was his extensive knowledge in scheming that had whispered him to be on his guard away from Targoviste, especially now that the attack had failed.

Vlad continued to gaze vacantly, somewhere above the nobles, who one by one had come out of their shells and were now raving against him, some with more open words, some still hesitant, seemingly full of concern for him and his country's future.

'What about Mircea, my older brother, why did you kill him?' the Voivod asked in a dark monotonous tone. 'Was he of no good either? What about my father? Why did you sell him and why did you kill him?'

He wanted to tell them more about Mircea and his father's goodness; of their skill in war and especially of their great love for Wallachia. There were transparent images from his childhood flashing before his eyes. He saw Mircea tending with a burdock leaf to his knee bruised in the forest near Targoviste; he felt his brother's kiss on his forehead and the love that flowed from him. He wanted to tell the nobles about all of these and scold them, but in the end, he decided they deserved none of it. Through the sweet colourful and transparent veil of his memories, he could still see clearly the noblemen gathered before him. Mircea, the one so good and alive in his memories, suddenly turned to cold dust and remained forever still and unmoving, his mouth wide open and contorted with his final death scream, just as he saw him in the shrine he was now worthlessly rotting in.

Vlad felt the pity and anger weighing hard on his chest and freezing his eyes. He slowly rose and commanded coldly:

‘Silence! It is just that I should now kill all of you for your many betrayals!’

The nobles all sprang to their feet, hands on the swords. In the same moment, the doors burst open and from the doorstep, Stroe announced curtly:

‘The blocks are ready, Lord, and the executioner is waiting for Your Highness’ command.’

Through the wide open doors, the noblemen saw a beautiful and neatly ordered army gathered in the courtyard of the palace. They had all been trapped! Arvinte thought quickly of taking the Voivod as hostage, then cut himself a path through the rows of soldiers and gather his own army to be done with Draculea once and for all. Behind the Lord however, now stood his trusted knights, Mihnea, Marcu and Tudor. To face them meant straight suicide! They had but to obey. They were at the mercy of the Lord they had thought finished till a moment ago.

‘Be seated, My Lords!’ Vlad ordered in the same strange absent tone. ‘I shan’t finish you as you deserve. I have come here to build Wallachia anew, not to do war with its nobles. I believe that in the years to come, we shall have need of many fortresses strong as mountains if we want to remain free before the Turk. You can still see up on the mountain at Poenari the ruins of the city built there by the fierce Lord Negru. You shall all go there and rebuild this city! Make a strong shield out of it against any enemy; thus you shall cleanse your sins to Wallachia!’

Before the noblemen, Vlad had instantly turned from a little boy with ruling aspirations to an absolute Lord, in whose face nobody could utter a single defying word. His whole being had grown fierce and a great boiling strength they had never seen before radiated from him, without words, without gestures.

The soldiers advanced in the Great Hall and chained the nobles Vlad had gathered. They were pushed out in the courtyard and tended unceremoniously like sheep outside the city. The long convoy of chained noblemen was flowing soundlessly on the main street of Targoviste. A few nobles had tried to scream, hoping fruitlessly that the people they had till then oppressed would come to their rescue. However, the soldiers struck their mouths violently with dogwood clubs and so no sound escaped them anymore. From noble mansions, wives and even children were pulled out and brought together with their fathers and husbands.

The few Targoviste citizens that had been given news attended bewildered at the nightmarish scene. The nobles that had been at the head of the Country till an hour ago, were tended on the streets like common thieves, chains over their long glittering mantles. The motley column, filled with flashy colours and many furs, had nothing flashy about it now. A sticky trail of disgust and sadness was all that was left in the nobles’ wake.

Now and then, some old dumbfounded lady would cover her mouth and whisper a soft “God forbid!” Strong men however, and even younger women spat a feisty “They deserve it!” through their

teeth, and would ogle with whipping eyes at those who had made them suffer for so many years.

Lord Vlad had purposely wanted the noblemen to march chained on the town streets so that it would be a teaching lesson for whoever would dare to believe themselves above the Lord's will and the Land's Lore.

At the city edge, the noblemen and their families were mounted in chariots and chained together in a bundle. After that, the sad convoy headed upwards to the Poenari nest of eagles.

At the foot of the mountain, Vlad Draculea was waiting for them. He waved and all the chariots stopped at once. His powerful loud voice rose above the stringy silence of the mountains and gave the nobles an ounce of hope.

'You all know why you have been brought here! For disobeying and treason to the Country, it would have been fair for me to have you hanged like the common thieves that you are! But I shan't do it! You shall work however like ordinary men for this broken fortress until I see it standing proud again, ready to face the Turks by my side. You shall eat whatever you find here. After so many bountiful feasts, the mushrooms and nettles here won't do you any harm; they would tone you up a little since you are all so loaded! You shan't need any change of clothes! You shall remember that the fancy garments on you were done through hard labour. Someone else's hard labour! Whoever among you stays alive when this fortress stands proud again on its peak will be allowed to return to Targoviste or to walk free wherever he will see fit!'

He was silent for a moment, his eyes searching the crowd for Boyar Arvinte, the one who had defied him the other day.

'Now you can say that I too have cleaned my own house, can't you, Boyar? And my work has just begun! Good luck with your task, My Lords!'

Arvinte opened his mouth as if to say something more: to ask for forgiveness or to curse the Voivod. He looked around and his strength left him. Under the sky, from beneath the heavy shade of the high fir trees, the vengeance of the land and of Vlad himself was slowly trickling towards them. The low moaning of the noblemen and of their wives around him was most eloquent. There was no need for his words.

Before Arvinte's face, the Voivod reined in and headed back to Targoviste at full speed, followed by his knights and by one hundred soldiers who had finally come to understand that Wallachia had a true ruler again. It was a ruler they did not fully understand. They had first believed him wicked when he had arrived with his army over Vladislav. Then, on Friday, the Passion day of Christ, only three days before this, they thought him tricky and green of mind. The Lord had secretly called for Teofil, the high priest of the Royal Court and had given him the order of shortening the table legs in the church. As tradition went, the people would bring flowers and would pass underneath the church table three times. It was only that the noblemen, most of them overweight in the past few years, did not make it under the table newly modified at the Voivod's command. The entire town laughed about the nobles' misadventure and was greatly amused by the farcical ideas of the new Lord.

Now they saw him dark and just and most especially vigilant about the reinforcing of the country. It seemed that fierce times were afoot in Targoviste. Times of legend...

A great army had gathered in the capital of the Romanian Land, immediately after the convoy's departure. Stefan, Prince of Moldavia, and commander Cazan were in charge with preparing this army. Word was that the Voivod had commanded the training of the army in order to counter any attack come from Albu or from any other supporters of the noblemen caught.

There were only a few people, the new Lord's most trusted councillors among them, who knew exactly the purpose of the army. And the prince of Moldavia also knew. He knew best.

Stefan was quivering anxiously in his saddle, kneading the reins in his hand. When his eyes set on Vlad and on the small army approaching the castle, he lost patience and moved his horse in his cousin's welcoming.

'I'm ready, Vlad! You just give me the sign that I can take these brave men with me and we'll be on our way!'

'A blind man could see you're ready, cousin!' Vlad laughed. 'You've been ready these past four years! Follow me!'

Vlad reined in his horse a few steps from the army that was waiting in perfect discipline and silence. He measured Stefan from head to toes: he was young and strong. He seemed still green, still unprepared to take the throne of Moldavia. His large blue eyes like those of young maiden's in love had many people fooled. Vlad knew however his sharp mind and the determination that made Stefan one of the most feared among Lords and throne aspirers.

He had chosen for that day a great white horse that would have made someone of the same size as him seem quite short. There was a kind of force radiating from Stefan that only great leaders have and which makes them seem huge even if their bodies are rather more like a mound than a mountain.

Then and now, it was the custom at Royal Courts for noblemen and even kings to wear nicknames. Although too short in stature, nobody had thought of linking this fault with Stefan's name. His very presence inspired respect and one could literally sense the royal blood in him. He liked his clothes to show his rank and origin; today he also wore a tunic masterfully encrusted with gold and jade beads and trousers of the most expensive fabric, but it was not this that made him distinguished in the eyes of men. It was something else: an aura of goodness and power around him, a gentle peace and a promise of wealthy times, as if the destiny of Moldavia that God had written inside him was open to be seen by everyone.

Vlad gazed at him with open love and said:

'Don't insist, Stefan, I'm coming with you! Here in Targoviste I'm leaving Linart and Cazan. They will make sure the country stays orderly while I'm away. I believe that you'll need me at least for a week or two, until we settle down your nobles and we find who is with you and who is against you!'

'But you knew which noblemen were the dangerous ones in your country! And you have dealt with them justly today! Don't you think I don't know what goes on in my Moldavia! This morning, message from Lower Moldavia has reached me. The Patriarch Teoctist together with Cozma of the house of Sandru, Oană, Otel, Micu Craiu, High Steward Goian, Councillor Isaia, and many others, all are waiting for me to arrive as their Lord and Ruler. They were good and faithful to my father. Most them are of the noble breed from Maramures, sons of the founders. I shall lean the weight of my sceptre on them for as long as God will allow me on the throne of Moldavia!'

'Beneath your kitten's mask you plot and work tirelessly for your throne! I pity the souls of the enemies that will let themselves besought by your angel's face!' Vlad laughed out loud.

'You know, cousin, that nothing would be dearer to my soul than to have you by my side when I go to Suceava for the throne by which we were both children for a while! But I don't wish for *you* to give me Moldavia! Nor do I wish in a few years' time to be said that Draculea of Muntenia conquered Moldavia and set Stefan Musat on the throne. This crown I need to get for myself. Or die trying!'

Vlad was silent for a while. He thought his cousin was right: he too would have done the same!

'Take Stroe and Ler with you, to keep you secure! You know you are safer with them than with a thousand faithful soldiers. They have their own ways of smelling a trap even before there are any signs of it.'

‘You still don’t understand, Vlad?’ Stefan smiled. ‘Don’t you see that neither Stroe, nor Ler, nor even young Tudor, who are your faithful guardians, would not part from you even if you ordered it to them a thousand times? They do whatever you tell them to, but *only for you!* You are their absolute light, their only reason to be on this earth. I don’t know what they are made of and how is it that they love you so immeasurably, but I would like it very much to have at least one like them by my side!’

‘You are mistaken, cousin! It’s not me they hold as their light! No, it is Wallachia their mother and God! They saw in me the will to die in every minute to defend like they do this blessed land – but don’t kid yourself! If they ever thought I became wicked, or I gave the country to the Turks, their daggers would find me even in a snake hole! That’s why I love them too!’

Up in the saddles of their beautiful stallions, the two men that would later become the greatest Lords of the Romanians, turned to gaze at their knights. Stroe had put the hat on Ler’s head the other way around and he was now minutely determined to make two plaits of Ler’s hair like little girls wear. The fearsome blond knight was patiently enduring this like a grandfather, and arms crossed over his chest he calmly asked his friend:

‘What are you doing, man?’

‘I’ve got work to do, what’s it to you?’ the high squeaky answer came which made the laughter of soldiers all around boom and echo.

Vlad also smiled lovingly, obviously proud of his knights, and said to Stefan:

‘They are good and playful like children, but from here to Anatolia there is no warrior that doesn’t know their names! Look at them! I gave them no specific command! But do you see them packing the horses? They are coming with you! Stroe always plays like that before going somewhere far and dangerous. He is scared that if he loses his brother, he will die of grief. He cherishes every moment with Ler. Blood brothers could never be closer than these two!’

‘Even if I wanted to, I could never stop them from coming with you. They also understand that with you on Moldavia’s throne you are a shield for their Wallachia against Tartars, and if we are to unite our armies, we cannot be defeated neither by the Sultan, nor by his father!’

‘Then I thank you, cousin Vlad, and it is good bye! It’s time for me to go home!’

‘Go with God, Stefan! And be a good and brave Voivod! If ever the Romanians remember my name, let it be not for other deeds, but for the fact that I helped Stefan “the Great” take the Country of Moldavia!’ Vlad joked.

‘Not to worry! Even our great-grandsons of our grandsons will know your name! As for me, maybe I will never become “the Great”, as you put it, but my Moldavia will be freer and more beautiful than ever! This is a certainty!’

They embraced each other curtly, brotherly, and then Stefan gave the order to depart for Moldavia.

That day, one of the greatest leaders of Mediaeval Europe was born – one that the pope would name the Athlete of Christ and of which the Turks would later believe that he was truly invincible long after his death!



The hermit receives me as usual..., but today he offers me venison. He says he got it from a hunter yesterday.

Strange coincidence with what I thought I saw yesterday, when I was leaving.

We step onto the porch and he continues the story.

The old man tells me he agreed to tell me everything because the whole deal with the vampires annoys him! He tells me in a passionate voice that his Lord had fought for the cross and for Christians.

Through the window of the back room, I see a large wide sword hanging on the wall. It looks very old, but well kept!

I believe the old man has a nice collection of medieval items...I have to see it before I go!

Arefu, 21st of March 2008

The short and merry summer rain was knocking at the windows of the royal palace at Targoviste. In the mood for frolic, it made a try for Stroe's room. But from inside, one could hear sounds that indicated Stroe was either splitting logs with a large bow saw or chasing a three or four hundred pound hog through the room. Unaccustomed to such great snoring, it ran to the window at the other end, where it lulled its drops and looked at Mihnea in surprise.

The knight, staying in the corridor and guarding the Voivod's door, listened in bewilderment to the faint sounds coming from Vlad's room. Every now and then, a heavy sigh – quickly smothered by the proud ruler – would reach the knight's ears.

Mihnea quietly walked in the room, where he saw Vlad seated at the work table, lost in thoughts, his head in his hands.

No candle was cheering up the room. Only some solitary bolt of lightning on the warm sky would shed strange light on the two.

'You're sad, Your Highness!' Mihnea dared, not being able to bear the darkness gathered on the Voivod's brow and eyes...

Many a time had he seen his Lord doing deeds that would frighten ever the bravest of knights; he had always been awed with Vlad's flawless self-control, with his stoutness in the most difficult of periods; he had heard him laugh bitterly when tortured by Turks. But never had the old knight seen him in such a state. His head in his hands, laying on his simple soldier's bed, Vlad dared not raise his eyes. The sleeves of his white shirt were soaked as if by sad autumn rain; from the Voivod's eyes, dark clouds continued to pour the waters of heavy, endless sorrow. The knight reached out and wanted to caress his head like one does to a good child; but his hand stopped for a moment, shivering above Vlad's head, and then retreated shyly, afraid and hesitant in such an unusual moment.

Vlad slowly raised his eyes and looked at Mihnea. His lips were trembling and his eyes continued to unleash streams of clear tears, gathered during endless years of misfortunes.

'I'm not crying for nothing, Mihnea, not for tiredness or, God forbid, fear! I miss peace, I miss my mother and father, my brother Mircea...I cannot bring them back! As beautiful and enchanted the Targoviste of my childhood was, as hollow it is to me now! When I came back from the Turks, my father was gone, Mircea was gone, too, mother had died of sorrow...That was when I realised that the roads that used to be beautiful to me, were so only because they led me to them. Now that they are all gone, the roads are merely stones and dead dust... I don't know why trees bloom anymore. What for? Oh, if they were still alive, I would go to them like one goes to church! And Malina... You don't know her... I have never told you about her. Don't be surprised, man, and don't think me weak, it is not her flesh that I miss...'

Vlad's eyes rose higher and began to twinkle.

'And I am not crying for the suffering I feel now, I just suddenly miss how happy I was with her. I have known her since forever, she grew up by me, here in Targoviste. Her father was no nobleman...They did not have much; but they were honest good-hearted people. The first time I saw her, it was a market day. I remember it like it were yesterday...I was about nine and everyone was respectfully stepping aside as my father and I were passing from one merchant booth to another. Suddenly, I heard a short, boyish whistling and from behind a furriery booth a beautiful, dusky little girl, waved at me and shouted, wide smile on her face: "*Catch, Vlad, it's tasty, it's a Royal Apple!*" I caught the fruit she had elfishly thrown at me and thanked her. Her father was stunned and feared that

the Lord might take the child's gesture as an insult. They were common people, and us... But my father burst into laughter and, along with him, all the people in the market. He also thanked her father and gave him two golden coins to buy food and clothing for his little girl, for Malina. Later that day, around sunset, I saw her again, in the shade of that great nut tree below the Hill Monastery; she was waiting for her father, who had business to discuss with the Abbot. I ordered the guards to wait for me downhill, and we chatted almost till dark. She told me that, someday, I was going to be the greatest Lord of the Romanians; I told her that if that was ever going to happen, I would make her my princess. She poked me in the ribs like the tomboy that she was and started laughing: "*Well don't you know, Vlad, that I'm only a merchant's daughter? What princess? Are you crazy?*". Then she'd laugh like a squirrel and run through the tall grass at the foot of the hill.

'I did not mind her talking to me like that, I did not even realise it, it felt good and natural. After that, I saw her maybe three or four times; then the Turks took me. And I never knew anything about anything. Only the Country...and...

'You know, Mihnea,' Vlad continued more lively. 'If only I could walk by her for one last time, even without her knowing it...to stay still and breathe in me her shadow. I could live ten more lifetimes of the hardships and evils I have encountered so far!'

'Your Highness, try to get some sleep. You'll feel better in the morning. We all crave for simple life, every now and then. Try to sleep!'

Mihnea flew out of the Voivod's chamber and disappeared into the soft night covering Targoviste. A few minutes later, yeoman Lazar, accustomed with nocturnal tasks, was not surprised by the knight's visit. But half an hour later, in the middle of the night, lights suddenly came to life in a common house at the periphery of the city. Some seemingly meaningless questions followed and five minutes later Mihnea was hurriedly returning to the Court. Behind him on his horse, holding on tightly, there was a second rider, whose unusual long soft hair veiled the delicate figure that could only belong to a woman.

The candles at the Voivod's window continued to measure the slow passing of the hours till dawn, quietly and patiently. Without warning and the customary knock, the room to the royal chamber opened and Mihnea delicately pushed in his strange nocturnal companion.

Vlad controlled his incipient anger for only a moment, because in the next one his hand dropped the dagger and he stood astonished at the sight before him.

'God, don't give me more than I can carry!' he murmured faintly. 'May it not be an illusion!'

Malina, the girl from long ago, from his childhood, was standing before him, confused, ashamed and with her head lowered, as it was proper when facing the Voivod.

He wanted to walk slowly towards his Malina, but his feet would not obey. He reached out his hands instead, hoping that she would understand and come into his arms, but Malina did not even dare to breathe. He tried again and this time she managed to slowly come a little closer. His hand first touched the girl's hair – black and slightly rumpled from the journey – and then descended towards her shoulder.

'My little girl, my little girl...' Vlad whispered, softly holding her against his chest.

Then, suddenly, like waking up from a beautiful dream, Vlad glanced at Mihnea furiously.

'Why do you bring this Christian woman to me? What, are we savages? Where was your head, Mihnea?'

Mihnea, baffled by the harshness of his words, did not know what to answer or why the Lord was so upset.

'What will her husband say? Why have you dishonoured that man?'

Mihnea did not answer, but only smiled shortly and sneaked out of the room.

‘I have no husband, my Lord! I didn’t need one!’ Malina said shyly, staring at the floor.

‘Why do you say you didn’t need one? That’s only proper, that every one settle down with his or her spouse and raise their children in good faith!’

‘I didn’t want someone else...’ the girl murmured softly.

‘I see! Your man must have died fighting the Turks.’

‘Let me go, Your Highness! Please...I’ve done nothing wrong to have people see me coming out of the room of a man to whom I’m not married. Let me go, please! I’m no mistress, not even the Voivod’s!’

Her words, a bit harsh in the end, completely tore Vlad from his dream state.

‘Go, Malina! And forgive Mihnea, he did not mean any disrespect.’

‘You still remember my name, Lord?’ Malina winced. ‘Then you should have known!’ she continued, leaving the Voivod’s chamber.

Vlad’s heart was throbbing and every beat now sounded like music. He threw himself on the bed like a wanton little boy, his mind invaded by a thousand thoughts.

“Why doesn’t she have a husband? What does that mean? She said nothing when I mentioned her man dying in some war...but if she did not say anything, maybe she never had a man. And how proud she was! Saying she is nobody’s mistress! Great girl! And come to think about it, it’s not a big deal that she does not have a man...She’s what...Twenty? Let’s say twenty-one. Others have married later and it was fine! I’ll call her here tomorrow, during daytime...Or better yet, I’ll go see her! But... how could the Lord go see her? I don’t know anything about her! Maybe I’ll cause her harm or maybe...”

Amused by the young Voivod’s plans and abashment, the night was slowly dragging her skirts of darkness and stars towards light. A new day was beginning in Targoviste...

Accustomed to the Lord’s spontaneity, the five knights were not surprised to see Vlad mounting his horse at the break of dawn.

Just like they had been doing ever since they came to Targoviste, Stroe and Ler would sleep in turns, afraid the Voivod might leave unannounced. They knew him to be mighty, brave and proud beyond measure. But they also knew that a cowardly knife could hit at any time even the most skilled warrior, if he is alone.

‘Come on!’ Ler said briefly as he was leaving the room.

‘Come – don’t come – come! Where to? Is he up again? Where’s he going? Maybe we can go sleep somewhere or eat. Some fried eggs, a slice of cheese, a bowl of milk and some...’

‘Shut up, man!’ Ler laughed. ‘Let’s see where he’s going!’

The two hurried down the castle stairs and, when reaching the door, stopped for a moment to spruce themselves and catch their breath, as if they had simply happened to come out at the same time the Voivod had.

‘Greetings, Your Highness! You’d think we planned it, we woke up at the same time again!’

Vlad glanced at Stroe and smiled cheerfully, pretending to believe the jesting knight’s words:

‘That’s right, Stroe! Great concurrence! I was thinking of going around the town, to see how people are doing.’

‘Take us with you, Lord! We’d be stretching our legs a bit...’

The three men mounted and left the royal Court, heading for the city streets. Wondering faces had already begun to appear at the windows, and some daring people were even rushing at the doors, in order to get a closer look at the Voivod riding without the customary guards. In the neighbourhood

at the end of the city market, Vlad drew reins and fixed his eyes on a pretty little house, windows adorned with roses and flowers on each side of the door. The house – even though not much different from the surrounding ones – stood proof of its homesteaders' craftsmanship.

Stroe raised one surprised eyebrow at Ler. He did not have an answer, so the knights turned their horses around along with Vlad and were ready to move on.

Behind them, the door opened and an angel's voice said:

'Catch, Your Highness! It's good, it's a Royal Apple!'

Malina, the girl from Vlad's childhood, wearing her nicest outfit, was now standing in the doorstep on the house she had been born in and which the prince had so many times begged his father to pass by. The blouse inwrought with bluebottles and oak leaves, as well as the sheepskin vest also woven with stars and flowers, were visible from under the girl's thick black plaits. Her white pearl-like smile dumbfounded even the knights.

'My Goodness!' Stroe murmured faintly.

Vlad caught the apple Malina had thrown at him, just like the first time, a long, long time before; Ler and Stroe let go of the knives they always kept ready, and hoped the girl had not noticed their rushed gesture.

In one instant, Vlad understood everything. His years of waiting had been interlaced with Malina's; she too had dared to hope, elfish as he remembered her to be. The previous night had provided the girl with reason to believe that the Lord had not forgotten her either; their age gave them the courage to see beyond social rules. She too must have stayed up all night, and her smile and the twinkling eyes could have made a blind man see that she was barely refraining from jumping into the Voivod's arms. While the girl somewhat managed to fight the urge to embrace him, Vlad found no reason to wait any longer and jumped off his horse, arms wide open. He hugged Malina tightly and she gasped with longing and overwhelming joy. The flowers carefully braided in her plaits stood out beautifully against the Lord's white shirt.

Ler smiled widely to Stroe, who was nodding his head with content and surprise. Everything was so natural...

'Mihnea told me you don't have a man!' Vlad whispered carefully, as if afraid not to ravel the magic.

'I've been waiting and I could have kept on waiting. Even if it were all in vain, I wouldn't have been sorry!' Malina answered, and Vlad felt her words rather than heard them.

'Do you see them, mute?' Stroe asked, touched by the sight before him.

'I see!' Ler answered briefly.

'You see, you see! You don't see nothing! It's like they're one and the same! I never thought there was a match for our Lord in this world. Look at her, she's meant for him!'

'She's "Vlada" from head to toe!'

'She's what, man? "Vlada"? That's right!'

'My lords, won't you come in?' Malina interrupted the two friends' dialogue. 'I don't know if it's proper, but please come in. You probably haven't had breakfast yet!'

'It's proper, my dear, why wouldn't it be?' Stroe replied hurriedly, lest the Voivod should change his mind. He had known for a long time that the Lord was reluctant to tie his soul to someone else's, afraid that he might pass his suffering and torment onto her. The knight was now happy that Vlad had finally had the courage to listen to his own heart; he was not going to let this chance be wasted.

'Don't be upset with my father,' Malina went on, suddenly saddened. 'He can't get out of bed;

for a few months now. The Voivod's...Vladislav's men beat him badly and maimed him.'

The Lord looked at Ler, eyes flashing with anger, but the knight's merciful expression kept him from flaring up.

"How much these two are alike, and how different they are!" Stroe thought to himself, noticing the exchange of looks between Vlad and Ler. 'Vlad'd cut open the culprits, while Ler is thinking of how to comfort the poor man. Thank Goodness they found each other! With Vlad's fury and Ler's mercifulness we can restore Wallachia to its former self, like it was in the time of Great Mircea, or even better.'"

'Father, we have distinguished guests!' Malina shouted merrily from the doorstep.

'Let them in and put something on the table!' a strong, cheerful voice answered from the back room. 'Who are they?'

'Good people!' Vlad said amusedly. 'We have not seen each other in a long time, uncle Petre! I wonder if you still remember me?!'

'Bring yourself here and we'll see!' Malina's father said, happy to receive guests.

Ler glanced at Stroe and started for the door; he intended to go in first and see if it was safe for the Voivod to go in as well.

With a subtle movement that the girl missed, Vlad pulled aside the lower side of his long tunic and exposed a large dagger, half unsheathed. Ler smiled approvingly, but still planted himself by the door. His knives were also in their right place, and he knew Stroe's were ready as well. In the small room, large swords would be too heavy and difficult to handle.

Pretending to have to mind the horses, Stroe went outside, from where he was keeping an eye on the entire area, with an apparently bored look on his face. He wished they could avoid upsetting Malina and her father with their mistrust, but they knew Vlad had always had plenty of enemies, especially in Targoviste; they had to keep him safe at all times. It was on the Lord's life and strength that the future of Wallachia and their dreams depended on.

'Do you recognize me, uncle Petre?' Vlad asked as he entered the man's room.

For a while, the man remained with his eyes fixed on the young man standing before him, seemingly searching through the nooks of his memory for the time he had seen him before. Then, suddenly, he lit up and tried to stand, hastily grabbing the edge of the bed.

'Bless you, my Lord! Am I dreaming? I'd know you after a thousand years! You stand tall like His Highness Vlad Basarab. You have his arched eyes and you're as well-built as a Voivod ought to be! How could I not remember you?'

'I am glad you have not forgotten us, uncle Petre! Knight Ler is outside, and Stroe at the horses. You may have heard of them...'

'The knights are here, at my place?' the man wondered sincerely. 'Who doesn't know them? A while ago I went for trading over the Danube, at the Bulgarians and Greeks, then to the Hungarians and Poles and everywhere I went the knights' names were uttered with admiration. Just like we know Hristo of the Bulgarians and Skandenbergh of the Albanese.'

'True! All knights fighting the Pagans should be honoured properly!'

'It's just that before the Pagans get to us, the enemies inside the country will, my Lord! Forgive my foolish words!'

'Your words are not foolish, man! What is foolish is the ways of the noblemen, who are idle and cowardly, afraid they might lose their fortunes!...But let us speak of these bad things some other time!'

'Yes, Your Highness, let's do that!' the old man said with prudence.

For years, he had been hearing Malina mumble her prayers every night; every single time, she would sneak young Vlad's name between the 'Lord's Prayer' and 'Watch over our souls at night!' For a while, he thought this was just the fantasy of a rattle-headed girl, but the years passed and Vlad's name was just as frequent during prayer time. And now he saw them both in his room and in spite the respectful distance between the two, one could easily sense the burning happiness of reunion and the desire to stay together for ever.

His mind of a simple man – living within the unwritten laws and the conventional distance between Lords and common people – still had trouble imagining Malina alongside the Voivod of the Country; yet, his eyes and especially his heart had started to whisper to him otherwise.

'Forgive me, Lord, but what about would you like to talk to me?'

'Well...I say that...' Vlad seemed abashed. 'To talk about our... about...Forgive us for a moment, uncle Petre!'

Vlad left the old man's room, softly pulling Malina along. He gently put his hands on either side of her face and asked her, almost whispering:

'Will you come with me to the palace and be my lawful wife?'

Malina tried to answer, but her knees were shaking and her lips would not obey her anymore. But from outside came Stroe's squeaky voice:

'She's coming, she's coming! Why wouldn't she?'

The uproarious knight could not help eavesdropping a little bit; his unbridled heart sometimes forced him to meddle in other people's business, and that is precisely what happened this time.

Vlad and Malina burst into laughter, and Ler smiled widely at uncle Petre, who still did not have the courage to admit what was going on, and shrugged smilingly: "*Stroe...*"

'Sir,' Vlad began speaking to Malina's father. 'For years on end I have endured bad and good, I have run, I have wandered or fought with my heart for my Country, my parents and our Malina. Until now, I dared not come to see her, afraid that I might tie her peaceful life with the turmoil following me since I can remember.'

'My Lord, her life would be turmoil without Your Highness! Only I know how many times she's woken up from a nightmare screaming your name. She's stubborn and proud; she didn't want anyone else and I could feel her slowly perish, thinking she wasn't even allowed to dream about being with you.'

'I will return tomorrow, if you allow me to,' Vlad said, gently squeezing Malina's hand. 'I will come with suite, as one should do when wooing.'

'We'll be waiting, Your Highness! I never thought I'd live to feel such joy! Farewell!'

'I'll go get the horses ready!' Ler justified; actually, his intention was to grant the young couple a few more minutes in each other's company.

'Well, come on! What took you so long?' Stroe's high-pitched voice responded; he had obviously been eavesdropping again.

In the guest room, Malina slowly came into Vlad's strong arms.

'Will you come? Will you really come tomorrow, like you said?'

'Let them try and stop me!' Vlad tried to joke, anxious that Malina might feel the heavy steel dagger beneath his tunic. He resented having to wear it, that he could not put it away not even when sleeping. He knew that, even in church, his knights had their daggers ready; that they had to cross themselves one at a time, lest should all of them have their heads lowered at once and offer some assassin the opportunity to kill the Voivod. But he also knew that someday they would butcher all the enemies of the Country and the thieves would come to tremble at the simple thought of wrongdoing!

Outside, by the horses, Stroe let his mouth loose as soon as Ler appeared in the doorstep:

‘Speak, mute, how was the ol’ man? Was he happy? Or better yet, forget about him, tell me about her! Did she say it just ‘cause Vlad is Voivod now or does she love him? Did you goggle at her? Was she happy or just, you know, content that the Lord came to see her? Did she really love him all these years? And why didn’t that fool Mihnea tell us ‘bout this in the morning? Come on, man, speak! Or am I talking to the walls?’

‘Yes!’ Ler answered.

Stroe dropped the reins and stared at his friend. Then they both burst into laughter.



Close to dusk, Vlad carefully straightened his white shirt, picked up his best trousers, put on the encrusted leather boots, checked his appearance in the mirror and started for the door. But then he stopped and started thinking: *“These clothes are not bad. Not too fancy, but...She doesn’t have all that much...Maybe she will be embarrassed to see me so dressed up!”*

Then he rushed to the clothes chest, took out some simpler trousers made from fine black fabric, changed the boots with less adorned ones, but just as beautiful, and decided to keep the shirt. He gave himself another look over and, now finally satisfied, came out of his chamber.

He looked along the corridor and saw Mihnea sitting, as always, on a stool at the top of the stairs. The knight respectfully greeted him and went into his own room.

A little surprised that he was not asked about his departure, Vlad went down the stairs, three at a time, and looked for the other knights in the castle yard. He was used to them following him everywhere. But now he was content not to see them around. He wanted to go by himself, to spend a few peaceful hours, alone with his Malina.

But a few streets away, in the house right across the road from Malina and uncle Petre’s, Stroe was talking his head off, as usual, with silent Ler.

‘He’s comin’, don’t you worry! Didn’t you see how they were looking at each other? I bet they didn’t plan to meet again tonight, but do you think anything could keep them apart?’

‘It’s good that we are here, the noblemen still want to get rid of Vlad’ Ler answered.

‘We got lucky with this abandoned house, right here. He won’t know we’re keeping an eye on him. I reckon he’d be horn-mad!’ the gleeful knight laughed.

Stroe was right. In the morning, when they left Malina’s house, he was certain Vlad would return that very night. Vlad was madly in love with the beautiful Targoviste girl. Stroe understood that the young voivod’s love was intertwined with long years of hoping and enduring. In the Turkish prison, Vlad had turned from child to young man, and the only things keeping him alive were the images of his Country, his parents and Malina. In Vlad’s tender mind, Malina had transformed from a playful child into a beautiful pure girl, and everything about her was perfect. To his joy and relief, Stroe saw that Vlad’s dreams were nothing unlike reality.

As if guessing his thoughts, Ler said briefly:

‘At least this should be God’s reward for what he’s endured!’

An hour before sunset, Vlad knocked at Malina’s door.

The door opened almost immediately, an obvious sign that someone could hardly wait for his arrival.

‘Good evening!’ he said meekly, for the first time in his life.

‘Good evening, Your Highness!’ Malina replied, a bit surprised.

The Voivod's official tone made her wonder, for just one moment, whether he had changed his mind. Maybe the noblemen and knights had advised him otherwise. But then the twinkle in his eyes washed her worries away.

‘I’ve come —’

‘I can see that!’ Malina laughed at the Voivod's sudden shyness.

‘And —’

‘And you’d like to talk to my father!’

‘Something like that...and —’

‘Come in, Your Highness!’

‘I’m coming...’ said Vlad, but he did not move an inch. Malina gently took his hand and pulled him inside. She led the Voivod in the back garden, where the old soldier was glad to see him.

A small round table, masterfully carved in nutwood, and three chairs were waiting for guests. In the shade of the great acacia trees that made the garden look like a small grove, two butterflies were chasing each other, merry with the pleasant warmth after last night's rain.

The tall grass was sprinkled with fully bloomed flowers, painted everywhere on the deep green; at the edge of the garden, a roguish little runlet was wooing the blushful, scented lilac bushes.

‘Bless you, My Lord! Thank you for crossing our threshold!’

‘Well, I did say we would meet again soon, to talk things over! Maybe it was all too sudden and my boldness has upset you!’

‘Upset??? No kin of mine has ever had such honour and, after all, Your Highness is the Lord of this Country. You have the right to go where you please and do what you want.’

‘It is not like that, uncle Petre! I only rule over the land and army, as my father Vlad, and my grandfather Mircea did. But the people's hearts must be free and neither I, nor anyone else can forget this.’

‘Shall I understand that you came here for matters of the heart, My Lord?’ Malina's father laughed.

Alongside the old soldier, Vlad had regained his confidence and the strength of his voice. Only Malina's presence made his knees go weak and he stumbled to find the right words.

‘Indeed, uncle Petre, I came here to make sure that I have not upset you with my unexpected request. Whatever you decide, I assure you that you will have the honour and respect due to an old soldier of my father's!’

‘We’re all happy to hear the new Voivod cares about us, simple people! But you’ll have to pardon me! I’ve got to go say my prayers and get into bed. These damned bones of mine always hurt in bad weather!’

Vlad looked up, at the clear, cloudless blue sky, and glanced at him thankfully. He pretended to believe the pretext and replied gently:

‘Go, uncle Petre! Maybe tomorrow the weather is better, and we have more time to talk. I will stay for no more than an hour, if you don't mind. I will be gone before dark. It is only proper!’

Finally by themselves, Vlad had the time to really look at Malina. She was simply glowing, wearing a blouse left from her mother and a skirt finely laced in summer colours. Her black plaits and her smile – resembling a flawless string of pears – blessed a perfect little face, lit up by two large eyes, as happy as a squirrel's. The Lord thought that maybe he should have worn the French outfit, after all; and maybe even that would not have been enough. Malina was simply ravishing!

‘Your Highness, tell me, please, it is true that you’ll give land to the poor and have even the most ranked of noblemen pay taxes?’

‘I have already started to. But let us talk about ourselves, please. At least for tonight!’

‘Forgive me, my Lord! In my dreams, you’d always be just and kind, like princes always are in fairy tales. But sometimes doubts overcome me. It’s like I have lost the power to believe that things will ever be right. I only wanted to know if you’re as good as the people want you to be. Forgive my foolish words!’

‘What’s there to forgive?’ Vlad laughed. ‘You deserve my reverence, not my dislike. Others would have gone out of their way to flatter the Voivod, so they could make the Royal Court and be Ladies!’

‘Others...not me!’

‘Let us play a game tonight! You pretend to be a Lady and I – a simple commoner or soldier... Ask me anything and I’ll answer.’

‘I wouldn’t dare, my Lord!’

‘Nonsense! Come on, try it!’

‘Fine!’ Malina laughed gleefully. ‘But tell the truth! How come you’re never afraid? Here, we have all heard stories about your deeds in Anatolia, among Pagans, or at Corvin’s Court. Some say they’re a little hard to believe, that one man couldn’t do it all by himself, but I know the tales are true!’

‘Afraid?’ Vlad smiled bitterly. ‘I’m not afraid! Not of dying and not of pain! I was once! But that was long ago...’

He smiled gently, caressing Malina’s scented hair. But his eyes had darkened, trapped somewhere in the deserts of Anatolia. In his mind, a burning whiff was unleashed, bringing along ripples of sand – slowly crawling forward, like dead white tongues, covering the beautiful living garden before them.

‘When they took my father to Galipoli for the first time, I did not know whether he was alive or not. The Turks, so skilful in torturing people, told me they had slaughtered him...and that they would later kill Radu and then me. They were spiteful that I had not lost my composure in front of them. I was terrified for days; I hated the headsman sitting just outside my chamber, grinning while sharpening his great yataghan; but mostly I hated myself for not being able to stop shaking at night. By day, I would show no fear; but I think that heartless beast of a guard could feel my knees trembling, even though I kept my head up straight and clamored at him when he brought me food.

‘When I looked outside through the bars, I could see the exact place where Christians had been beheaded on the cursed day we were chained. I could actually hear Death roaming madly, waiting, howling and whistling like a blizzard; sometimes, for no more than a moment, would take shape from the dust and wind she aroused. I could hear her coming at my window at night, enjoying my terror. One night, the guard outside my room slammed the door open and stormed in. He grabbed me by my hair and dragged me outside before I could do anything. He kicked me in the groins and forced my head on the log. My flesh was quivering and I couldn’t stop it! I could see nothing but for a few torches that seemed to be floating farther and farther away, though the light they shed was not diminished. For a moment, I thought they must have taken Radu as well, but I did not find the courage to look for him. I resented myself for not being able to think about him; that I was trembling like a animal; that I could not choose to die like the Wallachian that I was.

‘Like so many times before, Death had bestirred dust ripples around me and was slowly gathering them to the place where I was kneeling; she was mixing them with fallen leaves with which she made hair and clothes for herself, putting it all together, shaping her unseemly figure from the air and filth around. She was staring at me! And she was so content! Grinning silently, like a toothless

hag, happy that she was soon going to consume me; happier yet that I was afraid, that I was melting, that I could not bear the terror anymore...

‘Then I learned that she had been after me for a long time and that she craved to reap me, but most importantly, to frighten a Basarab. How many of our forefathers hadn’t laughed in her face? Mircea the Great, and before him Decebal and all his Dacians that would rejoice at her sight, spit at her and send her upon weaker ones. She must have gathered a lot of hate to torture me in such manner.

‘That’s when I understood everything and swore never to be afraid again! Never!’

Malina had nestled at his chest. The words of the man she had dreamt about for so long now hurt her, but still she loved these moments, their first embrace.

‘Don’t you be afraid, Your Highness! If you’ll have me, I will stand by your side and guard you with my own life!’ she whispered compassionately, believing her own words.

Vlad held her tighter. He felt her – cuddled against him, both fragile and brave –as the only woman in the whole world. As his wife, meant for him even before she was born. All around them, the blushful lilac flowers were whispering : ”*Good night!*”

He was...happy!



He seems to trust me more and more. Today we're talking about Dracula's Queen. A fascinating story about a brave woman, as few others were in history.

For the first time, the old man is clearly touched. He doesn't want to show it; he speaks casually, but his eyes are filled with tears. It seems this story affects him more than others had. Maybe a similar personal tragedy? Or maybe something else, that I'm still struggling not to believe...

Arefu, 22nd of March, 2008

*“And in the days of Lord Vlad Tzepesh, there was a boyar called Albu the Great. Thus he took over by force the said villages (Glodul and Hintea) and also ravaged the holy monastery(Govora)...and then, in the days of Lord Vlad Tzepesh, the same Boyar Albu the Great rose over the will of Lord Vlad Tzepesh, and Lord Vlad Tzepesh came after him with an army, seized him and cut him and all his kin.”*⁴⁰

At the “Light of Wisdom” inn, there had been great hustle and bustle for three days now!

Spring had maddened, just like every year, people, sky and flowers just the same! But unlike any other spring, the inn was now overflowing with helpers for Sache and his family. The beautiful Catalina had been sent to the great house in the back and wasn’t allowed to work alongside her father and Sofica, her mother. This time, she had more important matters to attend to! The most famous tailors in Brasov were hired to make her white wedding gown. Finally, to her mother’s infinite joy, young knight Tudor had dared to ask for her hand in marriage.

The event had occurred quite unexpectedly and Tudor was never to find out that Sofica had not even considered refusal; she had actually made plans to kidnap him, as knight as he might be, and convince him – by force, if she had no choice – that he and her daughter were meant for each other.

But on the very same day, more good news came! Lord Vlad Basarab had also asked for Malina’s hand in marriage, and Sache and his wife were to prepare the food for the wedding!

So the inn was ruled by holiday spirit and commotion like never before. Above the door there now hung a large sign that said: *“Sache, the food magician, shall be back in his distinguished clients’ service, after the joyous wedding of his daughter and the famous knight Tudor and after the customary few days of hangover”*.

At the royal Court, the general mood was a little more restrained, but not much different. Great flower garlands were being hung in the throne hall and the entire palace, the tailors were working on Vlad’s wedding garments, and the minstrels’ sweet songs resonated from outside.

The Voivod proved to be a difficult client to the most skilful tailors in Wallachia. He did not have the time or the patience to let his measures be taken and try on the new clothes.

‘Here I am, I have two hands, two legs and one head, like any other man. What’s with all the measurements?’ he joked with the tailors.

After much reasoning, he agreed they were right and decided to offer them a concession. He asked them to follow him and – amused with tailors Cioaca and Dinica’s manner of walking, taking small but hasty steps, while struggling to keep up with his quick and agile walk – once outside, he grabbed a soldier by the hand and told them:

‘Here! Take this man and measure him!’

Then, turning towards the bewildered soldier, he told him in a pompous, grave tone, as if the poor man was going to war:

‘Man, Wallachia needs you! The Lord needs you! You go with these two rattle-brains, who seem to have forgotten how to make clothes and how many sleeves a tunic has! Let them take your measures, I’ve had enough of standing with my arms spread and a needle in my mouth!’

The soldier smiled confusedly and handed over his battle axe to the Voivod. Vlad grabbed it enthusiastically and said merrily:

‘Well now! This is a tool I’m accustomed to!’

He jostled the three men back into the castle, then hurried towards the stables. He was in the mood for riding until his horse was worn to a frazzle; to circle the city and the forests whooping; to fill everybody with his joy.

He burst into the stables, but the surprise waiting for him inside was neither little, nor pleasant.

Sweaty and covered in dust from an apparently long journey, Stroe was whispering something to Ler. When they noticed the Voivod's presence, they both stopped, baffled looks on their faces. Stroe, jestful as always, put on a smile as wide as it was comically false.

‘It's not working!’ Vlad cut him short. ‘Speak, what is it?’

‘What could it be? It ain't nothin', we was just talking!’ Stroe said, looking at Ler for support.

But the blond knight said blankly:

‘Albu is coming for us!’

‘The Devil with you, you long-tongued mute!’ Stroe lashed out at him, in his high-pitched voice.

‘Didn't we agree we wouldn't tell him? That we'd cut open Albu and his dogs and let the Lord enjoy his wedding??? That rattle-trap of yours works only when it shouldn't!’

Despite the bad news, Vlad burst into laughter:

‘Don't be angry, Stroe! Ler is right. I need to know this! And anyway, I will not have you doing my job as well! When did you learn about this?’

‘I just came from there,’ Stroe mumbled. ‘It was last week that my scouts told me Albu was gathering troops; as soon as he heard about Your Highness' wedding.’

‘He plans to hit us when we least expect it, that cowardly dog,’ Vlad said spitefully. ‘How many of our men are close to Albu's estate?’

‘I secretly sent a thousand riders there. I reckon'd he'd do somethin' one of these days! Our men are waiting patiently in the forests, to crush Albu whenever Your Highness wishes!’

Ler did not join the conversation. Silent as ever, he saddled the Voivod's stallion Storm and left the stable.

‘You're so smart!’ Stroe sarcastically shouted after him.

‘He is right!’ Vlad responded instead of the blonde knight. ‘Right now, he went to get my sword and kargi. Unlike you, he has already understood that I cannot just stay here and hide. It's my divine duty – written in the blood of my father and brother – to put an end to this traitor's arrogance and disobedience. Only the three of us shall leave, without anyone else's knowledge.’

Stroe mounted his horse dejectedly. He was upset that Vlad did not have the chance to enjoy life. He resented Albu and the other traitors for not realising that Wallachians would have a much better life, if united under Vlad's fierce arm and clear mind. For the first time in years, he was in no mood for chatting!



South of Wallachia, on the way to contemporary Valcea, there was a village called Hintza. In the centre of it – by the place where people would gather on Sundays, to dances and weekly fairs – there was a great mansion; it was beautifully painted in white and blue, with a tall stone threshold. In front of it, there were waving flags, just like at the Royal Court. The markings on the red quivering cloth of the pennants were precisely the same Basarab eagles from the Wallachian Lords' flags, except that these were entirely white. It was Albu's manner of displaying his claim to the throne and disobedience towards the new Voivod.

Early that morning, he had appeared in front of the villagers, riding his pure-blooded white horse. He had shouted to the people that he intended to charge Draculea and save the country from him. The boyar was even wearing a purple cloak, like those of Lords; but something was missing, regardless of how much he strove for stateliness: that inner power that makes people obey a true

Lord.

At first, the villagers had sunk in disapproving silence. But then, one by one, they began raising their voices and shouting that the Country had made good since Vlad had come to Targoviste; and that things should be left as they were. Some even booed, but in the end the villagers left sullenly, heading for their homes, not bothering to ask for the boyar's permission.

Now it was silent again. By order from Albu, villages Hintza and Glodu had been burnt to the ground and the Govora Monastery – whose abbot had also openly supported Draculea – robbed and devastated.

In the main building, Albu was solemnly sitting at the head of the table. To his right and left stood boyars Filimon, Arsenie and Tanase. They had been alongside Albu for a long time and together they had decided the fate of many Lords. From beneath his heavy, bushy eyebrows, Albu was gazing at them with a satisfied grin. His yellow, beast-like teeth were now being laid bare in a most hideous manner, while unleashing a wheezy laugh.

‘This is what these wretches deserve for having the nerve to go against their boyar! Draculea won't know about the torching of the villages before tomorrow night, but that's when we'll be in Targoviste, to get him! Don't you think, my lords, that the time has come for us to take hold of the Country's reins? We've wasted enough time supporting this Voivod or that!’

‘The reins and the treasury!’ Filimon laughed perfidiously.

‘And the estates and the studs!’ Tanase bolstered. ‘But what are you going to do about Draculea, Your Highness?’ he asked, trying to please Albu.

His face blossomed at the sound of the title he would never earn, but which he had dreamt about for dozens of years.

‘I'm going to impale Draculea, just like he did to our kind! And I'll make you my Sword Bearer!’ he said, letting himself fall prey to illusions of grandness.

The noblemen continued to laugh and drink, already thinking themselves in Targoviste. They were going to storm over the castle there tomorrow, and no one would be able to stop them.

But what they could not even imagine was that Targoviste had come to them! Or rather, the Lord and his knights. In the rafters of the main building, Stroe was looking at Vlad. They had sneaked in there without anyone noticing, taking advantage of the mansion's poor guard. In his infatuation, Albu thought himself untouchable at his estate.

Vlad and the knight were laying on their stomachs in the attic, trying to see between the small cracks in the beams.

‘I want to be certain Albu is doing all this, before I kill him!’ the Voivod whispered almost inaudibly.

Then he rolled onto his back and stayed there, staring at the ceiling, hand on his dagger.

Night was falling over the Hintza village, clean and scented, indifferent to the plotting and scheming going on. The tranquil, bluish darkness was silently singing the peace of the sky - delicately sprinkled with seemingly living, gleaming stars.

Albu was having a restless sleep. The large quantities of food and wine he had imbibed were tormenting his head and were giving him nightmares. But the previous day's killings and the profanation of the holy Monastery Govora did not bother him in the least.

He sat up in bed, sweaty and frightened by a bad dream that he could not remember. He wanted to light a candle, but suddenly stiffened in terror.

He could hear the floors creaking in the middle of the night and tried to tell himself it was merely an illusion. But he could feel Lord Tzepesh' steps approaching, foretellers of death. The door

sprang open, kicked by a foot used to such things, and a hefty, menacing figure appeared in the doorframe.

The boyar was no coward, and thus he managed to keep his composure. He quickly reached for the sword ever present by his bed, but it was already too late. The darkness monster swung its enormous broadsword towards the boyar's legs and cut off his right foot. An overwhelming pain burst through his entire body and, triggered by his uncanny yell, the entire mansion was flooded with terrified screams and hurried footsteps. He was swept away in an incomprehensible maelstrom: in the bustle of those mighty hands he could not escape from, he still managed to see his young sons being dragged along the lengthy mansion hallway, and above all this, he could hear his wife's maddening screams.

He was dropped like a rag in front of the mansion, in the bright yard, lit by a thousand torches and a thousand pairs of blazing eyes.

In front of the royal soldiers stood the feared Stroe and Ler, like two sentences to the same death. The boyar bent his head backwards to see who was holding him and his greatest fear came true: it was Vlad Draculea!

'What did you think, Albu? That I – like so many before me – would let you do as you please? Bring an army to Targoviste? That Wallachia is a village without guard dogs?'

'How did you know, mongrel?' Albu spat through his teeth, having recovered his sense and forces.

Vlad laughed softly, as if to a child's joke, and answered plainly:

'I know everything in my country!'

He then looked towards his soldiers and was satisfied with the sight: they were all lined up perfectly, like on parade: the sentinels were in position, a hundred feet away in each direction, as he had ordered.

'I should have judged you and explained to you that no one shall scheme against the Lord; that no one shall secretly gather troops and burn down their own villages; that no man, no matter how foul his soul, shall profane a monastery; that it is not proper to plot the murder of a man preparing for his wedding. I should have told you all of this before I send you to your grave, but you are not worthy of it!

He furiously mounted his stallion, and sickened, he commanded his soldiers: 'Kill them all! Albu and his kin! Let there be no trace of this old breed of traitors! They are the ones that sold Mircea the Great! It is because of them that the Country has suffered for a hundred years! No more of it!'

An hour later, behind the Voivod and his two knights, the first rays of sunlight revealed a grotesque but just spectacle in Hintza. Albu "the Great", his two sons and their mother, all impaled, were still moving spasmodically, to the horror of their former servants and villagers. Gathered in front of the mansion, the people were watching silently as the grievous morning light was slowly uncovering the full extent of the new Lord's wrath. And his justice...

The slow death sentenced upon Albu and his family was to torture them for a few more hours, and then fully enshroud them and throw them into the Hell of traitors!

It was only at dusk that day that Vlad entered his palace in Targoviste. Dinica, one of the tailors, noticed the bloodstains on the Voivod's clothes and the thick veil of darkness on his face. He wanted to say something, but Vlad pointed a warning finger at him and ordered tensely:

'Do not ask!'

He then went into his room and slammed the door, as if to crumble the entire wall. A moment later though, he came out half way and shouted at Dinica, who was cautiously hurrying away:

‘Let no one know about what you just saw! Especially Malina!’

And then slammed the door behind him once again.

He walked around the room nervously, unable to settle down. He wanted to sit on a chair, but was too agitated. He kicked the chair, violently smashing it on the floor. He was boiling inside, feeling like a trapped lion that had no way of escaping from behind the cold, heavy iron bars.

He had shaped millions of plans for these days. His greatest wish had been to invite all the noblemen to his wedding and there, in the church, to plead for their cooperation. He had even imagined himself beneath the great icons, successful in convincing them all, friends and foes; that that day would be a fresh new beginning! That he would forgive and forget even the spilt blood of his family, and ask in return for nothing more than to struggle together for the well being of the Country. He had believed with all his heart that the boyars would see their faults; that they would understand there was no room and no point for strife between them; that it was in everyone’s best interest to live in peace and brotherly love.

And it was on this day – so painstakingly carved in his mind, the day he would forgive the unforgivable – that the boyars had planned to attack him in church, to murder him in front of Malina and the priest! On this same day when he was supposed to call the Holy Ghost upon him, to forever lock away his anger and thirst for revenge! On *this very day* he had to shed human blood yet again, to fight for justice in his own Country!

He decided he did not want to leave his room that day. Instead, he asked for Paisie, the Abbot of Dealu Monastery. Only he could understand; he, that had once been a soldier as well and had tasted the blood of his enemies, *because he had had no choice!*

The thought of having the Abbot in front of him soon managed to calm Vlad a little. He eventually sat on a chair by the window. He was staring into nothingness, beyond the hustle and bustle in the castle yard, beyond the walls, the ground and the sky... He tried to see himself somewhere far away in the distance, to see his inner self and demand a reason for all the evil that he could not avoid, that was not his; he was hoping that God would find his soul lost somewhere between the two realms and give him strength to go on; and maybe later, God would offer him another fate, a life in some other age, without swords and invasions. He would have been more than happy with the short life of a child; to die from an ordinary illness in the arms of a loving mother, to be mourned by the whole village and to have flowers laid on his grave. And then, to come out of his body and watch from above as everyone – wearing mourning clothes – comforts each other, and cares for each other with sympathy and sincerity...

Two short knocks at the door tore him away from his silent prayer. He had lost track of time, but was relieved the Abbot had come so soon. He hurried to the door and opened it impatiently.

‘How are you, Your Highness? I’ve missed you dearly!’ Melis – his childhood Latin and Greek teacher – broke out from the doorstep.

The Greek ventured to embrace him and was rejoiced over Vlad’s enthusiastic response. What he did not suspect was that the reason Vlad had prolonged the embrace was to hide his disappointed and impatient expression. He was truly happy with his teacher’s unexpected visit, but the timing was off; right now, Vlad wanted to see Paisie and Paisie alone. Yet his affection for Melis was a deep and strange one, intertwined with the cheerful recollection of childhood and the respect due to such a great scholar.

He softly tore away from the embrace and they both sat at the table.

Vlad grabbed a kettle of delicious, red wine and poured a glass for his teacher. But Melis did not touch the cup; he continued to look at Vlad and eventually said in a sullen tone:

‘What is wrong, Vlad? Why are you not happy, not even today?’

‘I cannot keep much from you, can I, Melis?’ Vlad laughed bitterly. ‘What could be wrong? Life... who offers me no tranquillity; and the more I seek peace, the more war I find. Each time I want to forgive, I’m taken for a coward and I have to cut deeper still. Sometimes I contemplate going away, living in solitude for a year or two, making my peace with the world... but I am denied this privilege...’

Just like then, a long, long time before, when happiness still existed, Melis enshrouded him in a kind, protective smile. He understood... With his chubby face and round body, wearing simple, almost monastic wool clothes, the Greek seemed one of Saint Nicholas’⁴¹ helpers, if not the old man himself.

‘What you need to do first is make peace with yourself, Your Highness! To comprehend what the Gods of Olympus have moulded your fate into.’

‘That’s what you never understood! You knew everything else. But your Gods have no power here! If Hercules appeared in front of me, I would chase him away like the whelp that he is; Ares would be frightened by me and hide in the forest, begging Zeus to protect him from me! Do you think I need Hephaestus’ fire to protect my Country? No, Greek! I will make my own fire with flint from the unfathomable mountains and it will burn better than a thousand Greek fires! Here, only God and the Lord of the Country are undefeatable! We only need a little light, and I cannot find it. And I do not know who else wishes for it –’

He was interrupted by more knocking at the door and this time it was the Abbot himself. Melis immediately guessed the reason behind the monk’s presence and invented an excuse to leave and allow the two to speak freely.

‘Stay, dearest Melis!’ Vlad invited him. ‘I have not seen you since Constantinople, on that damned day when Mahomet conquered the city. You are welcome here!’

‘Your Highness, I can wait!’ Paisie said softly.

He was moderately tall and age had taken away some of his vigour, but there was still something about his appearance, that feeling of force and safety that surrounds wholesome, experienced soldiers. But his large black eyes emanated endless kindness, which first made him a servant of God, and only then a soldier. It was this paradoxical combination that appealed to Vlad. Paisie was what Vlad would have wanted to become.

‘No, men, both of you stay! I thank you both for coming!’

And then, turning towards the old monk, said cheerfully:

‘Melis here was just lecturing me about the Olympian Gods and how I should make my peace with them. He was telling me about their gifts to me...’

‘An avva⁴² wandering in the Egyptian desert for years left us with some wise words,’ the monk said meekly. ‘It goes like this: “*the foreign monk in a foreign country shall not try to change anything!*” I think it is reasonable, but I also think Your Highness’ teacher is a truly learned man, who knows much.’

Ever wishful of scientific or religious debates, Melis replied, like the dignified descendent of the ancient Greek scholars that he was:

‘I wonder, is not the Christian God merely a Zeus left alone, that has converted his gods into saints?’

‘No, teacher, God is One and without beginning. He is the Light of true love. The gods that your illustrious ancestors have imagined are petty, they fight each other and mortals, they betray, they take

revenge...they fall...Your beautiful stories have reached our ears. But if you came here looking for your beliefs, let me tell you what you will find: heroes that you think to descend from a god and a mortal woman! This is their land! There are hundreds of them and you are looking at the fiercest of all!’

‘I must agree with you, Father! Vlad seems more like a legendary hero than a mere mortal! We knew him otherwise. As a child, he appeared weak and tender. But I had the chance to see him in Constantinople, transformed into a grim, shrewd soldier, the kind that always wins.’

‘You’re dreaming, dearest Melis, like you always have!’ Vlad intervened. ‘I do not always win...Had it been so, you would now be in your Holy city, teaching more Greek young men. I could not shield it from Mahomet’s strike, and your gods forgot about it!’

‘His Highness Vlad, like his father, like his grandfather Mircea the Great, is not an ordinary warrior. I had the chance to serve under them and I saw their hearts. I doubt that any other people hate war as much as we do! You have never heard of us going to conquer other peoples, but that is precisely why our Lords and simple brave men are undefeatable!...They do not go to war easily. Not at all...but when they do – God forbid!’

The Abbot stopped for a moment, hesitating. He wanted to continue, but feared that his words might further upset the Voivod. But then Paisie realised he had been called over precisely to do that, to appease Vlad’s inner fight, to make him understand, or merely to confirm to him that war sought him, that sometimes there was no other way...

‘Over the years, I learned that the souls of our Lords are never lost!’ he continued in the same even, comforting tone. ‘Lord Mircea’s wisdom and strength were tripled in his son Vlad and then they were passed on tenfold in the Lord you taught the secrets of history, languages and astrology to, but whom you have not yet understood wholly. He is – as his ancestors were – but a mirror that always shows *everything*. It shows all the good and the evil residing in the mirrored souls. There was never a good man that the Voivod had not rewarded or a bad man that had escaped his wrath. I believe this is the reason why God made him ruler of a country!’

The former soldier’s words, so skilled in finding and explaining the evil and violent nature of people, had a calming effect on Vlad. He thought the same, but needed someone else to turn his thoughts into words, so they would stop sounding like excuses for atrocities that might have been avoided. During his childhood, he had dreamt not to shed human blood. Then – not to shed Christian blood, and later on – that no Wallachian would perish by his hand. Both dreams and oaths had been crushed by the heavy times in which he was living and which weighed more than ever on his Wallachia.

Even though he had just arrived in Targoviste, the Greek immediately understood that the Abbot was there with a purpose; that something bad had happened and Vlad needed consolation from his words.

‘In these times of hardship, no Christian ruler can be weak or merciful towards those who will not fight Mahomet!’ he agreed with the priest. ‘Ancient kitai⁴³ say that: “*When at war, mercy to your enemy is cruelty to you and your people*”, and I tell you that only the shrewdest, bravest and most cold-blooded will stand a chance before the tyrant of Istanbul⁴⁴!’

‘*Res dura et regni novitas me talia cogunt Moliri, et late fines custode tueri*⁴⁵...were the lyrics by Virgil that you made me learn by heart!’ Vlad smiled. ‘But only now do I fully comprehend the meaning!’

‘Since the beginning of time, we Greeks have been skilful at observing the strengths and

weaknesses of ourselves and our enemies. It is from us that the Romans learned and all the peoples of the world afterwards. Our legends praise every hero that has changed something in this perishing world of ours; but not one of these legends speaks of such a refined, vicious, tenacious and aggressive monster that is Mahomet, the one the Turks call Fatih.'

'The monster you speak of has now turned its red eyes on my Country!' Vlad whispered between his teeth, spitefully. 'I know him. He truly is the most dangerous Sultan ever. He is both as learned as a lala⁴⁶ and as wild as an executioner! I have spent a few years close to him. He is brilliant and tireless. Stopping him will be no easy task!'

'But not impossible, either!' Paisie broke out passionately, suddenly straightening his elderly posture, as if the soldier within had struggled to shake off the monastic years and outfit.

'What do you think, dear father? That I am afraid? Do you think that is why I praise him? I know him well, but I do not fear him or his measureless army. He can bring upon us twice the men he sent to Constantinople, and he still would not stand a chance! But we have to fight him differently. His sharp mind and the tenths of scholars in his service have helped him understand us Christians better than anyone, but have also planted in his heart an unknown-of weakness! He is the perfect strategist! His plans have never failed, but this is precisely what is going to cost him the most! The war I will bring upon him will be one unheard-of, such as he has never imagined. He is brave, but here he will not fight men, but cursed forests and djins⁴⁷ from the Turkish stories! I will bring to life all these monsters for him!'

'In war, it's not always the swords that have the last word!' Melis said, beginning to comprehend Vlad's strategy.

'No! The mind and the heart have decided the outcome of more battles than swords and horses have! I know that Mahomet shall come here, but he will do so only when I choose and when the country is ready for him! This is why I need every Wallachian to obey me, to know his place and fight by my side till the last breath, if he has to! And those that will not see that this is the only way to survive, let them leave the country or perish! I am not going to surrender my Country to the Turk because this boyar or that dreams himself a Voivod, when he cannot even rule his own estate properly!'

'The Country will know how to fight, and as long as you lead them in battle, the men will not take one step back! Everybody is aware we are preparing for war, my Lord, even though no one speaks about it out loud!'

'I know, father! And it makes me happy. I was hoping that the noblemen would finally come to their senses and tear themselves away from the scheming that has impoverished us all for fifty years! But my hopes were in vain! Thus I shall tear them away myself!'

'I wish there were some other way! But we all know there isn't! Often, history remembers as enlightened, the same rulers that the people see as tyrants! And this Mahomet – whom many Turks want dead for having conquered the small kingdoms – is already being called the greatest Sultan that has ever ruled this earth, by Turkish poets and historians!'

'True, Melis! Father Paisie was saying I am like a mirror! I believe we all are! In the nicked and bent glass of a poorly made mirror, like the guileful and thieves are, I will always appear as wicked and unseemly! But it is for all the other mirrors that I have dedicated my entire life; for the poor mothers sending their sons to battle, for the brave and wise men that struggle and die for our precious Wallachia!'

'Let us forget the mirrors and swords and get ready! We have a big day tomorrow!'

‘Indeed, father!’ Melis lit up. ‘This is why I came all the way to Targoviste! Only once does His Highness Vlad, the Voivod of Wallachia, get married!’

Slowly, gradually, their thoughts and words became lighter and slid towards more pleasant subjects. Vlad had found his peace and made his decision, this time for good! What he had refused to believe, what he had blamed on his own impetuosity, was now being confirmed, from both the centuries of legends of the greatest peoples mentioned by Melis, and the sky sometimes sprinkled with warrior saints praised by Paisie.

Any trace of his mercy, any motivation to try and bring the treacherous noblemen by his side was now gone! For ever!

Across Targoviste, Malina’s heart was much lighter, not having to answer for so many terrible things. The many thoughts were softly and merrily pinching and tickling her, chasing sleep away. She was afraid to fall asleep. What if when she woke up in the morning Vlad would be away again, in exile? What if it had all been merely a dream? She stood up again and checked if everything was ready for the next day. She then laughed at her own silliness, took another pirouette in front of the mirror and went back to bed. The wide, beamful smile remained on her face long after she had fallen asleep, deep in beautiful dreams. By the girl’s window, two ring doves perched on a willow branch sighed deeply, melancholically, touched by her happiness.

A few houses away, Tudor was also restless, his thoughts were split in two...Half were cheerful and light, scented with longing for his Catalina, but half were lucid and somewhat sad. He knew that on the following day, during the wedding, there would be plenty of opportunities for Vlad’s enemies. Thus, his preparations for such a great day were brief and had long before been finished. Now he was carefully arranging his knives and unmerciful sword. He was not angry or bitter. He had known for a long time this was his avail, that he was what he was – defender of Vlad and Wallachia. Everything else, the wedding, the joys, the sorrows, meant little, spots of colour over a black and white existence, as that of any soldier is...

Kneeling in his hut in the mountains, Zyraxes the hermit could see with his fiery eyes the thoughts of the four young people that would soon be forever tied to each other; he watched them rise, colourful like rainbows, from all four corners of Targoviste. They met above the city, creating a magical dome from which dust of pure young love slowly fell over the souls of people. The old man smiled in content and remained frozen in his everlasting prayer. He knew that, at least for a couple of days, the four of them had brought about a better, more tranquil fate for the Country...



As ever, in May the day came suddenly over Wallachia. The great celebration of the royal wedding was running its course as custom had it for noblemen’s weddings. Early in the morning, the royal cortege had left the castle yard, lead by Lord Vlad and his beloved knight Tudor. The groomsmen were – of course – Stroe for the Voivod of Wallachia and Marcu for their fortunate companion.

Mihnea had no part in the ceremony, but it was for the best. His eagle eyes could watch over their Lord more carefully.

But as soon as they passed through the gate of the royal castle, this wedding ceased being an ordinary one. The royal groom and his companions started not towards some grand nobleman’s castle, but towards the outskirts of the city, where simple people lived; by tradition, they were not taken into account during major courtly events. Thus, now the streets were crowded with people from all over town and the surrounding villages, bearing gifts and flowers for their Lord. Their great numbers were

a clear sign that the new Voivod had given them hope for the times to come, that they, the folk that suffered all hardships, were no longer feeling excluded and exploited, that they could be together! As it should be!

Vlad was all smile. He rejoiced over the crowds gathered for him! He reined in the horse and drew closer to Stroe; he had to shout a bit, to make himself heard over the people's cheering:

'I believe no other groom has ever received a gift greater than this!'

Stroe did not answer. But he did nod approvingly, looking at Vlad who was wearing Romanian wedding clothes, not French or Italian, as custom had it with the nobles; he truly seemed one of the folk people. He was wearing a thin flax shirt, sleeves embroidered in discrete sky-blue flowers, made by Malina herself, as tradition demanded. On top, he had a light gaberdine bearing the symbols of Wallachia, that matched perfectly with the Draculesti dragon pendant made of blazing jade. He also wore a traditional wide belt, a present from one of the many skilled leather dressers in the town. As were the black trousers and the high boots adorned with silver studs.

Instead of answering, Stroe raised the customary fir branches he was carrying and cheered sharply and merrily, to the delight of the crowd that cheered back and to Vlad's amusement.

'I never thought I would see you like this, knight!' Vlad confessed.

'And why not, Lord? If not today, when then? Look at Ler nearly bursting with pride by his boy!'

Indeed, the blonde knight had blushed from head to toe and was shyly enshrouding his son with all the love and missing gathered during his years of exile, during which he could only dream of embracing him.

Tudor, in his typical maiden-like bashfulness, had initially declined riding by Vlad's side. He considered himself worthless of such privilege. But the Voivod had insisted that he was the one being honoured and that he wanted him by his side, especially since his blood brothers could not accompany him. And also, was not Catalina worthy of all honours? With such arguments, the Lord had eventually convinced him, but could not banish his sheepishness.

But Tudor was riding tensely, like one who does not enjoy having all eyes on him. Soon, the cortege reached the crossroads where Vlad had to head for Malina's house, and Tudor and his companions – for Sache and Catalina's inn. They stopped for a moment to exchange best wishes. Vlad slightly lowered his head on one side, a warm and somewhat sad smile for his brother on his face. But Tudor did not see it...His eyes were searching for Mihnea. The old knight nodded discreetly, meaning everything was under control and that he had nothing to worry about. Only then did Tudor turned his eyes to the Voivod and returned his best wishes. It all happened in less than a moment and no one but Vlad noticed the signalling between the knights. Vlad thanked him silently and took for the street to the western side of the city.

His heart – accustomed to battle and all sorts of horrors – was now throbbing out of his chest, at the sight of Malina's house gate, dressed with fir branches.

He drew nearer and then waited, as tradition went, for one of the lads accompanying him to chant the "conocoșia"⁴⁸. From the porch, Malina's "druște"⁴⁹ replied with their cheerful, beautiful songs, inviting them inside. In the doorstep, uncle Petre was standing up straight and proud on his wooden leg, radiating with happiness.

The crowd, come to assist to the Lord's wedding suddenly fell silent, as if signalled to. The cortege was now supposed to dance the traditional bridal round dance, as it had been done for hundreds of years...but who had ever heard of a Voivod dancing along with simple folk, hand in hand? But Vlad had every intention of doing just that, so he took the hands of Stroe and the nearest girl

and started the round dance... Still diffident, as one should be before the Lord, the townspeople dared not join the dancing. Only the guests and relatives started spinning vertiginously, among whistling and cheering. When the round dance came to an end, Vlad called for one of his soldiers and whispered something to him. The man put on a wide smile that was a step away from turning into booming laughter. One could easily see he was happy. Then, the Voivod spoke out loud to the people gathered beyond the fence:

‘My dear people, from Targoviste or wherever you may be from, I and Malina thank you for giving us the pleasure of coming to our wedding! We invite you to the great clearing in the Prisaca forest. I have now sent word for the banquet and the priest to be waiting for us there!

‘It is proper that we have the wedding in church, but it is also proper not to leave you fine folk outside, when you came to us with open hearts. Is the forest not also a church of God, with sky as dome and stars as candles? Is not every part of Wallachia sacred? We shall celebrate together, my dears, just like we shall together endure the hard times to come!’

The people remained silent; they should have been happy, but they were reluctant. How should they respond to such an unexpected treat? For the first time, they were not offered some meaningless give-away meant to mark this kind of event, but were lovingly asked to participate themselves, to be there. The Lord was happy to share this with *them*!

One of the boldest women started singing in a nightingale’s voice: “Say farewell, bride”. She was immediately followed by Malina’s druste and the hundreds of women gathered there. It felt as though the entire city, with houses, trees and churches, was singing for Vlad and Malina.

The bride was lifted on the horse by her chosen one and everyone present was wondering whether there had ever been a wedding as beautiful and a bride as resplendent. The flowers in the girl’s long plaits combined with those woven into her new white blouse and they all seemed picked from Heaven. Malina could hear the entire city singing and could not believe it! She had intended to ask Vlad’s permission to invite several simple folk like her, but she thought it would not be proper. Now she was overwhelmed with joy at seeing her husband, proven to be like Prince Charming himself: handsome, strong, brave and, most of all, with a heart of gold!

In front of the Royal Court, Vlad and Malina’s cortege met that of Tudor and Catalina. They blended their singing and cheering, and house windows were shaking with the commotion.

Vlad shook Tudor’s hand firmly and spoke to Catalina and her parents:

‘I hope you will not mind, but I said it would be better to have the wedding beneath the clear blue sky, so that not one of the fine people honouring us with their presence be left outside!’

‘I wouldn’t have it any other way, my Lord!’ Tudor said with all his heart.

Side by side, the four of them rode on their magnificent horses wrought with flower garlands.

In the Prisaca forest, as the woods outside Targoviste were called, the preparations – a bit unusual as they were – had been finished less than half of a clock before. A gigantic table, nicely decorated with flowered table cloths, as well as others spread throughout the clearing, were waiting for the wedding guests. At the glade entrance, like at a church’s gates, were the priests; still surprised, but also happy with Vlad’s choice.

This was perhaps the happiest day in the history of Wallachia since Mircea the Elder had defeated Sultan Baiazid and redeemed the country. All around the clearing, people were laughing, feasting and dancing light-heartedly.

Sache, a bit tipsy after four buckets of wine, got up and walked in an approximately straight line towards the table where Melis, the Greek scholar, was sitting. It was only proper for such enlightened minds to seek each other and relish in the secrets and subtleties of Philosophy.

‘My lord!’ Sache began solemnly. ‘I–’ he remained silent for a few long moments, and then went on plainly, filled with the sincere merriness of a man as drunk as a fish. ‘I’m whacked good and I forgot what I was gonna ask ye! There ‘tis!’

Melis did not mind. As there had never been one single Greek on this green earth that did not love a pail – or ten – of good wine, he was also not in his best shape. But he was feeling forgiving and kind. Thus he replied:

‘I might know! You wanted to ask me... something!’

Sache looked at the Greek lovingly, raised an eyebrow and said to himself: *“I be whacked but he be pickled! Good pair we makes! But us still be the wis’st men here!”*

‘’Tis so, man, ‘tis so! I wanted to ask ye somethin’! There, ‘tis settled! Let me give ye a kiss!’

They smacked each other passionately on both cheeks, like any normal drunken men; then, Melis remembered a dilemma that had been troubling him for some time and for which Sache could provide an accurate answer, as he was directly involved in the matter:

‘Listen, mister innkeeper, but why did you write on your inn a few years ago: *“We organise weddings with the client’s bride?”* How so?’

‘Well, hear this! I reckon’d there’s people who, ‘stead of going through the labour and trouble of puttin’ t’gether a wedding, ‘d rather come to our inn here, just say what they want and we’ll do it all for them! ‘Cause that’s why we be the finest cooks of Wallachia and even the world!’ Sache added, sensing that Melis would never contradict him.

‘So, how did that go?’

‘An’ nobody came, man! Dammit! Some big idea *I* had! ‘Ere, people work hard an’ no matter how hard it gets, they does everything they needs, especially in a day of feast like that! Bu’ then what do yer know? One day a soldier no bigger than a boy and heavy as a middle dog as yer migh’ say is stopping by, see. He just stays and stares upwards. An’ I says to ‘im:

“’Ey, sonny, what are yer staring at? Or yer needy o’ coins an’ migh’ be thinkin’ to fix that roof that the hail broke th’other day, so as to give yer sommat to eat. ‘Cause yer sure look like yer might need the food!” I says.

The midget is looking at me like he’s the king an’ says:

“Coins I’ve got more than I can handle and you haven’t got enough food in ‘ere to stay wiv me!”

When I hears this folly, I thinks the poor fellow mus’ be starvin’ outta his wits, ‘cause I can see ‘is ribs through three layers o’ clothes, and I yells to Sofica to put a stew or sommat to boilin’, just ter help out the poor Christian!

‘*Nah,*’ he says to me, *“I’ve just eaten two turkey hens! I’ll be waitin’ fer a while an’ maybe I’ll be samplin’ sommat from yours own coockin’.* Bu’ tell me, ‘tis true you’re planning out weedings, or what?”

‘*So ‘tis!*’ I says, happy fer me first customer, even if he seemed a little off.

‘*An’ you do everything? That is, I’m givin’ the money and that’s that?”*

‘*That’s ‘bout right, yeah,*’ I says cautious. I didn’t exactly want to put meself in trouble wiv the madman...

‘*Well, see, I wanna wdding meself! How much is that?”*

‘*Hang on!*’ I says trying to cool ‘im down. *“How many relatives have yer got? How many are comin’?”*

‘*Well I don’t know... ‘bout 50 people, no more!*’

‘*Well, whatta yer know,*’ I says in my head. *“Mister Bony ‘ere is serious!”* so I asked ‘im in

an' we wet the bargain. An' watta yer know, the dirty rat sent down two whole chickens and a big bucket o' wine!

Now I was worried 'bout 'im, 'cause he had paid fairly an' I saw 'im bit white in the face an' getting' sad. An' I says ter 'im: *"What is it, fellow, d'you change yer mind?"* An' he says:

"No, not to worry, it's just that I've got to go now, got loads to do, an' me hunger is just growin' specially when I see you mister makes damn good food!"

He sprang to his feet an' left me alone an' bewildered, as yer migh' say, at the table. He had no belly, an' he wasn't groggy neither!

"Oh, boy, what sort of ferret is this?" I asked meself, bu' had no way wiv it an' set meself to work: pies, broths, stuffed pigs, wine from Buzau...what could I do? The man had paid fair and square fer all the goodies.

'Bout eight in the mornin', on the settled Sunday I went outside to wait fer the weddin' guests, I see the scrawny fellow comin', a big grin all over his face, dressed mighty fancy, strutting all alone down the lane. Yer could barely see 'im above the burdocks, big as he was!

"What did ya do, man did ya have a quarrel?"

"Wiv who, man?" he says, still grinnin' an' rubbin' his hands.

"Wiv your wife! I see yer alone!"

"Well, why should I fight if I haven't even seen 'er? Is she pretty?"

"What sort of jest is this?" I says to myself worried. *"I'll bet everything this lizard's well out of his wits!"* so I decided to approach 'im easily, as yer migh say:

"Well, of course she's pretty if it was you who chosed 'er!"

"Well, where is she 'cause I wanna give 'er kiss on the front!"

"Who, man? No one got 'ere yet!"

The midget's face darkened, threw me out of the way and burst inside the inn. There was no one there, except me wife, Sofica, who was staring and sniggering foolishly at the poor man, ready to show the guests their way to the table's. Bu' there wasn't even a trace of guests!

I see the dwarf startin' to snuffle furiously like a mad bull rising dust in the air all 'round 'imself and makin' the floors tremble! An' he says:

"Can it be that you've tricked me? Are yer inter such pranks? Didn't yer say yer organize weddings?"

"Sure I did," I says, trying to retire.

"Very well then: where's the bride?"

It's only then that light lit me mind an' I realized the fool thought I'd also provide 'im with the wife! It must be that as ugly and little as he was, he hadn't found a bonny lass on 'is own, an' when he saw the notice, the street rat was filled wiv 'ope again! What could I say? I took pity on 'im, too, bu' I also pitied the tons o' food an' I didn't feel like throwing! Keep it I couldn't, t'was summer, t'would've gone bad fast. The man was glaring at me, he was very upset, and says:

"An' what'll you do wiv all this food now?"

"Well, what can I do?" I says. *"I reckon we both sit ourselves at the table to forget such grave misunderstandin' an' you should eat as much as you can, an' the rest that can't be kept I'll give to the pigs."*

He says: *"I see yer a good man an' I shan't bear a grudge against yer! Never mind the pigs, 'cause I eat loads o' food when I'm upset!"*

That was right then an' there said an' done! We sat down and started our meal with the broths firs'. He says broth makes 'im even 'ungrier, an' so he dives directly inter the stuffed cabbage! 'Bout

three hours later, I was feelin' a bit queasy an' I says to 'im:

"Hey, man, yer just stay 'ere and stuff yerself wiv as much as yer can! I'll go lie down fer a bit an' rest ter get me strength back an' I'll come down ter help yer later!"

An' he says ter me:

"Don't fall asleep fer too long, yer migh' not find anything left!"

I was lookin' at 'im: there's no way he could ever be full. The man looked whiter in the face, an' even 'ungrier! That skinny midget stayed wiv me fer two nights an' two days!

Wiv the dawn of the third day, he says: "That's it!" he wiped 'is sharp mouth wiv 'is sleeve, gave me a bear hug like good ol' brothers, and he was out the door, just as thin as he came, bu' maybe a bit jollier! An' he was off! Who knows what kitchens he's 'aunting now? I fer one don't want ter set eyes on 'im again!

An' so, I've decided since then to makes adjustments, as yer migh' say, to the ol' notice, brigh' red, so yer can' miss it: "WITH THE CLIENT'S OWN BRIDE!!!" so as to not have any surprises o' this kind next time, 'cause the bloody fool did grave damage to the inn last time! No wonder he couldn't find 'imself a woman!

Melis was literally shaking with laughter, especially since he knew perfectly well Sache did not exaggerate too much. The story was by now famous in Targoviste, but he wanted to hear it again first hand from the innkeeper's sly mouth.

The philosophical matters were not very successful that day. It was still the anecdotes and the jokes that got the best attention, so that Sache remained in the dark but happy, while Melis remained happy but tight as a tick.

In the middle of the clearing, two fiddlers had their strings smoking, dazed by the young people's dance that went round and round in circles. Sweating with the furious dance, Vlad and Tudor swirled their brides, happy and careless as they had not been in a long time.

Tudor would leave the dance every once in a while and would come by each table, bringing more food and wine. The people loved him just as they did the Voivod himself. He found the time to run around with every crowd of children, to thank every father come there with his family. There was not a man in the Prisaca forest who would not gape at him. He had the gentleness of monks accustomed to the ways of the world among temptations and evils without ever letting himself attracted into their sticky net, and always fighting for the comfort of the people around him. He knew all of them by name and honoured them like his own family. By now, word had spread beyond Wallachia's borders of his exploits in battle, but the people here knew him best for his kind and gentle heart.

Now he rejoiced with his big soft eyes, clutching Catalina to his chest, whispering wonderful plans of many children and peaceful old age.

People were dancing throughout the entire clearing, and the children were running in the high grass, lively and beautiful like all children are. The elderly sat at tables or on lusciously green river banks, still in deep wonder at such a miraculous event. A Voivod that honoured them as though *they* were the royal heads!

That day, Vlad was in fact marrying the whole of Wallachia, who would be faithful to him till death and grateful till the end of time...



A few years ago, in France, I met a Romanian who claimed to be Dracula's direct descendent. The whole scene was more than embarrassing. There was nothing special about him, he didn't even have knowledge on the topic!

Today I asked my ancient interlocutor if he thought himself the descendent of this ruler of the Romanians. I had planned to save this question for the end of the interview, but I was too intrigued by the multitude of details given by the hermit and could resist no more.

My question surprised and almost offended him. He fixed me with his eyes for a long time, as though he wavered whether to confess something to me. Then, he spoke fiercely:

"In Lord Tzepesh' time, I was not...I could only have been a simple soldier, in the service of my people!"

Strange choice of words and even stranger hesitation...

Arefu, March 23rd, 2008

„...and so feared he was, that there was in a place of his a spring and a fountain...He placed a wonderful golden goblet at that fountain. And whoever wanted to drink water from that goblet they would put it back when they finished and for as long as time would keep it intact, no one dared steal the goblet from the fountain.”

Things had long since taken their normal course in the Romanian Country. Villagers everywhere worked harder, better and with more care, knowing that they and their families would be the first to enjoy the fruits of hard work, and not the noblemen – as things had gone till then. The craftsmen were also very surprised that they had come to live such good and rich times; and the elders said that not even in the age of Mircea the Great had the Country’s army been in better order. The only ones who were not happy were the fault-finders who invented anecdotes on the Lords. The new Voivod was not providing them with any good material for their jokes. Ugly, he was not: on the contrary, he was strong and handsome as few men of the age were; kind, he had showed himself to be with everyone: from the least of soldiers to the opposing nobles he had forgiven at the beginning of his rule. On this topic particularly, a fellow once said to his companions gathered around a table in the great square in Targoviste:

‘Yer know, fellas, ‘bout this Lord Vlad...what’s there to devise about him? I’ve been thinkin’ and thinkin’...haven’t slept in three nights! I reckon I’ll pick on his horse soon!’

‘Never mind, uncle Florea!’ another one answered. ‘Let this be the least of grudges we’ve got against the rulers: not to have reasons to laugh on the Voivod’s account. I say we’d better be careful, he might make us cry later on! His velvet paws may well be hiding sharp claws. As for his stallion, what fault, by all saints, could you possibly find with it? It was brought by Iancu Corvin all the way from Andalusia and it’s as good as any Moldavian ones – feisty as you might say! Why, the Lord wouldn’t have named it Storm for nothin’!’

In Wallachia however, there was still one category of unhappy people left and rightfully so. Vlad seemed to have forgotten the merchants. As the days passed and all the others had been given attention by the new Voivod in one way or another, Oană, the merchants’ guild master in Targoviste, decided to go to the Court and demand the Lord justice for them, too.

After Mircea the Elder’s demise, the privileges the German merchants from Brasov and Sibiu had in Wallachia grew more and more to the point when, in a few years’ time, they had come to stifle the local merchants all together.

Having already been informed about Oana and two of his friends’ intentions of facing themselves before him, Lord Vlad Draculea decided to send them word that he was willing to receive them in audience.

The Great Hall was not crowded with noblemen as usual. One by one, the young Voivod had let the wise council of the nobles go, and kept by his side only his five knights, inseparable from him and commander Cazan, the one who had dealt with royal orders in Lord Dracul’s time as well.

‘May the Lord our God give you good health and happiness, Your Highness!’ Oana began with a respectful bow.

‘The same I wish for you, dear ones! I know why you are come here today, and that is why I gave leave to the nobles. I wish for a secret meeting with you alone!’

Oana switched a confused glance from the other two merchants, to the knights, and after that back to the Voivod. The latter did not seem to be joking! On the contrary, his face had darkened a little and the voice grew huskier when he said:

‘I know that for decades the Germans have governed the trade in our Land, and under their

pressure, the Wallachians have stopped guiding their children on the path of this honest and fruitful profession. That is why we no longer have many skilled merchants; why all useful wares in times of peace or in times of war have to be bought from merchants in Sibiu or Brasov, for shameless prices, although merchandises pass through and come back to our Land from the Balkans and Asia Minor.'

'That is true, Your Highness, they have stifled us completely! We sell things underpriced to them and we pay ten times more when we want to buy something!'

'There is no need for more words, gentlemen. Henceforth, things in our country will change! Just like we are masters over the army of our country, just like our peasants are masters of the land they work, so it is fair for your lordships to be masters over Wallachia's commerce and all our people should be able to work together for the rising of our country! Before a month from now, I shall send our brother Tudor with a message to Brasov. I believe there cannot be any reason for grudge between two neighbour Christian countries. We shall seek to offer the Brasov merchants nice profit without limping your lordships' due freedoms.'

The merchants were happy and satisfied when they left the Great Hall. Lord Vlad was supporting them like he did with the rest of the people in Wallachia. The fact that young Tudor would be the one to go to Brasov proved the seriousness of Lord Vlad's words. There was no better messenger than kind and wise Tudor.



'Your Highness, they're bringing Tudor...' a soldier spoke faintly, bursting inside the tent without announcing himself.

What did he mean *bringing him*? Tudor had *to come*, not be brought!

In every knight's head, the soldier's words resounded worse than the tolling of a great bell on a funeral day. Vlad ran outside, immediately followed by Marcu, Stroe and Mihnea. Ler did not dare rise from his chair. His head merely tilted to one side; his mouth half opened, a long sigh was desperately trying not to turn itself into a whimper. Then, the knight's lips closed tight and nothing was heard inside the tent or out. Without a single word and empty eyes, Ler began to rock slowly backward and forward, slightly leaning against the back pillar of the tent.

Outside, all the soldiers had silently gathered around the cart where young and dear Tudor was lying close to death. The skin of his face and hands was torn off and a great sharp pole was run through his body, but Ler's son was doing his best to smile to the knights in front of the cart. He wanted to speak, but a stream of blood gushed out from his mouth. His weary eyes met Vlad's and they seemed to be asking him for forgiveness for such unpleasant misadventure. The Voivod carefully mounted in the cart and leaned beside his friend.

'What have they done to you, Tudor? *Why* have they done this?'

'Don't...trust...' Tudor managed to murmur. 'Where's...' he tried to go on, but his eyes were searching for his father.

Back inside the tent by his friend's side, Stroe was having trouble finding his words – what was there left to say? For Ler, nothing. For Tudor, everything!

'Come on, brother, pull yourself together. You *cannot* be weak now. I know it's hard. I feel like dying with him now, too. He's like my own son...but let him go in peace, don't let him see you down. Come on outside, brother, come with me slowly!'

The other knights moved aside before Ler and Vlad jumped down from the cart. With a brisk waved sign, he ordered the soldiers to leave. Tudor and his father needed not share their last moments together with anyone else.

‘Knight, hold yourself together!’ Tudor spoke smiling faintly to his father. ‘They’re watching us now, hidden in their tents, the entire...all the soldiers of Wallachia.’ the young man barely managed to finish his sentence.

‘Christians shouldn’t have done this! Forgive me, son, I’ve sent you to the wolves...’ Ler faltered, clasping his son’s fingers in his large hands.

‘It was not the Christians who did it, father, but men. Be they Muslims or Christians, it doesn’t matter. A man’s worthiest creed are his own actions, and not the image before which he prays.’

Tudor’s words were no longer weak. For a few moments, he seemed as though completely healed. Ler however knew that often, in their dying hour, the badly wounded may look like they are strong again, but this happens only when the end is nearest. Perhaps this was God’s way of letting them put some order in their worldly matters, before rising to Heaven.

‘Father...I wish I could stay a bit longer with you...’

The terrible hurting of the body did no longer succeed in stifling Tudor’s words. All that remained was an endless aching for his father and the horror of the separation which were both tearing at his pure soul, already half gone on to the other side, to the world of the unblemished. Ler was stunned, speechless, and out of his beautiful eyes still set on his departing child, tears were flowing incessantly. He felt as though his own world had come to an end; that he could not take it anymore, that he was in Hell without even caring why. Then he felt nothing. He lost consciousness, just as he was: standing and eyes wide open, nailed to the ground like a cross. He escaped from his worthless powerless body and tried to accompany at least for some time his child’s spirit in its ascent to the skies. Once there, he would have wanted to ask the saints or God Himself for permission to stay with Tudor. Or at least to get a glimpse of him in Heaven, to know he was all right, to give him to the care of some kind angel. After that, he could simply roost at the Heaven Gates, from where he could hear his son’s voice from time to time. All he could manage to see from where he lingered was the world below him, now turned into darkness. Far away in the distance, he could see a narrow streak of blood-red light which lightened nothing, no silhouette, no blade of grass, but which sealed even more bitterly the world of blackness from which he was trying to rise. Ler’s time had not come yet.

A little way farther, eyes flashing with rage, Vlad was questioning the six nobles who had left with Tudor to Brasov.

‘How could something like this happen, Adam?’

‘Forgive us, Highness, as soon as we got there, the Germans welcomed us most coldly, although they clearly saw we were coming in our Voivod’s name. And it seemed their eyes were full of disgust at seeing us there...Afterwards, Tudor gave them the presents and believe me Your Highness, I’ve yet to see a better, more skilled messenger and who would bring more honour to the hosts than he. Without bowing and scraping, he spoke to them as friends and presented them Your Highness’ demands regarding the border commerce.’

‘And what did such upheaval start from?’ Vlad asked, alarmingly calm, as if he had already taken a decision.

‘I don’t know, Highness, there was no reason for it at all! We were all Christians there...and we were all peaceful. Tudor told them to take their time and consider our propositions, and then, in a month’s time, they were to give us the answer and have a meeting again if they had other thoughts. What more could the Germans want?’

‘I’ll tell you what they wanted,’ Vlad continued just as calm. ‘I’ll tell what *more* they wanted! They wanted to have control over *all* my commerce in my Country. They wanted our merchants to

remain forever their slaves. These Germans wrinkle their noses at saying the word *Wallachian*. They forget they have been *brought* here, on the lands of ancient Dacia, and instead of being grateful that we welcome them, they dream themselves as absolute masters! But things cannot be like this anymore!’ Vlad said, rising to this feet.⁵⁰

‘Stroe!’ the Voivod thundered, becoming a completely different person in an instant. He looked taller and his face had darkened. ‘Is everything set?’

‘Everything, Lord! Seven thousand soldiers ready to go.’

‘But...where are you going, Your Highness?’ nobleman Manta asked surprised.

‘We’re going for the Germans! Now! And you are coming with us, we still have got things to discuss and there’s no time for lingering. Mount your horse and get your weapons!’

Inside the Wallachians’ camp, preparations for the punishing campaign had been completed in less than a quarter of a clock. The long months of heavy and exhausting training – sometimes over the normal limit of what a soldier could bear – were now proving their efficiency. Seven thousand Wallachian cavaliers were neatly ranged, each beneath his own flag, each knowing well his particular purpose. Many among them already assumed where they were going and secretly approved the Voivod’s decision. Tudor was admired and loved by everyone. He would always have a kind word for each of them and his ever-gentle nature and smiling had had all the soldiers see him more as a younger brother than one of the army’s commanders.

Now, everyone suspected they were heading to Brasov to ask the Germans to account for their meaningless cruelty. Lord Vlad spurred his horse before his army in order to have everything perfectly clear.

‘Soldiers of Wallachia! Today, a heinous injustice has been committed! Pure-heartedly, we have sent message of friendship to the Germans. And our hearts have been ripped out of our chests. All that we have asked was for their interference in our Country’s commerce to be limited at border fairs. Our brother Tudor went to Brasov and spoke to the Germans with goodness and kindness, leaving discussions open and never threatening anyone, as it was perhaps fair for us to do. He was skinned alive and impaled! Our Christian “brothers” have done this! And now our good brother Tudor is dying. His life has been wasted for nothing. You all know what we have to do.’

The Voivod’s words echoed over the silent army, frozen at the foot of Targoviste hills. The hard resolution in Vlad’s words made all the soldiers think the worst. For many, this would be their first battle and it was a shame it would be fought between Christians; but not one among the Lord’s seven thousand cavaliers would have ever faltered. They simply had to avenge beloved Tudor’s many sufferings – especially since they fully demonstrated the pointless brutality of the Germans and their arrogance that simply could not be allowed to continue!

‘Treasurer Adam has told us how things went in Brasov,’ Vlad continued his speech, just as determined as before. ‘Tudor was not murdered by a few bad German scoundrels. No! he was taken to the city square, where common Germans, several of them from the neighbouring villages, actually cheered his execution. Maybe some did not know what they were doing and who they were judging, but time has come for them to find out! On our way to Brasov, we shall pass through some German villages. So, let us show that it is high time for them to think twice before killing anyone else and that Wallachians are masters in Wallachia, here and across the mountains! With such dogs, mercy has no use whatsoever! Let’s go.’

The soldiers’ usual acclaims before every departure to battle were silent this time, but Vlad was not even waiting for them. He jerked Storm’s reins and gave a short command.

‘Marcu and Mihnea, out front! Take one thousand riders! The rest will stay here under Cazan’s

orders! Off you go! Stroe, here!’

‘At your orders, Highness!’

‘You, Stroe, shan’t come with us! Stay here with brother Ler and take care that he doesn’t lose his mind. Watch and care for him most unfailingly!’

‘You think I would do otherwise, Lord?’

‘No, Stroe, I don’t think you would,’ Vlad whispered as if to himself, while he was already heading away from the knight. ‘But I know Tudor was your light, too, just as Ler is like your twin! I greatly fear your heart would be the first to break lest I leave you with a definite hard purpose here.’

The one thousand Wallachian soldiers were making fast progress to Rucar Pass, onwards to Transylvania. Perfectly trained, young and fierce, armed head to toes, with new and fine weapons, they were the elite of the Wallachian army. Embittered and, more importantly, striking unexpectedly, Vlad’s army was impossible to stop.

Lord Vlad was riding at the head of the army, flanked by Marcu and Mihnea, hands tightly clutching the reins of his black stallion. Two hours after their departure from Targoviste, two manly shapes appeared in front of the soldiers. From a distance, they looked like two common riders. Mihnea’s sharp eyes made out something else, however, and the young Voivod’s words confirmed his suspicions.

‘What is Ler doing here? And how come Zyraxes has come down among men?’

When they got closer to the Lord, the two startling riders stopped and dismounted.

‘Forgive me, Highness,’ Ler whispered with feeble words. ‘I have left camp and hope to have usefully broken your command at least, Lord! Stroe is there and everything is prepared and well-ordered.’

‘Tudor?’ Vlad asked softly, but the name echoed in the knight’s heart and mind like hundreds of bells.

‘Gone, Highness. Right after you left. And we cannot turn him back. Listen, Lord, to what father Zyraxes has to say. I believe he is right this time as well...’

‘Speak, father,’ the Voivod prompted, trying hard to hide his impatience of continuing with the punishing campaign.

‘God sent his Son on Earth to die, and we were redeemed. Has He ever called us to account, then or now? Or has he asked us to renounce the sinning?’

Vlad threw Ler a quick glance, and the knight, paler than ever, gave his silent assent. Then, Vlad wanted to cuss, but felt shame to do so in front of the Father and the nearby soldiers. He sighed deeply instead and answered with difficulty:

‘And *have* we renounced all sins, father? Or are we still killing children who come to us in peace and with beautiful words?’

‘He who has never sinned, let him cast the first stone!’ Zyraxes went on, touching on Vlad’s nerves with his gentle justice, fit for completely different times. ‘And remember, Voivod: an unkind word turns the kind unkind, but a kind word turns kinder even the most lost of men!’

‘How do you mean? Leave the Germans unpunished? Let them do the same again and again and again? Or perhaps, father, you would like me to offer them some gifts, as well?’

Vlad seemed to have lost his temper, and for a moment, Marcu feared the wise man’s words had worsened matters.

‘No, Lord! Evil must be crushed, but man deserves another chance to make amends. You must find the right way to do so and I have faith in you! Now be kind and let me go, Lord! And give me Ler, too. He’ll be back in your camp in three days.’

‘Go, father, and you too, brother Ler, take care of your soul.’

‘*You* should take care of your souls, don’t rush into bloodshed,’ Zyraxes answered quietly.

Eyes set on the backs of the two remote figures, Vlad was trying to swallow his pride. There was only Christian goodness in the old man’s words, but what use did goodness have for such beasts? Maybe it was worth to try for the sake of the soldiers’ young souls beside him.

‘Marcu, you’re to go with ten men to the first German village. Don’t let anyone know there’s more of us behind. You’re to catch the village elder and send him with a message to Brasov. You’ll tell the Germans that, in return for Tudor, they shall give us one hundred young men for a year’s service at our Court. Then they shall be freed. We shan’t ravage any hamlet until we know their answer. Instead, we shall set off to the cover of the woods near Brasov and there we shall wait. You’re to tell the Germans that we wait for their answer in Targoviste and you’re to pretend you’re going back. Then, you shall join us at the foot of the mountain in Brasov!’

Marcu picked ten young men he had brought to the royal army and continued his way to the German lands. He was not hoping for too much; he was well aware the people there had gotten used to privilege and found it natural to have Romanian Country’s commerce under their control. From Mircea the Great onwards, people in Brasov had been enjoying important dispensations. However, after the death of the wise Voivod, these freedoms had grown more and more every year, and no following Lord thought of setting bounds to them. On the contrary, the fighting for the throne between various nobility factions had been heavily speculated by the people in Brasov, who, in exchange for all sorts of services to some candidate or other, had succeeded in ruining the merchant competition in Wallachia.

Marcu also knew that not all Germans were to blame for it and that many would pay simply for not having been against the injustice committed by their superiors across the mountains.

The rest of the army lead by Vlad split in bands of 200 people. The usual road to the villages across the mountains was left behind, and the bands of brave young men were heading on through the darkness of the forests, as silent as ghosts. No one was making a sound, and even the scouts sent ahead would only give discreet signals that the advance could be made without worry. At sundown, the five Wallachian groups joined one another in the thick forest at the foot of Brasov mountain.

Mihnea was supervising the preparation of the arrows with tarred wads for setting the city on fire. Each soldier carried ten simple arrows and ten with wads. Upon the captain’s control, the soldiers all ranged themselves orderly beside their horses and presented their weapons for checking. All were anxiously waiting for their share of blood: new strong bows, swords recently brought from France, belts with knives and short spears called kargi, which Vlad himself had imposed on his army and of whose efficiency he had been convinced during the years of heavy captivity at the Turks.

‘Everything is prepared, Highness,’ Mihnea reported.

‘As soon as we receive news from Marcu, we’re off. From here to our border, no village shall remain unpunished!’

‘Perhaps, Lord, we should send word to the leaders in Brasov and try to –’

Boyar Codrea’s son, Anghel, broke off mid-sentence. Through the deep darkness of the forest, he could feel the fire of Vlad’s eyes. Then, after a few horribly long moments, Vlad’s low husky voice became one with the coldness around and scratched ominously at Anghel’s ear drums.

‘Try – what, Anghel? Perhaps you feel ashamed at sneaking out in the dark, as is never the knightly way? I once had a friend, Tudor, a good child, a saint. If we are to judge on his behaviour alone – do you remember him? He died, only this morning. Impaled he died, like a raving dog. Don’t give a damn about the Brasov people, just as they didn’t give a damn about Tudor. Anyway,’ the

Voivod went on more quietly, 'I sent them word with Marcu and maybe they can get out of it alive if they still have an ounce of humanity left in them and are repentant. If not, it means they would be killing themselves and we would merely be fulfilling what is written.'



A little while before dawn, ten riders in very good spirits were out through the great gate of Brasov. The one higher in rank over his companions was wearing one white messenger flag and one with the city's crest on the saddle's pommel. Soon, he addressed the comrade riding next to him:

'Karl, tell our honourable companions what claims did the Wallachians have, and mostly, what our Burgmeister⁵¹ answered.'

'Listen, brothers! The Wallachians sent word that their young voivod won't tolerate the killing of their putrid messenger, and demands that one hundred of our young men go to Targoviste and serve there for a year. Obviously, without payment!' the one named Karl said, putting on an act to the great amusement of the nine Brasov riders. And Herr Friedrich Wolfgang, our honourable Burgmeister, sends them word today with us that he is willing to send them the one hundred youngsters, and they will get there in seven days' time – but they will serve as princes and counts there! In such brilliant way, each will learn his proper place in the world. The arrogant Vlad Dracula, who imagines he can threaten us whenever he feels like it, will learn how he must treat the merchants in Brasov, and we shall greatly rejoice at the knowledge and enlightenment of the most ignorant voivod!

In the silence of the young morning, laughter reached far and joking on the Wallachians and their voivod continued to flow. One of the riders however did not seem to share in with the general laughing mood, and was riding deep in thought, as though carrying an invisible weight on his shoulders.

'Maybe we shouldn't make the Wallachian our laughing stock,' he said at long last, to the surprise and indignation of his friends.

'What? Don't tell me you're afraid of the Romanians, Peter!? Or maybe you think they should indeed be masters over the whole commerce across the mountains!' asked ironically the leader of the messenger group.

'I'm not afraid, Herr Muller, but I think we should be careful, Wallachians under the rule of Voivod Vlad are no longer weak. I served under his command when he was general of the Southern Army of Transylvania, and I'm telling you: I don't think we or anyone else around here has greater skills at war than he does.'

'Nonsense, Peter! You well know the Southern Army was still lead by Huniade, as were all the rest. And Huniade was Wallachian, too, but he was different.'

'No, Herr! Huniade came but rarely, and was always surprised at the Wallachian's skills. And let me tell you something else: general Vlad was always first for exercises of fencing, riding, archery and all the others. And when we had fighting exercises to practise, five adversaries would present themselves before him, not one or two as I heard some very brave men do. Rarely was the case for him to come out touched from such a confrontation. As for the five knights that are inseparable from him, what more could I say? Real demons, they are!'

'You're wrong Peter! You were just a boy, and the Wallachian made a fool out of you with all sorts of tricks at which he and his kind are experts! And even if things were as you say, at Bran we'll pass the message to a Romanian who will take it to Targoviste, and Vlad can get here only two nights

from now. And I think there isn't anyone afraid of a handful of clumsy Wallachians always at war for a worthless throne!

Herr Muller's calculations proved wrong, however. If he had learned better the war craft, maybe he would have paid closer attention to a rooster's cackle stopped a bit abruptly, and repeated three times right after their departure from the city; neither did the honourable messenger notice the owl answering the rooster in almost the same fashion, too. He simply continued relaxed on the way to Bran, the castle on the border with Wallachia.

But after a few metres, this time he could not miss ten short hisses, followed by ten rattling breaths, one of which happened to be his own. At the shelter of the forest where the path to the Romanian Country was cut, twenty Wallachians previously given intelligence by the rooster and the owl of the number and direction of the messengers, had been waiting, chains at a ready, for the ten men to arrive.

The long thin heavy ballled ropes did their purpose quickly, and their handlers could be satisfied that their long hours of training with such an unusual weapon had not been in vain after all. Before ever realising what was going on, the ten Brasov envoys flew off their horses' saddles, landing roughly on the rocky ground. They were tied firmly, their surprised gaping mouths filled suddenly with gags that had been prepared beforehand, and before returning to their senses completely, they were mounted on the same horses, who had made no sense of such a scuffle.

After another half of a clock, the ten German messengers dismounted – or rather, were unpacked off their horses. In the transparent light of dawn, the messengers were witnesses to a less common dialogue. Knight Marcu sprang off his horse at the same time as the rest of the twenty young men – whom he had led as scouts over night, below the Brasov City walls - and bowed to his Lord.

Muller pricked up his ears, desperately trying to catch something out of the two bandits' conversation. Of course, it could only be bandits attacking them at that hour of morning. Brasov held grudges with no one, and as for the Wallachians, they could never had gotten here so quickly, without the guards' notice. He felt pretty secure about the future. He knew they would get themselves ransomed with a few bags of gold, and they would be free in a couple of hours. The problem was that the two bandits had not exchanged too many words, and had not asked him of his rank or fortune. And their weapons seemed too valuable for simple thieves.

Marcu bowed before his Voivod and shook his head lightly at Vlad's unspoken question.

'The stake!' the Lord growled while mounting his horse, then he quickly called for Marcu and Mihnea.

'We're going to enter the city and we're going to set fire to the German shops and workshops for an hour. Whoever plunders or slaughters women and children shall end up impaled. Whoever backs away from the enemy shall end up worse! Now let's go!'

The perfectly ordered rows of Wallachians were spreading out in ghost-like fashion through the ever scarce trees and on to the walls of the city. Upon reaching open fields, the horses started in full gallop, and before the city guards ever realised it, fifty Romanians had climbed the walls on ladders and ropes, as agile as monkeys, reaching the top of the city walls. Once up there and protected by the Wallachians arrow's, they engaged themselves in a short fight, out of which the ten German guards had absolutely no chance. In less than two minutes, the great gate was opened and the one thousand Wallachian soldiers thirsty for vengeance burst with wild cries into the city.

Most of the Germans sprang from their beds and to the windows to see what was happening. Their surprise was no less great, but much less pleasant at seeing down the narrow alleys a whole Wallachian army running at full speed, thoroughly prepared for war, and haunting the city in a

deafening uproar. The shattering of doors and windows became one with the shouting of the brave men from across the mountains and the fires erupting all over town. It seemed all Hell had broken loose over Brasov, and no one knew how this mayhem would end. The city garrison had only had the chance to sound the alarm, and most of the soldiers had already died of arrows or spears, before ever being any the wiser against whom they were fighting.

That morning was not very happy for Burgmeister Friederich Wolfgang, either. Before six o'clock, his door was broken down and two soldiers – in Wallachian uniforms, black with soot and carrying bloody swords – stormed in. His heart was bursting in his chest, thus, all that a quick punch from Lord Vlad straight to Herr Wolfgang's head did was to hurry the latter's loss of consciousness, which would have undoubtedly come anyway, judging by Herr Burgmeister's strength and bravery. When the ruler of the city of Brasov came to his senses, he was in the Council Square, surrounded, as always, by the men he ruled over. It was just the simple matter of him being bound, and his subjects guarded with spears and bows by one thousand Wallachian riders.

The young Voivod of the Romanian Country grabbed Herr Wolfgang by the scruff of his neck and uttered thunderously:

'Today, the mayor of the city of Brasov is called for judgment, accused for the killing of our brother and most noble knight, Tudor Amariei. Wallachian soldiers, what shall his punishment be?'

'The stake!!' one thousand soldiers cried in unison.

'It can't be, it can't be –' Friederich Wolfgang faltered.

'Of course it can, Herr, why couldn't it be?' Vlad answered ironically. 'Execute him!'

Four pairs of strong hands grabbed roughly and knocked down the man who until a couple of hours before had been master of the city. At once, two soldiers brought a long stake of fir wood, especially prepared for the occasion. One of them set it between the Burgmeister's legs, while his companion began to nail it in with a great wooden hammer, pushing the stake very, very slowly into the damned man's body. The terrible shrieks of agony drove silent everyone present in the city square. The magistrate's body, torn, started to bleed abundantly, while the pain had invaded every tiny part of his body and of his soul. Then, for a short period of time, he thought the pain was dimming and an almost pleasant numbness was overcoming him instead. With blood-shot eyes, he could see the columns of smoke rising like stakes above his city. The Council Square, with its beautiful houses neatly built in the German tradition – all were lying there, tilted to one side, ugly and scared, without helping him in the least. Cowards...

An empty eerie silence had fallen over everything. He saw in the front row of the forcefully gathered crowd a woman that was throwing herself to her knees, screaming out of her wits. But Wolfgang heard nothing anymore. He slowly lowered his head, hoping with all his might for death or a swooning fit to come right then, to be spared of having to witness his own execution. Suddenly, a hand clawed itself in his hair and jerked his head backwards, so that he can look up. Stuck to his face, he found Dracul's son, Voivod Vlad's own face. He could feel his calm breath on his lips and could not repress a shiver of horror at the sight of the big cold eyes that glared at him as though he were a small uninteresting insect.

'Is this what you wanted?' the demon before him asked in a husky and condemning voice. The pain swept over him again, brought about by new hammerings of the stake running through him, crushing his entrails deeper and deeper. He again made huge efforts to lose consciousness, but each new hit of the sledge hammer woke him, and amplified his pain. Soon, his voice disappeared, hoarse with so much screaming, and the Burgmeister wondered how come the young Wallachian messenger had resisted for so long without screaming. He would have never thought that *anything* could bring

one so much pain.

His stake was lifted and fixed in the centre of the square. From its height, Wolfgang saw over the city walls the other ten stakes in which his messengers to the Romanian Country hung still.

They at least seemed redeemed...



I didn't write anything in my diary yesterday. I spent the day studying almost every document on Dracula considered serious. The old man tells me a story that reveals a great, hardly known personality! A military genius such as few have been throughout history. Documents speak of an army of the Sultan of 250 000 people (a somewhat exaggerated number). The Romanian opposed and vanquished this army after an exemplary psychological war, of which I knew nothing till now. This is the tribute paid to history by a great king for having ruled a small country! They say Napoleon was a military genius. He, who attacked Russia in winter and lost because of the terrible cold over 100 000 men! Napoleon was great...huge! But this Dracula whom I discover in documents and tales of his age is truly a mastermind! I shall have to write a thesis about him when I return!

Arefu, March 25th, 2008

“Once, messengers from the Ottoman Emperor came to him. When they were received by him and gave proper praise according to their custom, they did not remove their turbans...”

Slavic Tales of Dracula

The four years that had passed since Constantinople had fallen to the Turks, had begun to leave their mark on the buildings of the city, which until recently was still a Christian citadel. Mosks had risen everywhere in the old polis⁵², and churches would hide quietly in the slums.

It is fair to say that crafts and commerce were blooming nicely and that the Turks, brought to live in the city, were getting along fine with the Greeks and Italians that had not run away.

The Greeks had been allowed to organise themselves into millets⁵³ and keep intact their customs, while Sultan Mehmet had even named an Orthodox Patriarch for them.

Behind such gracefulness from the Padishah, there was actual fear that Christians, deprived of the heart of Orthodoxy, should unite against him under the church of Rome. A great crusade, which would have gathered all the nations, would be hard to crush!

Common folk, Greeks, Turks, Venetians, Armenians or Jews, did not have the time to stop and think about such fine political strategies, and there was rarely between them any reason for grudge. The important people however, on one side and the other, were all scheming plans and traps to bend their enemies.



Standing in front of the ancient Saint Sophia church – presently turned into the greatest mosque of the city – to inspect the reconstruction proceedings, Sultan Mehmet glared with a slight nausea at his glamorous entourage. More than one hundred spahija, janissaries, great merchants and scholars were fighting each other discreetly and quietly for a place closer to the King of Kings.

‘It has been three years, Ali Beg, and Vlad Draculea has not sent the due tribute yet. What do you think, is he rising in revolt, or has he not managed to get the money he owes us? We already know that not all the noblemen want him on the throne and many are not at all happy with the new Lord’s ways of ruling the Romanian Country.’

‘Your Serenity,’ began with a deep bow Ali Beg, the old councillor of the Sultan. ‘Ever since the young Dracul has occupied Wallachia’s throne, news from there get to us harder and harder. A part of our spies have perished without trace, and others we could not engage.’

‘How could you not engage others? Tramps and low-lives ready to sell anyone on money or trifles can be found everywhere, since the beginning of time!’

‘That is so, oh, blessed Sultan! It is simply the fact that something rotten is happening in Wallachia. And I cannot exactly put my finger on it, neither can I say whether Dracula himself is behind these changes at all. Perhaps these are mere accidents.’

‘What exactly do you say is happening?’ Mehmet asked, suddenly more alert at the topic of the conversation.

‘The people in Wallachia are more orderly with themselves and more careful. Their fields are neat and clean. Merchants are saving their money and towns are blooming. This is a good thing for us, because the Wallachians will be shortly able to pay their tribute to us and will have resources to pay us even more!’

‘Or perhaps not...’ Mehmet murmured pensively. ‘I remember him when he was hostage at the Court of my father’s, the great Murad, bless his memory! He was wicked and fierce, he got angry out of anything, but he was never hot-headed! And he was the perfect soldier! If it is in his mind to rebel, we must not be careless. We must dispose of him immediately!’

‘Your Grace, I don’t believe it’s rebellion. His country is too small. He has no resources to assemble an army, and even if he did, we would know it right away. Besides, when tribute time came, he has always sent us a letter where he begged for our forgiveness and clearly demonstrated that he could not collect the owing obligation.’

‘Letters...Would you not do the same if you prepared a war? Would I not do the same? Let Catavolinos be ready to leave for Targoviste immediately. Let Hamza Pasha accompany him from Giurgiu.’

‘Wise decision! Catavolinos is sly as a fox and has never yet failed to find out secret things!’

‘Now he mustn’t find out anything! He must lure the Wallachian to the Danube in order to discuss border limits and settle them once and for all. Thus we will show Dracula high appreciation and trust. He will swallow the bait like a fool and once at the Danube, Hamza and his janissaries will kill him.’

‘Perfect, oh, Wise Sultan of Sultans! It is better to get rid of him now than have troubles later. And if he is innocent...then that’s that!’

‘Guilty, not guilty, who cares? Christians fear us and will not be so bold as to fight us, except to defend themselves. They are foolish and disunited. They only seek glory on the battlefield and doll themselves up as though for balls. Word is among them that if you enter the battle recklessly and run into the middle of the enemy, you are brave and songs will be sung about you. They are foolish, I tell you. We would have a hard time with them if they united and listened to a good general who knew that, from battle, one must not come out famous but alive and winning!’

‘No truer words you have spoken, oh, Wise One! Allah has taken their minds so that he could smooth out your way to the heart of Europe!’

‘This is why Dracula worries me so! He was not like this. He was truly mean and knew how to wait. He knew how to bear, as well. One day before running away from the Gate of Happiness, I lusted to spend the night with him in my quarters. By them, this custom is greatly abhorred, and they only enjoy women. They consider us pagans and loathe us when they even hear of such a thing.’

When I told him what I desired, I looked him in the eye, waiting to see whether he winces away and swears at me, as was his way. He smiled at me, although a bit paler than before.

‘He was insidious and black of heart like a sheitan!’

‘He waited until I sent the servants away, and he seemed as sweet as honey. He got closer to me, filled my goblet and made to cut a slice of a roasted mutton.

‘The damned one grabbed the knife, but instead of slicing the meat on the table, he aimed for my heart. Allah loved me then and I managed to dodge away and make it alive, but the knife was stuck in my leg! Otherwise, I would have caught the Wallachian myself, and paid the dues for what he had done. The witless guards never found him, it was as though earth had swallowed him whole!’

‘He was skilled at tricks and fighting as I saw no other Christian at your Grace’s Court! And he rode as a djin⁵⁴ of the forest! Maybe he is in fact sheitan’s spawn, as they say...’

‘Yes, he was very skilled at warfare...and furthermore, he was preparing himself for *something* with endless hate. I greatly fear it was this he was preparing for: the rule over the country of Wallachia and a war against us!’

‘If Allah has clouded his mind and sends him to war against the radiant armies of Your Grace,

then his end must be near!’

‘Nothing can stand in our way now! But I would not want him as my enemy. His grandfather, Mircea, stopped the great Baiazid, and the other Wallachian, Corvin, stood stone hard and only the plague beat him down. I wish we would submit the Wallachians once and for all and never worry about them again. They are divided among each other, but they have always been unbroken and evil in wars. They seem unsteady and frivolous. They laugh out loud for no reason whatsoever and tell jokes on everyone’s account, even on their own Lords. But it is from their ancestors, the Dacians, that they have learned to laugh even in the face of Death, and love more than anything the land they live on from the beginning of history.’

‘But Emperor Trajan defeated them, blessed Padishah of Padishahs! And now we are as powerful as the Romans were.’

‘It was *only* Trajan to ever defeat them. He, whom the Romans have named “Optimus Princeps,” that is greatest among emperors. Others did not succeed! Neither did he succeed from the first battle, but only after first losing before the Dacians, as my history teacher tells me. The worst is that the Roman victors combined their blood with that of the Dacian barbarians, and of these two strong nations Wallachians were born – fierce as the Dacians and practical as the Romans, in times of war...’

‘But there is no greater nation and no wiser emperor as –’

‘Never mind that! After the evening prayer, send Catavolinos to me! He should be ready to set off to Wallachia! Dracula must not be left another moment at the rule of the Dacians! First, he should send message and ask for the tribute, and if the Wallachian is not willing, he should go there himself and kill him by any means.’

‘Young Dracula will crawl away in fear if only he should hear that your Grace’s rage is coming upon him. He himself will bring the tribute to the Gate!’

‘I thought I saw him at Constantinople, in the day of our victory!’ Mehmet went on, flinching involuntarily. ‘He seemed to be searching for me...I do not wish for a Voivod set on wars, but one that obeys us in Wallachia. It is high time for us to submit Buda and Vienna as well – I’m tired of always stumbling on these Wallachians! Time has come for their nation to disappear from the face of the earth!’

A few hundred miles farther to the West, in Wallachia, people’s plans were not as profound as those of the Sultan’s. Basking in the freshly mown hay, two peasants near Targoviste were sharing a big piece of ham, one bread and one large kettle of wine – just as the grandfathers of their grandfathers had done in the same place, and as their grandchildren and great-grandchildren would do hundreds of years later. The same hay, the same language, the same kettle of wine and the same worries and joys. As God wishes.



The royal city of Targoviste had grown morose beneath the weight of the grey October sky. Through the wisps of ravens, the leaden clouds had started to let loose cold sporadic rain drops since nightfall.

The sky’s dreariness reached down, soaking up the city windows. Now and then, a delicate female hand would be clearing the glass, and a pair of watchful flinching eyes would search the open street of the city. From there however, no sign of movement could be seen. Only the tall poplar trees bordering the way to the Royal Court would dance their toneless autumn sadness in the grey whiff.

In the back yards though, every Targoviste man from boys of only twelve to soldiers greatly tried in many battles were all silently preparing their best weapons or even some made of whatever they had at hand. No one seemed to mind the mean cold rain. The arrows were neatly ranged into clusters of 20 and placed in quivers; the long spears were polished and their gaskets carefully verified.

Two weeks before, Lord Vlad had commanded that all men, together with the army of the Country, should dress nicely as though for parade and be ready for battle.

Sultan Mehmet, Conqueror of Constantinople and terror of all Christendom, had sent his messengers to Targoviste with the order of crushing what seemed to be the beginning of a rebellion of the Wallachian Lord, and give the latter straight command of paying the tribute without delay.

Tarik Beg, leader of the messenger delegation, could not hide his discontent that the Turkish deputation had been held unnecessarily for so long in the new town of Bucharest, that they reached the Royal City only after dark. But much he could not do either. Ristea, ruler over Bucharest, had shown himself more than gracious and had explained it was Voivod Draculea's command that the new rich town by the river Dambovita should be presented to the great Turkish delegation.

This delay however had another purpose, previously conceived by Vlad and his knights. The Turks had to arrive to Targoviste late after dark. They should not be allowed to see the fantastic change of the city until the next day: the freshly painted big houses, the wealthy merchants' workshops, and the perfectly trained and armed city garrison.

All these they would set eyes upon only the following morning, on their way to the Court, when they would not have time to clarify where the old, smaller and less radiant Targoviste had disappeared – a town that for many years had not demonstrated the force of an army capable to confront a great empire.

The Turks' wonder was enormous, just as the Wallachians had expected. However, Tarik and his companions knew very well how to hide such things. Their delegation was moving slowly and audaciously toward Lord Vlad's Court. Leading the procession and riding a beautiful horse minutely adorned with precious gems and fine fabric, Tarik was in deep council with Hakan Ibn Zafer, one of the great scholars of the Ottoman Court, an expert in foreign relations with the Danube Christians. Further back, young and haughty Cenk was talking to older and wiser Sezai. Bringing up the rear, a suite of fifty soldiers of the Crescent⁵⁵ should have inspired fear in the Wallachians, reminding them of the gigantic force of the empire.

'The Wallachians did well under Voivod Draculea!' Tarik said to Cenk.

'Yes, they did,' the companion replied pensively. 'This city was not supposed to look like this. When did they have the time to build it? How many are there like Targoviste and Bucharest? From where all the money?'

'Money means armies...' Hakan murmured.

'Let's not worry ourselves for nothing! Today, no army is capable of defeating us. If the Wallachians *had* an army, we would have seen it now, lined to greet us. The city looks empty. They're scared of us and have gone hiding like rats! We don't see even the usual gapers around. It's obvious how much they fear us!'

It was only in front of the Royal Palace that the Turkish delegation saw the first signs of movement. Two noblemen with ten statue-like soldiers behind them, welcomed them to Wallachia and to Targoviste.

The small number of hosts left Hakan thinking, and he privately whispered to Cenk:

'I think Dracula wishes to defy us. It must be that Allah has taken away his mind!'

An absurd thought was beginning to take shape in the minds of the messengers. Such modest greeting to the delegation of the Sultan was inconceivable! As a rule, Kings and Lords brought before the delegation everything they had best and went beyond themselves in endless promises and civilities, seeking to draw the Conqueror's benevolence. Had indeed the young sheitan begun to defy the Master of the World? And why was it that the Wallachian soldiers were nailing them with their frozen looks?

Cazan, the old commander of the army, whom Hakan knew ever since the commander had been serving under the late Vlad Dracul, smiled to them and welcomed them very politely in the Hall of Throne.

'Welcome, your lordships! We hope your trip through Wallachia was pleasant and not very exhausting! Come inside, the High Council of the Romanian Country is dearly waiting for you!'

'If you show yourselves wise, your country shall live still. His Grace the Sultan, king of kings and emperor of emperors, is not very angry with you, Wallachians...yet!'

The answer was a fierce one and the warning direct. These were the orders from the Sultan for his messenger. The Wallachians had to be brought to their bearings for their rebellious ideas.

In the throne Hall, Cenk and his companions stopped dead in their tracks utterly bewildered. They did not know whom they should address. They had originally planned to strut daring between the rows of nobles and straight before the Voivod, and to speak plainly with him.

The throne was empty however. The nobles sat quietly on their chairs.

Cazan alone went to stand on the right side of the throne, where he addressed the messenger delegation.

'The noblemen of the Country of Wallachia welcome you, and pray you accept this chest and tapestry made in the workshops of the city of Targoviste, as a sign of our hospitality.'

Hakan's mind was buzzing with questions. What did they mean one chest and one tapestry? Even a poor camel raiser from Anatolia would send more to the Sultan. And why were the noblemen sitting down before them? And where the devil was the Lord? The Wallachians simply had to be reminded at once *who* was the true master on this side of Europe!

From behind him, Sezai the scholar handed Hakan a parchment from which the envoy began reading out loud.

'To Vlad Draculea Basarab and to all the nobles of Wallachia, our very humble subjects, I –'

Hakan did not finish the sentence. Vornic⁵⁶ Stan's heavy sword sprang as if with a life of its own and the old soldier's voice resounded brutally throughout the entire Hall:

'Be careful, Turk! We have welcomed you most kindly and you have had no displeasure from our part. Do not offend us, naming us the Sultan's slaves! Lord Vlad and we have never submitted to you!'

Taken aback, the Turkish messengers closed on each other, at a loss of what to do. They had never expected such open insubordination.

'Mind your words before the nobles of Wallachia!'

'You dare stand against the blessed Sultan, conqueror of the World? who are you and where are your armies if you consider disobedience?' Hakan shouted in his own turn.

Vornic Stan no longer bore the Turk's defiance and cried to commander Cazan:

'High commander, let me destroy them!'

'Let's not rush into blood shed!' scholar Sezai said meekly. 'We pray you be patient with my younger brother Hakan. The exhaustion of the long trip has affected us all and perhaps some words may sound harsher than we think them.'

‘You are right, oh, wise Sezai! Let’s not any of us rush!’ Cazan answered gently, recognising a more peaceful nature in scholar than his companions.

Sezai was known in Targoviste and in other Christian states as a diplomatic, intelligent, though no less dangerous messenger. Beneath his sometimes sweet, and always wise words lay hidden traps. The Turk was very skilled in discovering the best kept secrets and in closing most advantageous treaties for the Sultan.

‘We are greatly amazed, commander, that Lord Vlad should be missing from this assembly. We would have loved to meet again the young man who once charmed us with his presence at the Gate of Happiness!’

‘His Highness Vlad, Voivod of Wallachia, has sent us to listen to you and to have council with your lordships about the future of our countries.’

From what the commander said, clearly resulted an inconceivable idea for the Turks, at least until an hour before. Vlad had sent his councillors, just as the Sultan had sent his messengers for this discussion. And the Wallachians’ idea of “having council” implied they thought themselves perfect equals of the Ottoman Empire messengers! What was behind such surprising attitude? Was this only Draculea’s folly? Were the Christians preparing a new Crusade? Then, the supreme command would belong to Matias, King of Hungaria, and not the Lord of a small country like Wallachia.

Sezai composed himself as usual and asked in a honeyed voice:

‘Will we be permitted to show ourselves before the Voivod of Wallachia today? Our hearts would be greatly rejoiced, for, sadly, such occasions come only too rarely!’

‘Or gladly...’ Cazan answered. ‘In these last years, countries have been sending their messengers to their neighbours only when there is cause for it, or when both parties want to fight together for the good of the Cross!’

Hakan threw a quick glance to Sezai. Were Cazan’s last words mere coincidence, or actual implication to the Christians’ plans? If so, then they should pay attention and learn as much as possible.

‘Should I understand that your lordships are requesting an audience with the great Lord Vlad Basarab? I will go and see if His Highness wishes to meet you and listen to your demands.’

‘We thank you, sir!’ Sezai answered, visibly white and mentally thanking Allah that Hakan had kept down his temper at such insult. They, messengers of the Great Padishah, had to accept the moods swings of this insignificant Lord! But if this was the price for finding out the Christians’ plans of crusade, then it was worth it! Wallachia and its Voivod would disappear next summer anyhow, they would melt in the sea of Christians and Muslims that made the Ottoman Empire.

Commander Cazan disappeared through the door behind the throne and there was heavy silence in the Great Hall.

Vornic Stan had never stopped to stare at Hakan, and his sword was still drawn. He fixed him, fired up and callous like a lurking hound, maddened at the smell of blood, that was waiting for the master’s command to jump and tear him to pieces. A quarter of an hour leaked away so slowly like a cold and rainy season.

Cautious and diplomatic as ever, Sezai managed to loosen the atmosphere a little with his beautiful compliments to the city of Targoviste, which had blossomed so much in latest years.

Upstairs, in the Lord’s working chamber, Cazan found the Lord surrounded by his four knights, just as he expected.

The heavy atmosphere testified the Voivod’s decision. Negotiation was impossible with the Turks. They didn’t want only the last years’ due tribute. Stroe had arrived mere hours before from

Constantinople, where he had succeeded in finding out exactly what the Sultan wanted from Wallachia with the help of his spies.

For the first time since they were at war, the Ottoman Empire was demanding from Wallachia one hundred young children for the Sultan's army of janissaries.

The blood tribute, as the Wallachians named it, was paid only by the conquered countries, transformed into Turkish provinces. To the Wallachians, such tribute was unimaginable. No matter how far you looked, there had never existed in the Romanian Country a mother or father who would give their child away. All would have rather died than willingly surrender their babies.

'We should cut them without a word for having the audacity to come to us with such a request!' Marcu said dark with anger.

'I'm afraid we have no choice. How could we give our children away?' Mihnea said quietly, as though to himself.

'What do you say, Ler?' Vlad asked, somewhat afraid of the blond knight's over gentle nature, who would always avoid killing a man whenever he could.

'Let *me* cut them, Lord!' answered the knight known from Rome to Istanbul for his forgiving nature.

The chamber resounded with an eerie silence, a coldness which made the skin crawl and brought peace in the knights' hearts. Peace, as it was now clear for everyone that there could be no way back. For the first time, they were not sorry *at all* for having to spill human blood. What beasts could ever take children away from their mothers? What need would they have for? In their Turkey, there was place for ten more nations and still they would live well. Time had come for somebody to stop these conquerors that imagined themselves unstoppable.

'Let's go!' Vlad said shortly.

'What do we do with Stroe?' Ler asked them amused.

Slumped in a chair in the corner of the chamber, Stroe was sleeping soundly, a little tilted to one side, as peaceful as a baby in a cradle. He had ridden from Constantinople to Targoviste in the last week without rest, day and night, stopping only by inns to change the horses. He was simply exhausted. Without his iron will, many of the Turks' secrets would have never been learned in Targoviste.

The Voivod smiled affectionately to his knight and covered him softly with a thick woollen blanket for fear of waking him. At the first touch however, Stroe jumped, his hand suddenly on his hatchet, ready to hit.

'Forgive me, Lord!' he murmured sheepishly. 'I dozed off a little and forgot where I was.'

'Never ask for forgiveness, Stroe! Wallachia is proud of you and I cherish you like the older brother that you are!' the Voivod answered with open love.

'Stay here and rest, we will go and do what we have to do!'

'Yeah, right!' the ever genial knight answered, now fully awake. 'Like I don't want to castrate some Turks of my own! Just you wait a moment!'

He went outside and plunged his head in a large barrel of ice cold water. He roared once, invigorated, and said in a toothy grin:

'Gentlemen, after you! Let's go and skin ourselves some Turks!'

In the Great Hall of Throne, Sezai had not completely managed to shake off the tension lingering in the atmosphere. None of the Wallachian noblemen had returned his compliments. The news of the Sultan's intention of demanding children from their own Country had spread around with lightning speed in only a few hours and had darkened the Wallachians' faces with an ominous deathly feeling.

‘Long live His Highness, Vlad Basarab, Lord of Wallachia!’ the noblemen thundered in one voice.

‘Along with your Lordships!’ the Voivod answered. ‘Welcome, gentlemen!’ he then addressed the Turkish delegation.

In his voice there was no trace of the anger that boiled within. His diplomacy proved itself as flawless as his bravery on the battlefield. The years of hardship in jail and of undeserved punishment had taught Vlad to wait and bury deep within feelings and desires difficult to repress for another. He had become a very astute ruler even as a young man, and knew every time how to take his interlocutors exactly where he wanted. Before him, messengers old and wise, Christians and Muslims, had been forced to admit defeat. None of them had been able to learn more than the Voivod had let them, and for some, the stake had been the final step if they forgot they were dealing with the ruler of a free country.

‘We are glad to find you well! Mehmet, the Sultan of Sultans and sun of the world, sends you his love!’ Sezai answered glossily.

‘We are overjoyed to hear of the Sultan’s love to us! And it is still with love that we must remind your Lordships that, tired as you are perhaps from the long trip and rejoiced in meeting again a loving brother that I am, you have forgotten to uncover your heads before the Voivod of Wallachia, as is proper.’

‘We never uncover ourselves before anyone. It is only before our great Padishah that we are permitted to take off our turbans.’

‘This is *your* custom,’ Vlad smiled.

‘Precisely, Highness! It is our holy tradition!’

‘But is it fitting to try and impose your custom at other royal courts, or rather to show due respect to the Lords you visit and who are so kind as to welcome you and listen to your demands?’

It was evident that Lord Vlad was speaking as though they, the messengers of the great Mehmet, Conqueror of the World, had come here to beg for something. Hakan saw fit to settle things right from the beginning.

‘This custom should be taught here, in Targoviste too, and as quickly as possible!’ he began in a loud voice. ‘Soon, you shall embrace it as your own, just as the Christians from the Lower Danube did!’

‘We, dear Hakan, have enough customs,’ Vlad answered patiently, still grinning. ‘Our ancestors, the Dacians and the Romans, have left us so many and so beautiful customs, that we no longer need to bring any new ones.’

It was now clear for the nobles as well that Lord Vlad had decided to kill the Turks. By then everyone knew that only when he was really angry would the Voivod smile so serenely – an obvious sign that the Turks were condemned!

‘But you are right, sir!’ Vlad continued on the same benevolent tone. ‘A custom must be observed and made stronger! Out of love for the Sultan Mehmet, I shall give a helping hand in strengthening this custom of yours.’

‘We are glad, Highness, that you have come to understand before it is too late that it is better to lay under the protecting wing of the master of the World, than to upset him, even unwillingly. He is the Sun and –’

‘So it is, old and wise Sezai! He is the Sun and Wallachia is West from Constantinople. We all know that after the sun rises, it slowly heads towards sunset, where it disappears.’

‘But only for one night, Voivod!’ Sezai answered without losing his nerve. ‘After that, it rises

again and again till the end of time!’

‘Possibly. But sometimes, when men are suns, and they shine only over empires built through sword, night may come without warning! And it can be a *very* cold night!’

‘A Sun shines exactly for –’

Sezai broke off mid-sentence. Vlad had interrupted him with a polite gesture which left no room for interpretations. After that, the Lord gave a whispered order to Stroe, whose face lit up with a big grin.

The knight went out the door behind the throne and muffled laughter followed him.

“You’re done for, pretty boys!” Stroe thought greatly amused. *“Not even I would have thought of that! I reckon your great-grandchildren will be speaking of your misadventure with Lord Vlad, the sheitan’s spawn as you call him! Well! Now it’s official: the Devil has taken you!”*

‘I think it’s time we skip the usual civilities and show you the demands of the Great Mehmet, Conqueror of Constantinople and of all the Christian territories all the way to the Danube.’

‘I can see, feisty Hakan, that you still have not learned how to speak in front of great rulers of nations without upsetting them. I am surprised Mehmet still delegates you to European Courts. And I am surprised you are still alive. Till now,’ the Voivod answered in a colder tone.

‘Blessed Mehmet is demanding you to –’

‘We know it all!’ Vlad burst, ending arrogant Hakan’s discourse. ‘We know the Sultan is demanding us a tribute we did not approve of. We know he wants your armies to pass freely through my Country in order to attack Hungaria. We also know that, in case I would not accept it, you have orders to offer me a decrease of the tribute and the command of an army.’

The Turk messengers stared bewildered at one another. From where did the Wallachian know all these things? And when did he have the actual time to learn them? They had received all the details of the delegation only before setting off to Wallachia themselves, and had spoken to no one.

Would the Wallachian rebel against the unbroken empire? Would he get the support of the other Christian nations?

‘And we also know, gentlemen, that your Sultan has dared to ask us for one hundred youngsters for his army of janissaries!’

Vlad’s voice had finally begun to lose some of its usual calm and irony. It now sounded sharper and came from somewhere outside of him. The Voivod’s grin had disappeared, and his eyes were staring straight at Hakan. After a moment however, Vlad regained his exquisite composure and even managed to smile back.

‘But know, gentlemen, we are not very upset. And to prove our wish to please the Sultan, we readily agree to reinforce and honour your customs here in Targoviste.’

Again, the Turks were left confused. For a moment, it had seemed Draculea was rebelling. Now he was speaking carefully not to upset the Sultan. Of course, he was going to humiliate himself like all the others, fearful before the incredible power of the empire! Earlier, it had been a mere burst of uncontrolled pride.

‘I would ask you, gentlemen, what happened if a strong wind were to suddenly throw the turbans off your heads?’ Vlad went on in a friendly voice. ‘Wouldn’t it also be against the customs that you so highly praise? And be careful: here in Wallachia, we have very strong winds, especially in fall. Sometimes, there are storms that simply knock a man off his feet! We would hate to leave an honourable custom such as yours at hazard!’

‘Then it would be without our own will, so it would not be a sin!’ Sezai answered hurriedly, fearing that impetuous Hakan might say something rash which would again provoke the Wallachian’s

anger and his thoughts of disobeying. The best thing was for them to obtain everything they had come for and then confirm to the Sultan the fact that Draculea had to be removed.

‘I would like your Lordships to tell the Sultan that we did our best in honouring with your customs, even reinforce them here. Obviously, we will help in the same manner all the Turks that will want to cross our borders. We have customs too. One of the most important among them says that we should honour our guest and most of all, we should defend our land and our people.

‘Tell me, oh, wise Sezai, why do you think I sent knight Stroe to bring this hammer and these nails?’

Back in the Great Hall of Throne, Stroe was beaming, carrying a silken pillow with a hammer, twenty big bolts and four smaller ones neatly ranged on top.

Unhappy with the Wallachian Lord’s smugness, Hakan intervened again roughly:

‘We have not come here for riddles, or to discuss our turbans, which we shall never remove before a Christian voivod!’

‘Precisely!’ Vlad laughed. ‘I thought it better to help you always keep them on your enlightened heads. What if the wind or some misfortunate event should throw them off your heads at my Court? I would never want to provoke the Sultan’s anger!’

Already used to Vlad’s sarcastic and sinuous way of judging messengers arrived at his court, the nobles all burst into loud laughter. To them, what would follow was obvious.

‘Stroe! Why don’t you help our honourable guests!’

There followed for Mehmet’s delegates one of those cruel but just scenes taken right out of nightmares, and which no one should ever have to suffer. Stroe and Ler knocked Sezai down, as soldiers from the Voivod’s guard did the same with the rest of the Turks. The bolts were nailed with the hammer into the Turks’ heads through their turbans.

Sezai did not even struggle. He felt life leaving his body even before the first bolt penetrated his skull. He could see and hear, but everything would combine somehow away from him, in a world from which he wanted to disappear as soon as possible.

The sound of broken bone was blending awkwardly with the screams of pain and the nobles’ laughter, come as though from hell itself.

Standing over him, Ler told him in a cold voice, without hate, without mercy:

‘We do *not* give away our children. Nor our country! You shall live to tell this tale to the Sultan. *Only you* shall live!’

The shorter nails pierced Sezai’s skull, making him lose consciousness out of fear, rather than actual pain.

Outside the Royal Court, an open chariot had already been prepared, where the old messenger was carefully lain. When he barely came to his senses, he no longer had the strength to notice how incredibly white and scared his soldiers were.

He managed to see in a dreamlike state the streets of Wallachia’s capital filled with a perfectly ordered army, with shiny, proudly drawn out weapons, and red uniforms as in the days of Mircea the Elder, but most especially, with eyes blazing with hate.

He was trying to understand whether the Wallachians’ army was real or mere imagination because of his agony. Only this morning, the city had been deserted. Now, the streets were filled with at least ten thousand soldiers, all professionals and ready to fight. His mind refused to confront all these ghosts; he looked again to the front of the chariot and saw all his soldiers were alive and well. Then, he fainted again.

From his window, Vlad followed the Turkish convoy until it disappeared in the distance at the

outer gates of Targoviste. There was no joy and no anger on his face. And most certainly, no sign of fear at the Sultan's reaction, which could not be far now. He was calm. The first step for the psychological war he had planned against the invincible Turkish army had been made.

"Starting today, you will never know when you have bad dreams or when you are awake. You will not know when you perish slowly on our stakes or when you really burn in hell!" Vlad thought to himself.

For the Turks and their Sultan feared throughout Europe, a nightmare was beginning, a nightmare which would last over a year. This was a nightmare at the end of which more than 100,000 Turks would rot in Wallachian earth, and even more would lose their minds out of fear!⁵⁷

One of the strangest wars in history was about to begin.



Today I'm writing from the ruins of the old Targoviste citadel. The old hermit has sent me here. He told me that if I want to know more, I should spend a couple of hours among the ruins of Dracula's old city, at sunset.

The sole resemblance with the vampire myth seems to be the multitude of bats flying around the Chindia Tower.

But for that, a wholly different feeling takes over me. Overwhelming peace and heavenly content. I read on a sign that thirty three Lords have ruled here. Each of them must have left hundreds of legends behind...

I have visited several other castles and ancient cities. Every one of them gave me the same sensation: the heavy burden of history, the battles and those that have died there.

Targoviste is different. It is tranquil and, in the copper sunset, it smiles welcomingly, as if its Lords – from the other realm, holding goblets of Wallhallic nectar – were savouring today's freedom of the city they sacrificed their lives for.

Magnificent feeling!

Maybe it's just the beautiful weather of the Romanian spring. Or, maybe the old man was right...

Targoviste, March 26th, 2008

„Thus I tell you, Your Highness, that we have broken the peace with them (the Turks)..Which when they saw our deed, they left behind the quarrel and strife they had elsewhere...and came upon us with all their might. As soon as the weather clears, meaning spring, they scheme to bring war upon us, with all their power. And we shall not run from their wildness, but we shall fight them in any way.”

Letter from Vlad Tzepesh to Matias Corvin

February 11th 1462

Ringing frost...Biting cold as only on mountain spines...

The wild blizzard was scattering the snow away and into the soldiers' eyes. From the Bucegi plateau, the surrounding crests seemed closer and somewhat smaller, under the burden of the merciless frost.

The Country's best army was lined up neatly, ready for exercise. The Sphinx⁵⁸ had pulled its snow cap over its ears and was staring at the properly dressed and aligned Wallachian lads, with its hollow stone eyes.

Tired from the climb, knights Marcu and Mihnea stopped for a moment to catch their breaths. Mihnea's long hair, coarse, square face and large, shaggy wool vest mixed well with Marcu's tight outfit and shortly cut hair. They looked like a Dacian and a Roman, forgotten in that remote place, by both time and people. From a distance, the Sphinx seemed to recognize Trajan and Decebal. It was not them...But they did have their ancestors' eagle hearts – accustomed to flying high, undefeated – and the same determination and love for this blessed land.

‘Our lads have grown nicely in these past six months!’ Marcu smiled in satisfaction.

He was speaking proudly about the army Vlad was training at the heart of the mountains, far from curious or treacherous eyes. They were preparing for great war, greater than any others before.

‘Not even they know that we're leaving today!’ Mihnea replied. ‘And even if we told them, they wouldn't be afraid. They follow His Highness Vlad blindly.’

‘They follow him because he takes care of them and the Country. And also because he's the bravest of them all. Time has finally come for Wallachia to have a proud and wise Lord!’

‘Look at this!’ Mihnea interrupted slightly amused.

On higher ground, next to the Sphinx, the soldiers were quiet. They had all stopped to watch one of those moments that undoubtedly turn into fairytales retold through the generations.

Wearing only a pair of long, black, tight trousers and tall, elegant boots, his broad bare chest, prickling with cold and determination, Lord Vlad was standing before five soldiers. He was carrying a gigantic sword, carved out of heavy wood, and wrapped in felt and leather, lest he should injure his men.

According to Vlad's command, the young soldiers were armed with real, sharp swords, and were protected by helmets and plastrons.

‘We begin!’ the Voivod thundered.

Five swift broadswords fell upon him at once, in an attack that would have sent anyone else to the underworld.

But their weapons hit air, as Vlad had already sprung lithely, without blocking, towards the soldier on the left side and hit him in the head with his sword handle. And then caught the collapsing man and pushed him into the other four, who were now charging again. The Voivod had positioned himself in such a way that only one soldier at a time could attack him. He kicked the closest one over the sword and flew it away; then repeated the initial manoeuvre and went for the first one on the left. His technique of ever going for the flanks made him actually fight one opponent at a time, not five.

The others could never reach him. And the one-on-one fight was child's play to Vlad. Not a minute later, the five lads were on the ground, swordless. They were ashamed at hearing their comrades' laugh, but their chests swelled with pride for having been chosen by the Voievode for the day's demonstration.

Vlad climbed down a couple of steps and washed his sweaty face with snow. Then he spotted Mihnea and Marcu.

'What a joy, my lords! Our lads were beginning to lose patience in these deserted lands. What news do you bring?'

'Good ones, Your Highness,' said Mihnea, admiring the Lord's strong agile body. 'Mehmet has gone to Asia to conquer the Trebizond. And the Gate's wise man, Catavolinos, is coming to Targoviste, along with Pasha Hamza, the Bey of Nikopol.'

'He's coming here to trap me and to waste me!' Vlad laughed coarsely. 'I know these two-tongued bastards too well. I have sent Stroe to the Turkish Court to bring me news. He is the one that told me Catavolinos is coming! I have everything set out properly!'

'Then let's go, Your Highness!'

The army from the Bucegi mountains was put under captain Toma's command and received orders to secretly descend towards the Danube. Vlad, along with Mihnea, Marcu and a small group of soldiers were also heading towards the river to greet Mehmet's messengers, but without hiding.

The Turks claimed they wanted to resolve the small differences concerning the Danubian border. But Vlad knew what they were actually after, and, indeed, the matters of border lines would become clear once and for all. *Very clear!*

Stroe had been the one to bring news about the plot of Mehmet and Catavolinos. He and his spies were working restlessly, risking their lives all the while. They would spend many days in Edirne and Istanbul, passing themselves as tradesmen, travellers or who knows what. They would diligently gather any piece of information concerning Wallachia. Many a times indeed they would have to secretly get rid of a potentially dangerous steward or general. They did their job silently, unbeknown; not even the Romanians they were protecting knew their struggle. Had they been discovered by the Turks, they would have certainly been tortured and killed.

Before leaving for the siege of Trebizond, the Sultan had demanded the Wallachian Voivod's death. Not paying tribute and slaughtering the messengers were clear signs of rebellion that the Turks would not tolerate.

Now, Mehmet Fatih was asking the Wallachian Lord to meet his delegates, in order to settle the Danubian borders once and for all and strengthening the peace between the two. But Catavolinos and Hamza Pasha had been ordered to draw in the Voivod close to their territories and kill him. And then retreat safely to the Giurgiu fortress.

'What fool he takes me for!' Vlad laughed at the Sultan's scheme. 'If he knew how many loyal men I have close to him and how much I know of his plans...He has yet to learn the value of news received at the right moment, in both times of war and peace.'

'Let's be cautious, Your Highness!' Stroe suggested, wary of Vlad's sometimes seemingly reckless courage.

'Be at ease, Stroe! Their own plan will turn against them. They want to lure us by the Danube, where five days from now a small army of akinci riders will be waiting to crush us and retreat quickly. But Catavolinos – whose shrewdness I came to know in Edirne – will be coming all the way to Targoviste or Bucharest, to show me the Sultan's respect and trick me. In the meantime, you and Cazan shall take two thousand fast riders and go to the Danube's shallows, where the akinci riders

will cross. They will try to do it at night and then hide in the woods, waiting for me.

‘Get on the trail and let not one live! I want their bodies brought to Targoviste! To adorn the enchanted forest I am preparing for Mehmet!’ Vlad grinned. ‘I will spare the great Gate messengers the trouble of the road to Giurgiu and back. We will settle everything in Bucharest! What do they think we need to negotiate? My Country’s borders? Wallachia is holy precisely in the way it was given to me and the way I must pass it on to future generations. We do not bargain our freedom and our land!’



The meeting between Vlad and the Crescent’s messengers was brief. The Giurgiu Pasha and the scholar Catavolinos, the Sultan’s envoys, were approaching the walls of the new city Bucharest, in pomp and false friendliness. Their arrogant flags were reminiscent of the Sultan’s power. As it was the custom for peace negotiations, their escort was slight, only fifty riders on large, beautiful horses. They were also bearing the traditional presents – richer than usual, to distract the Lord’s vigilance.

But Vlad came out the city gates without the smile demanded by such peaceful circumstances. And the soldiers by his side were wearing plastrons and large broadswords, ready to strike.

Catavolinos quickly peered at the approaching group of Wallachians and recoiled. The Wallachian knew! But the scholar hoped he was mistaken and that they could somehow turn things in their favour. And they might have succeeded, too, if not against Vlad Basarab, the Voivod of Wallachia, the creator of the first Romanian espionage system and whom history will remember as the most ruthless protector of the people!

The Greek solemnly drew nearer and reined in his horse. And then he gave a shriek of pain and horror.

Even before the usual salutes between messengers, Vlad had thrust his broadsword deep in Catavolinos’ chest. Hamza Pasha tried to run for his life, but he and his men fell under the Wallachians’ merciless swords. The snow around them reddened with the blood of men and horses stabbed in the tussle.

Standing tall on his black stallion, Vlad growled between his teeth:

‘They shall not bring their lies to me anymore! If they have the hearts, let them look me in the eye on the battle field! If not, let them all perish like these two-faced rats!’

Then the Voivod picked up Hamza’s pennants and continued towards the Danube. In the meantime, a long row of wagons was bringing five hundred dead Turks from the river. Lord Vlad had business with them! They had to pay for daring to rise against him, even after death...

In front of the frozen river, a long line of riders was waiting for nightfall. Thick white steam was spurting out of the horses’ nostrils, indicative of harsh wintertime.

One hundred of the five thousand Wallachian soldiers were now wearing Turkish garments. In front of them, Vlad Dracula gave the signal for departure. The hoarfrost, gathered in his beard and hair made him look older, white under the burden of the terrible times he would soon bring over Wallachia.

The Lord was wearing the expertly tailored clothes of the Nikopol Pasha and was carrying Hamza Pasha’s green pennant. A little while after dark, the Wallachians arrived in front of the Giurgiu fortress, once ruled by Mircea the Elder.

Vlad signalled his soldiers to stop.

‘You all know what you have to do! Giurgiu is a *Wallachian* fortress! Stay two bowshots away, behind us. We will stand our ground until you come. Show no mercy!’

He then spurred his horse and started straight for his grandfather's fortress. He had wanted to reclaim it his entire life. Now he could see it rapidly drawing closer and for the first time he felt the heavy burden of the war he was about to unleash.

The sentinels of the Giurgiu fortress began squirming on the walls and in the guard towers. Desperate cries were coming from outside. Hamza Beg's small army was retreating towards the stronghold, apparently chased by the Wallachian mongrels.

They recognised Hamza Beg's great pennant and their Bey riding madly to the gates, followed by his soldiers in disarray.

'Open the gates!' the Bey yelled. 'All to arms! Kazikli⁵⁹ is attacking! Open the gates!'

The soldiers on the ground strained with the great gates and opened them wide, to let in Hamza Pasha and his men. The Wallachians were still far behind.

But when inside the fortress, Pasha's men started to cut deep into the soldiers at the Giurgiu garrison. Only then did the Turks see the Wallachian's trick. It was far too late...

Five thousand more Wallachians were already flowing through the gates. It all happened in minutes. The fortress was lost.

Vlad jumped off his horse and looked at Atay – the citadel commander – coldly.

'Mercy,' he uttered, kneeling.

A trace of disgust appeared on Vlad's face.

'Do you show any mercy to our defenceless villagers, when you set out for prey? What are you doing in this *Romanian* city?

And then he swiftly cut off the Turk's head, with a single terrible blow.

'Cut them!' he ordered. 'I want their heads carried away in wagons! Let not one live! They are the ones that were planning to kill us and invade our Country in spring!'

A dreadful, ruthless massacre followed. No one was begging for clemency. No one was getting it either...

On that same night, they headed for the Darstor city, who fell under the same ploy. Then it was Turtucaia and Rusciuc.

The whole Danube line, along with the fortresses, was run through fire. The villages on the Bulgarian shore were plundered and cleansed from Turks. The Giurgiu stronghold alone now held a Wallachian garrison. Where the others used to stand, smouldering fires were still burning over the broken walls.

The dawn of January 8th, 1462, found Vlad back on the Romanian bank, in front of his victorious army.

To his right rode High Spatharus Cazan. Tall, lean and bony, he was as strong as a horse, although he did not show it. His long, hanging moustache made him look older than he really was.

'There's no turning back now, Your Highness!'

'There never was, Spatharus! Turks know not what mercy is! If they leave your Country alone for a year or ten, they do so because they are busy somewhere else, in some other war and they have no time to fight you. This war was coming anyway. It is better to unleash it when it suits me!'

'You're right, Your Highness, the Country is ready to fight and the Sultan is at Trebizond. But I fear the noblemen aren't on our side. Most of them have a brother or cousin at Poenari, among those sentenced to labour at the fortress.'

Cazan was right. The relatives of those boyars still breaking their backs working hard, like commoners, did not look upon Dracula kindly. And many of them were waiting for the chance to

betray him.

‘That may be so...’ Vlad said absent-mindedly.

On the road climbing towards Targoviste, the hills had begun to become visible. Behind them, the great mountains, white with snow and age, were standing proudly, aligned, keeping the battle formation.

Vlad took a deep breath insatiably and whispered:

‘Can you feel ***our*** air, Cazan? Who could ever defeat us here?’



As the polite and sensible man that I am, I was wondering this morning, before leaving for the hermit's hut, what gift could I bring him...It's usually simple with old people. Fruits, flowers or whatever else they may need.

Except that my old man doesn't seem to need anything!

His wizened body sometimes betrays an unsuspected strength, an energy emanating from deep inside his still straight figure, from will and his many years.

Age – which would've crushed others long ago – seems to grant him strength unusual among men.

He tells of forgotten heroes, which he describes up to the last detail, of battles and motives untold by any history...During the last few days, his stories sound more like visions... or maybe memories. Makes me wonder whether the old man is crazy. Or maybe I am?

Anyhow, one of us is twisted. No doubt about it!

Arefu, March 28th, 2008

„Titles such as Pope or Emperor are nothing but empty words, glamorous illusions. Every country has its prince, every prince his own interests. What voice could be as convincing as to reunite under the same pennant so many torn apart and hostile forces? And even if they did ally for upcoming battle, who would dare to take command? How would they organize? How would discipline be enforced? How would one make himself obeyed? What mortal man could bring together the English and the French, the Genovese and the Aragonese, the Germans and the Hungarians and the Bohemians?...The image Christianity offers!”

Aeneas Silvio Piccolomini ⁶⁰

Constantinople had fallen alone. Mourned by entire Europe, but alone...

Abandoned, by friends from Venice, France and the rest of Europe. Not one army had come to help. A few isolated groups of Christians, adventurers or dreamers had fought till the last moment alongside the Greeks. All in vain...

Not even the brothers from Trebizond had come to the rescue of the great city. Now it was their turn! The same ruthless, unstoppable Sultan was about to vanish the last remains of the Eastern Roman Empire.

Years before, Emperor John the Fourth had his eldest-born daughter wed Uzun Hassan, the Sultan of Ak Koyunlu and greatest enemy of the Ottoman Turks. He had also settled close alliances with the king of Georgia and the emirs of Sinope and Karamania, thus managing to prolong the life of his dismembered and dying empire. His successor, David Megas Comnen had the uninspired idea of splitting these alliances and putting his trust in the European great powers. But these proved to be more interested in internal battles and commercial profits than in the noble concept of survival of the empire.

Thus, at the beginning of 1461, the Trebizondian Black Sea shore was once again occupied by Mehmet's armies.

The blue waves were quietly washing the white sands, by now accustomed to wars and the endless progression of kings, as ephemeral as the seasons.

In front of his enormous tent, the Sultan was dispassionately watching the battle below the city walls, as if a stage play. He had not rushed into battle like in Constantinople, nor had he hewed elaborate plans to defeat the Greeks. There was no need to. This battle was a mere formality he had chosen to take part in. He had already defeated Uzun Hassan and conquered Sinope, leaving Trebizond isolated and hopeless. His mighty cannons were gradually making way to the heart of the city and to the seemingly rich prey; through the wide smoking holes, thick rows of janissaries were flowing into the city.

Mehmet's agile eyes were following the progress of the battle up to the smallest detail. As always, he aimed to find any weak spot his army might have and eliminate it. On that day, he was wearing blue flared shalvars, a shirt made of fine, white silk, and over it a red vest adorned with finest Persian embroidery. By his side, his old counsellor Halil Candarlî, was commenting on the outcome of the battle, in the same relaxed manner. They were not as much interested in the number of casualties during the siege as they were in the works of Grigore Choniades – great astronomer and savant - which they were hoping to retrieve intact from the city.

Mehmet was a great admirer and even protector of European culture. Many scholars and artists had chosen to do their works at the Sultan's Court. And those that had declined his invitation – well, he had decided to conquer them! It was easier...

‘I don't understand Christians!’ the Sultan confessed. ‘They should be here with all their armies

to try and stop me. Now they think Trebizond is too far away to mean anything to them, but without this impediment and that damned Uzun Hassan, I'll be able to concentrate solely on the European front. Only then will they realise their mistake!'

'They shiver like dogs, oh, Brilliant one!' Candarlî said, truly believing his own words. 'They're each waiting for their turn and hoping *someone else* will stop us!'

'Only they, together, all Christians united could stop us! But they will never conjoin!' Mehmet laughed softly. 'My spies have intercepted a letter from Pope Pius to one of his delegates in Buda. From his throne, supposedly that of peace, he has the best view over this war; he knows what is happening in every country he shepherds. He still speciously hopes for a crusade, but there is no one to lead it.'

The conversation continued just as peacefully among the flutter of great tents, the shrieks of seagulls and the thumping of cannons. Everything was going according to plan and the future of the Turks and their empire seemed brighter than ever. But something *was* going to get in their way, as always when Europe needed a miracle. A small, stubborn country that would survive all empires and attacks. A country that would – in times of hardship – untiringly yield men of steel capable of bringing down any army, any curse!

A hurried rider dismounted at the edge of the camp and asked the Sultan's guards for permission to see Mehmet. After brief inquiry, he was taken to the gigantic green tent. The Sultan had a short and heated conversation with the unfortunate messenger; he ordered the man whipped and then quickly went into the tent, to the confusion of the guards, who had not had the chance to overhear the news the strange messenger had brought.

Inside the tent – beautifully decorated with beds and precious carpets – Mehmet was walking around nervously. The hefty body and eagle-like, fiery eyes, stood proof of a man fierce and skilled in warfare. He stopped suddenly and shouted at Candarlî:

'What say you of this, old Halil? You that have seen so much, tell me, what drove Draculea into burning down my cities along the Danube? Could the Christians have put together the crusade we have stopped believing in? Could they have finally allied against us?'

'Unfortunately, it appears so, oh, Radiant King of Kings! But we shall destroy them at first sight. Our business here will be done today, thus we shall go confront them and punish those that dared to draw sword!'

'And what if Draculea accomplished this by himself?'

'How could he have done so, Enlightened One? He doesn't matter, he has no army! Unless he is insane and Allah has clouded his mind!'

'I know him well! He is insane, but not the way you think! He is insanely courageous and his pride knows no end. He believes himself a great ruler of a great people. He's made room in his heart of stone for one feeling alone: love for his country! He loves it so much that he feels nothing else for no one else. He knows no hunger, no thirst. All he wants is to see his country whole and free! He doesn't remember what fear is, what it means to obey, what it means to lose...'

'If that's so, I shall leave right now for Wallachia along with fifty thousand men and wipe him off the face of the earth!'

Mehmet remained thoughtful for a while, eyes fixed on one of the great maps of Europe laying before him. Allah had set the Carpathians in such a manner as to test his strength. Behind these gigantic walls, difficult to cross, Hungaria was much more at ease. And before these mighty, wild mountains, a people carved out from the same unbreakable granite had been an insurmountable obstacle to invaders for centuries. A few moments later, he replied absent-mindedly:

‘No, even if he is alone, it’d be best to bring the entire army against him. His country may be small, but he is shrewd and evil. He could do us much harm unless we are watchful.’

Candarlı winced in surprise. Apparently, Mehmet was afraid of this insignificant Draculea. The Empire’s entire army against a petty little country?

Such a thing was unheard of. The Sultan would lead the army himself only when a territory was meant to be transformed into a pashalik⁶¹, under his direct jurisdiction. Or when the enemy was too strong...

‘I will ride myself ahead of our undefeated army!’ the Sultan continued in the same meditative mood. ‘If Allah grants us luck, we will win at Kara Iflak⁶² as well, then go to Buda and spend the winter in Vienna. Then, in spring, we will conquer Rome and make it the heart of blessed Islam!’

Mehmet had failed to convey the confidence he had intended to his words. They somehow sounded broken, hollow, as if he did not believe them himself. The Wallachian caused him more concern than two armies combined; he was anxious about that fire, that look and that endless energy flowing from inside the Romanian. He had several flashbacks from his childhood, when he had met Vlad at The Gate; he remembered the young prince crushing the skull of his janissary opponent; or breaking down with his tenebrous strength the stallion that had dragged him through the dust of Anatolia. And, above everything else, he could still see that grim look on the Wallachian’s face before his escape, that silent promise, dark and definite, that Vlad would hold on to his entire life!

‘So it shall be, Conqueror!’ Halil said, pretending to be enthusiastic.

He was troubled by the sudden change in the Sultan’s attitude. What had frightened him so deeply? Could the Sultan himself – who would conquer one people after another – be terrified of a feeble prince? He could remember another Wallachian, Draculea’s grandfather, Emergy⁶³ Bey, who had defeated the sultan Baiazid; but that had been a long time before. Now, Wallachia was weak, and they had reached the peak of power!

He left the Sultan with his inexplicable worries and retreated making deep bows.

Outside, the waves were also retreating, murmuring something indistinguishable. It was the time of reflux, both for the sea and the Sultan’s heart...



He often scares me...He falls into some kind of trance and drags me along with him. I can't hear anything around me, not even his words. I only see, vividly, this long-ago story, told with cold passion, the passion of a man that has forgiven. He may have forgiven...but not everything!

Arefu, March 29th, 2008

Climbed up the high bank of the Danube, Buda was gradually being flooded with light, under the first sun rays of January 29th, 1462.

On the slow gliding waters of the river – under the heavy burden of cold and ice floes – the sun, still sleepy, was playing with the small waves, still sleepy, casting short glints, as if all the fish in the Danube had suddenly decided to rollick around. The many lamps on the streets and at house doors were filtering the lively sheen, up the hill and till the farthest houses.

Even back then, the city would propagate a feeling of grandeur and stateliness. There was something grave and warrior-like about the sharp walls of the many palaces, and also about the noblemen living inside, descendents of the terrible Attila – the Whip of God.

In the Great Hall of the royal palace, three men were preparing to end a conversation initiated the previous evening.

The first, Matias Corvin, the new King of Hungaria, and the son of the mighty Iancu of Hunedoara – the Wallachian, was not only an outstanding strategist, but also a passionate admirer of Renaissance culture. Thus, by his side sat his protégée, Galeotto Marcio, and an English traveller that had just arrived at the court, on his way back home from the Orient.

Galeotto was already famous all throughout Europe, but not necessarily loved by everyone. Harsh voices belonging to high ecclesiastics close to the Pope were accusing him of heresy, and his latest work, *De homine*, had been burnt in the San Marco Square in Venice. In Buda, he had found support and shelter from Matias Corvin, whom he was now helping with his grandiose plan: transforming Hungaria into one of the most evolved cultures in Europe. His chubby figure, long nose, chin twisted upwards, and eyes almost always tired – sign of continuous disquietude and sleepless night – were well known in Buda and its surroundings. He would take an interest in everything around him, from human nature to wines and the histories of nations. He was now working on his most memorable and controversial book yet – *De incogniti vulgo*.

The third, father William Scott, was a character whom official history would not remember, but whose ideas, sometimes touching heresy, were more than interesting to the other two. He had left England years before and crossed the territories of many peoples, some not yet christened, driven by that thirst for knowledge that pushes some enlightened men ahead of their time. From this extensive journey, he returned with a much more subdued picture of Catholicism and a much more amplified image of God. He no longer believed in the supremacy of the Pope or of Orthodoxy, but rather in the kindness that should bond them all.

Deep in their erudite discussions, the three had not felt the night flow towards its end. Now, as they were preparing to retreat each to his own business, their farewells were interrupted by impatient knocking at the door.

Matias Corvin opened quickly and asked, somewhat hastily:

‘What is it? What happened that made you come at such hours?’

The soldier on guard was pale and seemed a little frightened. But he held his composure and answered:

‘Letter from the Lord of Wallachia, Vlad Basarab, Your Highness! But you’d better come down to the yard. Two hundred wagons sent from Wallachia are awaiting permission to appear before Your Highness.’

‘Two hundred wagons? What do they carry?’

‘Come and see, my Lord!’ the soldier stuttered, lowering his head.

Matias hung a wolf fur on his shoulders and hurried down the stairs leading to the castle yard, accompanied by his two companions from the previous night.

But when reaching the doorstep, he suddenly stopped, blocking the way. Galeotto and Scott dared to push him aside softly and politely, to get a better look. After a moment’s consternation, Scott covered his eyes with his hand and rushed back inside.

The four sides of the castle, beautifully carved in massive stone, with lanced windows and great groundwork, had turned into the walls of an enormous necropolis. The soldiers aligned behind the imposing battle axes had fallen prey to grave, burdensome silence.

Matias Corvin was the first to tear himself away from the spell and walked closer to the wagons sent from Wallachia. He was tall and elegant, with shoulder length hair, right above the plumped white collar that contrasted so pleasantly with the sapphire blue velvet tunic. He had succeeded in hiding most of his feelings, as it was proper for a king. His attractive and somewhat feminine face, lit by two black, intelligent eyes, showed no grimace.

Before him there were two hundred wagons filled with cut-off heads. There were, as he would soon find out, 23,884 of them. An entire army!

By the wagons, a Wallachian soldier, tall and lean, with an enormous moustache hanging below his chin, bowed in greeting, sweeping the air around him with his hat and said in a strong, hard voice:

‘I am Spatharus Cazan, subject of His Highness Vlad Basarab, the Voivod of Wallachia! We wish your lordships health and a long life!’

‘Likewise, Spatharus! We know you by your name! Tell me, if you will, what is the meaning of this?’

‘I beg you forgive our delay, but the road across the mountains has been long and toilsome. This is our Lord’s Christmas present to Your Highness!’

Matias Corvin’s brow furrowed in bewilderment. Should he be upset? Was this an offence, a bad joke from the neighbouring Voievode?

Cazan hurried to shed some light on the matter:

‘Do not misunderstand, Your Highness, this gift here – a bit sinister, as you can see – is meant to bring hope! And proof the Turk can be defeated! For two weeks, us, the soldiers of Wallachia, have restlessly swept the banks of the Danube, taking the Giurgiu fortress and burning to the ground every Turkish stronghold. Mehmet, which the Pagans call the Conqueror, was powerless, and now his men lay headless along the water. The Turks and their subjects have fled Adrianople and hidden behind the walls of Constantinople, terrified! In spring, we shall hit them again and we hope that the brave soldiers of Hungaria and Transylvania will join us. Together, we can chase the Pagans out of Europe once and for all!’

‘You bring good news, Sir! We would have been content with a simple letter from your Lord! I shall have the Pagans’ heads buried, and invite you to the castle; stay for a few days! You need rest!’

‘Thank you for such honour!’ Cazan said gratefully. ‘But we cannot stay! Our Lord needs every man in Targoviste. Not before long, winter will die out and the time when Turks come out to war is growing closer. We must be ready!’

‘I understand, Sir! Please at least accept a few bags of good food for the road! Our letter of response will be leaving in a few hours’ time. It will reach you along the way!’

‘Farewell, Your Highness, and we thank you once again for the kind thoughts and the honour you bestowed on us!’

Cazan saluted once again widely with a wave of his hat, according to the western fashion, then led his men out of the castle, in full gallop. Behind him reeked of death and newly begun war...



The king ordered the assembling of the war council for that same day's afternoon. Until then however, he asked Galeotto and Scott to escort him back to his working cabinet.

The cabinet's walls were entirely covered with the shelves of four bookcases, exquisitely sculpted from nutwood. More than 300 volumes of history chronicles, philosophy and scientific works were already embodying the beginning of what would later become the Bibliotheca Corviniana – the greatest European book collection of the 15th century, counting over 5000 volumes all in all.

At that hour of the morning, the sun was not shining at its fullest, but was helped by three great candelabras on the middle of the table where the three men sat.

‘Well, gentlemen, what say you of this Draculea? Have you ever heard of such a gift?’

Tall and thin, with a long gaunt face, the English traveller would speak only when he actually had something to say.

‘Perhaps you will be surprised, but I must say that this very unusual and macabre gesture of the Wallachian Voivod has not surprised me to that great extent at all! I must admit, however, that it has engrossed me terribly!’

‘I, sir, on the other hand, must admit the exact opposite!’ the Italian scientist broke out enthusiastically. ‘I am very surprised and not at all engrossed. I’d say, in fact, I’m rather thrilled!’

‘Galeotto, you astonish me!’ the king jumped. ‘What is it that thrills you so much? What normal person would send over twenty thousand cut off heads across the mountains on such a long journey? I’m afraid Vlad Basarab is a madman whose bravery before the Turks will not suffice to cleanse away his sins!’

‘Forgive me, Highness, but I think I can understand the Wallachian. In Venice, too, we have seen many princes who can govern well relying on such terrible violent deeds. They are always given as a good example!’

‘Example?’ Corvin asked deep in wonder. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Your Grace, ever since the fall of Constantinople, European nations tremble with fright of Mehmet’s power. At this present time, there is no army ready to face him! In Italy, our republics and kingdoms make war with each other for commercial interests, which the agile Sultan supports or denies as he sees fit. The German States fight against each other even more intensely than my Italians do.’

‘And my England has been having a never ending war with France for decades!’ Scott intervened.

‘A very dismal image, indeed!’ the king confirmed. ‘What could *I* say? When I’m not fighting the the nobles that killed my brother and threw me in prison, I’m making war with the Austrian princes!’

‘Hence, the Sultan is perfectly aware that he will never catch a more favourable moment to conquer Buda, then Wien and then Rome, where he will complete the disaster he began in Constantinople. Gentlemen, we shall have great war this summer and no one believes we can actually win it anymore!’

‘You are right, Galeotto,’ Matias Corvin said sadly. ‘I shall fight Mehmet, but I fear that, the moment I descent with my armies to the Lower Danube to face him, my country would be invaded by

Germans, who are always watching the borders closely, like the hungry dogs they are!’

‘This is precisely the great gift Dracula sends you!’ the scientist answered. ‘From Wallachia to here, dozens of villages and towns have seen the Turks’ heads, have seen that they can be vulnerable! In two or three days, the news will reach Wien, Rome and then on till the end of the continent. Christians everywhere may rise because of this brave or mad Lord, and thus they can save themselves from certain destruction!’

The king smiled and agreed with the scholar. He had not had the time to think about that. In fact, Dracula had sent a message to entire Europe, and to him personally, as the apostolic king that he was; it was a message of victory and a fantastic declaration of absolute independence. A country that could raise 30,000 – 40,000 men at most had attacked the empire which gathered more than 250,000 professional soldiers – a country which now showed itself orderly and cleansed of rivalries, thieving and betrayals.

‘My travelling journal shall dedicate dozens of pages to this interesting voivod and his country, much more than to Istanbul and Mehmet the Sultan. I visited his country, where I regained faith in humankind, but almost lost my own life!’ William Scott said smiling, immersed in a memory which now seemed amusing.

‘I reached Targoviste in the evening, a little before the closing of the gates,’ he went on. ‘I asked the innkeeper to shelter the merchandise I was bringing from Adrianople and which I intended to sell in Wallachia. The innkeeper laughed and told me my merchandise would be perfectly secure in the street, at night time and unguarded.

Honestly, I did not believe him, but I could not insist too much either. In the morning, I ran outside in the street to check if there was anything left from my cart and was amazed. Everything was untouched. As if there were no thieves in Wallachia!’

‘This I haven’t heard till now!’ Galeotto marvelled.

‘Then, I went walking in the streets in order to complete my notes with drawings of Europe’s capitals. A perfect tidiness ruled over everything – and you are not going to believe me, but there were golden goblets at the fountains. No one stood to guard them, no one dared to steal them! It seems this terrible Voivod has succeeded to bring perfect integrity to his land, in some fortunate combination of cruel justice for the crooked and rewarding kindness for the honest! The city is in continuous transformation and already looks beautiful, with its great defence walls for times of war, with a large garden near the Royal Court, and an immense tower, recently built, from where guards can notice any approaching danger from far away.’

‘Yes, such news reaches us here too from Wallachia!’ the king said, musing. ‘Here in Buda, weak people are plundered in the streets every day. So it is everywhere I travelled, and so it has been since the beginning of the world!’

‘After that, I went to meet him. Receiving an audience was not difficult. It seems he is after all a good man who acts like a tyrant because he hasn’t got another choice. His small country cannot survive between empires unless it is *perfect*! He greeted me most warmly and openly. He is quite a letters’ man: he speaks Latin, Greek, German, a few Turkish dialects and the Slavonian language from Southern Danube. I learned from him that any discovered thief is executed at once, together with his family. A cruel and unjust punishment I believe, but after two executions, families have begun to keep close their bad-natured sons and no one has dared take something they had no right over, ever since. Besides, he gives high rewards to those who do honest work and help build the Country.’

‘I think the greatest victory was the fast and cruel dismissal of the opposing nobles! This is the advantage of a ruler in a small country! If I, Matias Corvin, son of the Wallachian Iancu, executed a

single Hungarian nobleman, the others would certainly start a rebellion against me!’

‘After he covered me in gifts and we spent two lovely hours of fine humour and lots of knowledge, he was about to kill me!’ the Englishman laughed.

‘So he *is* mad!’ Galeotto marvelled.

‘Not at all! But he swore no thief would live and plunder his country while he is Lord and he wanted to try me. He wished me safe journey and commanded me to check if I was missing anything before I go. I returned to my cart; everything was in order. But when I counted my money, I found an extra golden coin. I counted again – the same result! I knew for certain, because I kept a close counting! I went back to the Court and I gave him the coin, asking him to find the person who by accident had paid me more for who knows what merchandise. He beamed at me from his high throne and ordered me to turn and look out of the window. They were carving a long and sharp spike outside. I never enjoyed such spectacles and I haven’t got the heart to watch them. I asked him not to make me assist to the execution of some poor bastard. “*Why, no, sir!*” he said. “*This is your stake! It was waiting for you! Honestly, I did not think you would bring the gold coin back! You are a good man and it has been a pleasure to know you! Go in peace!*” Afterwards, he rewarded me with ten gold coins and escorted me to the city gates. In truth I tell you, I have never met another like him or any country like Wallachia!’

‘Fantastic!’ Galeotto wondered. ‘We shall have to write a most ample and detailed work on him. And if he has the courage to fight the Turks, I believe he shall become one of the world’s most famous princes!’

‘No, sir!’ the king answered dryly. ‘Of him, no one shall write anything, because he lives in a country too small to be of interest for other princes or common folk.’

‘But this country of his, if it succeeds in stopping Mehmet, can change the fate of entire Europe! It can defend us all! And the greatness of a war-winning nation is measured in inverse proportion with the number of its soldiers, I’d say!’

‘Now you are dreaming, dear Marci!’ Corvin teased him affectionately. ‘He is brave, indeed. Perhaps the bravest warrior I have ever seen, but from here to stopping the Turks by himself is a long way! Such a thing is impossible! If the case arises, we shall fight beside him; if not, we shall praise his mad courage and find the best way for the Hungarian Empire not to suffer!’

Disappointed, Galeotto lowered his head. It was obvious that the idea of crusade had been completely put out. The Wallachian Voivod would probably be forced to face the Ottoman colossus alone, since no one believed in his victory. The scientist managed to pretend to be interested when the king resumed his speech.

‘Sadly, Europe will never come united neither in war, nor in peace. And a great army such as theirs, gathered under a single general, cannot be defeated by ten separate armies serving ten separate kings and ten separate vanities, one bigger than the other. I shall fight for as long and as much as I have to, and when the odds are no longer favourable, we shall close treaties that, between you and me, can be broken as soon as their use is consumed. This is how the history of empires has always been written!’

‘I’m curious how the Wallachian will act and how long he will resist before the Turks! Although, when this comes, I hope to be long arrived in my rainy London, as far as possible from the Turks!’

‘Dracula will fight!’ Matias Corvin answered. ‘He knows not how to back off. He always keeps his word and his sacred oath. He is an idealist and incomparable warrior. Deep inside, he is firmly convinced he can defeat Mehmet. Last summer, Dan the Young, a claimer to Wallachia’s throne

taking shelter in Transylvania, managed to gather himself an army and charged Vlad with the clear intention of killing him and taking the throne. He did not succeed! A little afterwards, I myself was in Cluj and spoke with a soldier of the throne claimer who had barely made it alive. He told us that, in the battle, Vlad and his five knights – of whom I’m sure you’ve heard everything by now – are fiercer than wild beasts. The soldier said that they, Dan’s supporters, had never before seen anything like that. Upon setting foot in Wallachia, they were hit by Draculea’s small army and broken in mere moments. The Voivod had jumped into battle against his adversaries with terrible force, and from beside him, his knights had slain anyone approaching. The world began to think of them as dark spirits rather than men. They are strong, merciless and know perfectly how to use their mountains in times of war! They somehow steal the enemy’s strength and emanate superior force that scares and paralyses everyone in a way which is beyond our understanding. They simply throw themselves without blinking in the most terrible fire, *knowing* that nobody can defeat them, that their bones cannot be crushed by the hardest iron...This is the fighting way of those who truly believe in their country and love it beyond life and death...a fanatic fight...

After Vlad defeated his army, he caught the unfortunate claimer and made him dig his own grave. Then, the damned man listened how a synod of priests sang him the eulogy as if he were already dead. Only afterwards did Dracula behead him and push the body into the grave.’

There was stupefaction all over the two listeners’ faces. They had never heard of such a warrior who would always win and always frighten.

‘I gave some money to the poor fellow who told me the story and spared him of military service. He was useless anyhow: I’m sure that Dracula’s seed of fear will outlast this century!’

‘Unbelievable!’ Galeotto whispered, deeply impressed. ‘This Vlad Basarab would make even the Medici family seem calm and gentle!’

‘Yes, he is a great ruler! Sadly, great rulers need great countries in order to become legend. He hasn’t got this chance!’

The sarcasm and coldness in Matias Corvin’s voice had both William Scott and Marcio Galeotto convinced that, although a brave and skilled strategist, the Hungarian king was not yet planning for a noble war for the defending of Europe; that also, most probably, the fearless eagle across the mountains would quickly face a heroic but undeserved and disappointing death.

Thirteen miles away, Sword Bearer Cazan was riding deep in thought, ahead of the Wallachian soldiers. For ten days he had been tirelessly crossing the frozen roads of harsh January. Now it was the first time when he actually felt the terrible snakelike cold, coiling inside and stifling his heart.

“Lord Matias will promise us everything, but he will not move a finger when the time comes for the great fight! And my Lord will go insane, alone, with spite and disgust! I shan’t tell him what I felt at Buda’s Court! I shall leave him hope; he still believes in justice and men’s words! As long as there is hope in him, he will fight like no other. And as long as he fights, my sword will be beside his forever! It is a shame kings and princes of Europe cannot understand that we are defending them too, and that we should all work together! We shall disappear and no one will remember a handful of men, who, as God’s righteous barrier against all evils, have sacrificed themselves for their country and for the cross.”

Tired and disappointed, Cazan was mistaken! Of His Highness Vlad Basarab the Impaler, Romanians have never and *will* never forget! Whether you go to Targoviste, Bucharest, Bran or Poenari, or wherever you will in present day Romania, you will find thousands of children who know his story by heart and are proud to have Wallachian blood in their veins! As for Sword Bearer Cazan, even if no one has lifted a statue in his honour yet – as they have for his master – documents and

people remind him as one of Tzepesh' bravest men!

Beyond the mountains visible before them, beyond the cruel winter that tortured people and horses alike, their age of glory was about to begin...



I haven't been able to sleep for two nights now. I wake up frightened and see – feel, more like it – a dark shape running around the room. After a few more moments, I wake up completely and realise it was nothing. Or so I try to convince myself.

I've talked to people from Arefu about this. Their reaction is hard to explain. Most of them have just left me alone immediately and without a word. The few people who haven't turned away from me have advised me to pay a visit to the village priest.

"You're the one who seeks the tomb of Lord Tzepesh?" he asked me in a hard voice.

It was not exactly the welcome I had expected from a priest.

"Quit playing games! Let him rest in peace! Why d'you, people, keep looking for vampires and devils where there aren't any? You want to do something good? Go and light a candle for him on Sunday, as we all do! And careful what you write in that diary of yours!"

How did he know of my diary? And why this angry tone? What is going on here?

Yes, after my meeting with the priest, my fears have 'disappeared'. Better I hadn't gone.

Vampire or not, everything connected with Dracula spreads some kind of unseen, incomprehensible power over everyone in his way.

Arefu, March 29th, 2008

Upon crossing the Danube, the Tyrant wandered the place for more than 7 days, and, upon finding nothing, neither human, nor the most insignificant animal, nor anything to eat or drink,...the Tyrant grew frightened, and at night, when he lifted the tents, he dug ditches and raised dirt waves and he was standing in the middle.

The Danube was flowing on and on, carrying away silent yellow lights harvested from the torches off the Romanian bank. Under silent willows, 20,000 Wallachian fighters stood still like statues and ranged, ready for battle, ready for death.

Great fires lit behind them were shedding a ghostly light over the forest, creating strange ominous figures of shadow, of hot wind, of flickering lights. Now and then, some mad wild bird would screech, breaking the silence of that unearthly night. Then, hands would twist in tension, gripping tightly swords or bows, only to grow calm again.

Everyone's eyes were fixed on the opposite bank. For more than a day, the Wallachian soldiers – orderly split in eight camps, closely communicating between one another – had been waiting for the arrival of Mehmet, Conqueror of Constantinople, and for his terrible army. It was said the Turks were bringing 500,000 professional soldiers; others said they could be even more than that.

Rumours about the Turkish flood had already begun to do heavy damage in Vlad's army. Young men yet unscathed by the fire of battle had a hard time comprehending the old ones' impervious calm, but all remained unmoving and ready at all times to counter any attack. This was easy for experienced warriors: as long as they followed Draculea's orders, they could not possibly lose. Their Voivod would again do wonders and they would defeat the Turks as they always had, however difficult it may seem.

In the minds of young men now facing their first battle, things were not as clear. The Turks would surely outnumber them by at least ten times. They certainly had very good weapons, but the pagans had them, too. How could one fight ten enemies at the same time? How could one stay alive?

All Romanians – be they experienced or novices – seemed to agree on one thing, however: if a single one of them would perish, he would take at least a dozen pagans with him!

At only two bowshots away from his army, Lord Vlad was holding secret council with his four knights. On top of a small hill, under the cover of darkness, the five men were carefully observing the arranging of the army. They had not lit torches and had not dismounted yet. Stroe and Ler had the Voivod flanked, while Marcu and Mihnea were waiting quietly, five steps away from their companions, eyes half closed, ears taking in any suspicious sound. The old knights knew well that during such badly lit nights, hearing comes before sight, and in case of danger, one can better hear the enemy approach than see them.

All five were wearing long black cloaks, meant to hide them even better in the darkness of the night. Besides Stroe's yataghan and the others' feared swords, all now carried short and easy to handle crossbows.

'Everyone is in position, all our armies are well prepared and well defended behind the mounds we raised yesterday!' Vlad said, visibly content.

'Everyone knows their place and are just waiting for Your Highness to lead them into battle. The Turks couldn't possibly defeat us here. Wallachia will resist now as it did in the days of Great Mircea, and as it will from now on!'

'So it is, Stroe,' the Voivod answered. 'As long as we are alive, Mehmet will never succeed here. And after we are gone, God will call for other, worthier ones to keep the Country safe. But

know, gentlemen, that the fate of this war depends on what will happen at dawn, when the Turks will appear before us.'

'Yes, the pagans will come at daybreak, to scare us with the sight of their numbers. We should be hearing their drums and loud marching in a few hours. Then, with the first light of dawn, they will show themselves on the other bank, thinking they will soften our spirits.'

'Know this, Marcu, even the best of soldiers can lose themselves when they stop believing in victory,' Stroe answered pensive.

'Our men are brave and obey us in every matter. Each one of them knows exactly what he has to do and this makes up for ten armies, but yes, you are right, Stroe: the snake of fear and doubt cause you to lose even the best of soldiers, when you least expect it.'

'Your Highness, they'll be bringing, as I told you, some giant from Anatolia, who seems as though taken directly from horror tales! They brought him before the army for the Trebizond siege as well.

He's taller than two normal men, and he's as ugly as an old hog pressed by the worries of old age, and he's got axed heads hanging from his belt. He carries a club as heavy as a mountain, which he swirls above his head; and when he shouts, even a witch hag scurries away from his path, covering her ears! I saw him with my own eyes, while I was with them, hidden beneath a Greek merchant's apparel. He didn't scare *me*, but many still have nightmares because of him, and cannot get rid of his image at night!'

Mihnea was listening pensively, then said:

'I'm afraid the sight of such monster will be too much for the eyes of our youngsters. They're brave, but a vision like that can shake their trust in themselves!'

'Or can make it stone-still, knight!' Vlad said laughing. Then, he reached out to Ler, who, without a word, handed him a wide belt with knives assorted along its length.

'Hang on a second!' Stroe burst. 'What are you up to, Highness? And you, mute, why don't you say something? Oh, what *could* you say...you never say anything anyway! Okay, Lord, I'm coming, too!'

'Where's that, Stroe?' Vlad smiled. 'Did you realise what the plan is?'

'Of course I did! I mean...I didn't! but I'm coming, too!'

Mihnea laughed softly, every now and then throwing swift glances to Ler and Vlad. The two had brewed a crazy plan, that only they could accomplish!

'We, knight, shall twist things so as to turn the Turks' nerve into panic and our men's fright into unshaken faith! Even as we speak, our soldiers are wondering whether we are with them in the morning, or we seek shelter in Targoviste. This is a good thing. Know that a great war cannot be won with weapons, but with your mind and your heart. In mere hours, the Turks will enter a Hell of which many will come out with their wits rambling, and even more of them will not come out at all! For them, the name of our beloved Wallachia shall be blacker than any inferno! This is the only way to win!'

Vlad stopped for a moment. From beyond the Danube, muffled drumming had begun to rise.

'Let's go!' he said curtly. 'We descend beyond our army. The time to show myself before my brave men has not yet come!'

With each beat of the drums, the pagans seemed to scare away night itself and to tear it in long grey stripes. In a few moments, there were only random streaks of the previous reigning darkness, now lost among the red lines of the summer sunrise.

According to their custom, the Turks settled along the river bank, facing the Romanian army,

screaming and swinging their swords menacingly.

Following received orders, the Wallachians remained still and quiet, swords still undrawn.

Line after line, the pagans appeared on top of the hill above the Bulgarian Danube, flooding the bank.

The white-fez janissaries, lined up as though for parade, were followed by the militia, and after them, the proud spahija riders, beneath the Crescent flags.

The heathen army had already outnumbered the Wallachian soldiers, and was continuing to widen out on the smooth Danubian bank.

All of a sudden, the screaming and the drumming stopped, and the Sultan Mehmet himself – terror of entire Europe – made his appearance in the middle of his army. His sky-blue velvet gaberdine stood out nicely against the white shalvars, demonstrating the Sultan's most refined taste. A fine sapphire belt encircled his yellow turban, giving him a strange aura in the reddish morning glow.

Flanked by two spahija, Mehmet led his horse slowly, theatrically, to the middle of his army. He stopped and raised his sword threateningly towards the Wallachian bank. In that precise moment, his immense army suddenly cried in one voice:

‘Long live Great Mehmet, Conqueror of the World!’

The Sultan answered smugly, almost disdainfully. Then, he gave a quick sign to one of the backward rows. From there, a huge soldier appeared: he was just as Stroe had described him. The tallest soldiers around him did not reach his waist. With overlarge muscles, and long arms below the knees, with very few strips of long and slimy hair, and features that belonged rather to the wild animals' realm – this soldier was one of those nature anomalies, which come up once in a hundred years and horrify both men and beasts alike. From his wide belt, two heads were hanging, probably freshly cut off from the villages on the Bulgarian side. The blood from the skulls was horribly trickling down his legs, thus completing a most gruesome spectacle.

In the front row of the Romanian archers, a young boy of sixteen had begun trembling slightly. The idea of stretching his bow crossed his mind, but realised he could never make that arrow fly across the other side, now least of all times! He was shaking more and more violently, sensing his strength leaving him completely.

‘What's up with you, Ilie?’ asked the soldier to his right. ‘Don't be afraid! We'll get them, too.’

‘How, father? How do we get them? And where is Lord Vlad?’

‘Never you mind where he is! He won't leave us in distress. He's always been a foot ahead of us, and if now he's elsewhere, we're sure to find out why later.’

His father's reassuring words were not enough for the young soldier, however. He hated himself for the fear and doubt that were overcoming him. He could not take his eyes off the monster before them. The beast began bellowing with all his might and running towards the water, as if he wanted to cross it and throw himself over the Wallachians. The huge club he kept swirling above his head was thundering like a summer storm.

Reaching the river bank, the giant began screaming something in Turkish. His words were unclear and unintelligible with a continual raving-dog-like drool. The Turks behind him were also screaming loudly, excited at the Romanians' tomb-like silence. It seemed that the Wallachians were already defeated, and their resistance would shatter at the armies' first contact, or even before.

All of a sudden, in front of the giant the water came to life, and a man sprang from beneath the waves, his chest bare, his long dark hair tied back. For a moment or two, he seemed to be standing on water and the giant and his club froze. Two daggers sent by the strange apparition stuck themselves into each of the monster's eyes, killing him instantly. The beast rocked softly on his failing legs and

fell to the ground, to the great astonishment of both camps.

In the eerie silence fallen over the Danube, the voice of the Wallachian Voivod rang suddenly:

‘I, Lord Vlad, ruler of the Romanian Country, sentence all of you to death! You have no way to escape, not even if you retreat now! I will hunt you down wherever you go and I will not rest until I see you all rotting on my pales. Welcome to Cehennem⁶⁵!’

Upon finishing his stunning condemnation, he sank slowly back into the water.

The moments of complete confusion turned into deep panic among the Turks’ lines. The janissaries began to retreat in great hurry and as far as possible from the bank and the water on which the Wallachian sheitan could step as though on solid ground. The militia and the auxiliary soldiers were running and screaming terrified, incredulous that their monster, unvanquished till then and who had frightened so many nations, was now lying dead by Dracula’s hand. The spahija alone maintained their positions around the Sultan, trying desperately, with threats and blows, to re-establish order.

On the Romanian side, the situation was completely different. Cheering was rising to the sky and was making the forest behind shiver as if from a powerful wind. Before his soldiers, perfectly aligned on the shore, Vlad came out of the water, straight and calm, as though he had actually walked under and *on* the water. The thought that the Voivod had indeed unmeasurable powers began to take shape inside everybody’s mind.

‘Are we ready, brave soldiers of Wallachia?’ the Voivod asked in his clear, thundering voice.

‘Ready, Highness!’ the soldiers answered in one voice.

‘What did you think, my brothers? That I, Vlad Basarab, son of Vlad and grandson of Great Mircea, would take fright of the Turks’ numbers or of the monsters they rein towards the sacred land of my Country? That I would run away? God has nailed me in this Land like on a Cross and brings me to life every time there is need for my sword or my thought. If you, soldiers of never-defeated Wallachia, stand a wall by my side, nothing and no one can conquer the land of Ancient Dacia. Let an army of Turks ten times bigger come here, I shall still cut them and I shall still crush them like cockroaches! If we stand together as one, nobody can break us! Never!’

‘Never!’ the Romanian soldiers cried elated. For the first time in many months, Dracula’s men appeared somewhat disorderly. Many of them had already entered the water waist-deep, others reined on their horses, cheering and crying out like spirits of the forest – all overwhelmed by the same gigantic strength and will power emanating from the eyes, words and entire being of Vlad Basarab the Third, Voivod of Wallachia.

The old archer turned to look at his son and asked him with a smile:

‘Still scared, Ilie?’

‘Who, me? Scared of this lot? Let them come, father!’ the young man snarled wickedly, his eyes flashing.

Vlad felt as though the first and most important battle had been won. From then on, the Turks would think twice before sweeping over the little Wallachian army. No! From then on, the Turks would be waiting every minute for earth, water or air to come alive and swallow them whole! Wallachia had suddenly transformed itself from a small but rich land into the realm of darkness, shadows and curses, where wars were fought with armies made of ghosts, and Lords were spat out from Hell for their destruction alone!

A little way further, hid by great reed bushes, Stroe and Ler were also coming out of the water.

‘How did this idea come to your head, mute?’ Stroe asked his dear friend.

‘Tudor taught me. He too had learned this trick from old Zyraxes the hermit.’

‘When weswam on the bottom, the Turks could not see us in the murky waters of spring. And

we could breathe as freshly as if we'd been outside through those canes! I could've lasted for an hour or two more! And when I treaded water and lifted the Lord straight up, everyone was staring at him, not down, beneath the waves! D'you realise the Turks' terror now?' giggled the farcical knight, visibly content.

'Tudor taught me...' Ler murmured softly. 'Tudor...my child...'

Stroe was watching his friend with moist eyes. He too was often overcome with despair and bitterness that the knight's son was no more. It was a thick sticky desolation that wrapped around his body, draining his will for life. Sometimes, it made him wish for everything to be done with sooner, to let him and Ler die too, so that they could all see each other again in Heaven, where no parent mourns for his child! But they still had a mission to fulfil – the most vital of them all!

'Come, brother, rise! Vlad needs you!'

'Come!' Ler answered, but his word sounded more like an encouragement for himself, like a reminder that resting time had not yet come for them.

All the army leaders had gathered before the Voivod, waiting for his orders.

'The Turks will soon wake up from their fright and will cross the Danube,' Vlad began. 'Sword Bearer Cazan!'

'Here, Your Grace!'

'Take your archers and go no more than ten paces to the middle of the river. Careful that each boat should be tied with ropes to the shore, so that you can pull yourselves back quickly if need should come. Don't leave it all on the oarsmen.

Commander Gherghina!'

'Here, Lord!'

'When the Turks manage to come across, take all the cavaliers and run into the forest behind! Make them think you run away in fright. You're to wait there till a fourth of the Turks reach our bank, and then you hit them with all your might for a quarter of an hour! Whatever the outcome, you're to retreat and we'll all meet in the Stanesti forest.

My Knights! Let's go!'

'We're here, Lord!'

Closely following Vlad, knights Mihnea, Ler, Stroe and Marcu disappeared faster than ghosts in the forest behind the steep bank. When they reached shelter, safe from any indiscreet eyes, Vlad reined in his horse and asked:

'Ler, Stroe! Shall we go again to the Turks? Did you like how we scared them the first time?'

'Of course we'll go again, Lord!'

'The Turks are still bewildered now. We must take advantage while we can. It has been an hour since we killed their brute. They don't expect us back, but they think we shall strike them here.'

'Good plan, but whom we shall pick as target now?' Marcu asked cautious. 'It's difficult to reach the Sultan, he's in the middle of his horde and I don't think we can touch him at all in broad daylight.'

'No, Marcu, we shall walk underwater again, all tied together with this rope. We'll come out on the shore only for a moment, wherever their guard is weaker. We'll catch a Turk, whomever, and we'll bring him here. Then, we'll show the pagans how they'll perish in Wallachia.'

'The stake is ready, Highness!' Mihnea said dryly. 'Go! Brother Marcu and I will remain here with our bows stretched, and ready to pull you back.'

The underwater advance was done easily enough. Every spring, the Danube would bring along lots of mud, which was making the waters murky. Towards the edge of the Ottoman camp, where

merchants and coolies stood, the guards were fewer and less vigilant than they were on the soldiers' side. Stroe and Ler were swimming, each carrying along a harpoon with perfectly sharpened claws, made of good strong steel like that of the swords.

After a few moments of uneventful swimming, the three stopped, and only Vlad raised his eyes two fingers above the water. On the Turkish bank, near the coolies' camp, there were two janissaries talking, gazing towards the upper river at the Sultan and the spahija's tents.

Vlad went underwater again and showed two fingers to his knights. They understood the situation immediately. Vlad took Ler's harpoon and prepared to spring above the water, lifted on the arms of the strong blond knight. Stroe pulled a knife from his belt and waited for the Voivod's command.

One moment later, two bodies sprang out of the water, and one of the janissaries fell down, stabbed by Stroe's dagger, while his companion started screaming terrified, not knowing what could possibly be pulling him down towards the water. Vlad rose again and hit the Turk in the head, making him lose consciousness.

On the Turkish river bank, everyone started to run as far from the water as possible, and nobody even dared to look behind. Superstitions and all the Turkish rumours about Vlad, the sheitan's cub, were now solid reality. The Wallachian hit wherever he wanted and feared absolutely nothing!

The Ottoman soldier woke up from his faint, his face heavily scratched by all the thistles and tall grass which the horse's run was dragging him through. He tried to lift his eyes, but he was too scared to do it. Earth and stones were tearing at his skin and clothes, and the Wallachians' horses seemed to choose the worst forest paths on purpose.

Suddenly, their gallop stopped and the janissary kept his eyes closed, trying to distinguish sounds from around himself. He heard a snivelling noise like a snake crawling, but no human words. Then, two pairs of strong and merciless hands lifted him to his feet. He saw with wonder that the "huge snake" he thought he had heard earlier was in fact a long thin stake, sharpened at both ends.

Vlad Kazikli, the demon from the Black Wallachia, wanted to satisfy his lust for blood again, and he would be the first of Mehmet's soldiers to end up in the Wallachian's stakes!

The janissary's terrible howls of pain and horror made all Turks turn their eyes towards the Wallachian camp.

Up on his beautiful Arabian stallion, Mehmet the Conqueror was staring fixedly at the Romanians. He recognised Vlad Draculea by his strong body and straight figure that seemed to command without words.

Ibrahim, army commander of Rumelia, asked the Sultan in a shaky voice:

'Great Sultan, King of Kings, what is Kazikli doing? How did he catch the janissary? And when?'

'Silence!' Mehmet answered, trying to hide his agitation and disgust.

At the foot of the damned man's stake, Vlad Draculea seemed to be holding a goblet which he filled with the blood flowing down from the stake. Then, to everyone's horror, the Wallachian drank its content whole, and raising the goblet to the Sultan, said dramatically:

'Here's to you, Mehmet! And I still have not quenched my thirst! You are next!'

For the first time in his life, the Sultan did not know what to do and how to proceed further. He had come here as a great conqueror to crush this small and stubborn country that had been long since messing his plans and the Sultans' before him. He had come here, expecting beggars to crawl on all fours for mercy at the sight of his great army, and now this horrible demon which drank human blood, with whom he was connected through his childhood's most terrible nightmares, was glaring at him

insolently, a promise of death on his tongue!

At Vlad's side, Mihnea was smiling satisfied.

'It's good, the Turks will really believe we drink human blood, like raving wolves!'

'Let them believe it, Mihnea! That's exactly what I want! I want them not to be able to close their eyes at night with terror of seeing us upon them! Let their grandchildren tremble with fright when they'll mention our name!'

'Your Highness, won't you give me some of that blood 'cause it sure goes well with this fine fried chicken,' Stroe laughed. 'If only the Turks knew we've got Vedeana wine in our goblets now instead of blood, I think they'd better hold their hearts! You truly are a great master, Lord, in playing with the pagans' souls. Look at them, how they all went numb with fright! Hehehe!'

The entire Wallachian army burst into laughter that broke like waves on the Turkish bank, piercing the Turks' ears like bodiless arrows, fired directly from the Pit's burning mouth.

'Gherghina! Cazan! You stay here and fulfil your orders! We shall see each other in Stanesti!'

'All clear, Highness!' answered the Spatharus. 'We shall proceed exactly as you say. Not to worry. At least one thousand Turks will leave their bones here at our border. Then we shall crush them all!'

'Only at the right moment, Spatharus! Not earlier! Now go! The Turks have begun letting their boats to water.'

The Danube confrontation was short, just like the Voivod had commanded. Supported by their battle ships, filled with soldiers and mighty cannons, the Turks could not be stopped at that particular point. But they did lose plenty of men and, most importantly, they realised that the Wallachians were more shrewd and merciless than the darkest of djins.

The Crescent army was now cautiously advancing northward, to Targoviste. From Turnu upwards, the road was climbing among thick impenetrable woods, which had got the Country the name of Black Wallachia – the one they were now supposed to wipe off the face of the earth. The day was fading away into dusk, but the Sultan had ordered that the entire army speed up and reach the first open field or village; only then could they set up camp over night.

The sounds of Wallachia were the strangest they had ever heard. The heavy silence surrounding them was shattered every now and then by a howl, or rather an uncanny shriek, accompanied by a moment's drum beating and trumpet calling. That is when the Turks would stop marching and move into battle formation; but the howling would suddenly cease and no one was to be seen coming out of the forest. No soldiers, no beasts. No one.

In the middle of his hordes, the Sultan was trying to guess Draculea's intentions. He made a hasty gesture with his hand, demanding that everyone stay still and not make a sound. No suspicious noise was reaching them, from between the quietly rustling trees in front; nothing seemed out of place. He slowly drove his horse to the edge of the forest, brave and defiant. A silhouette quickly passed through the trees in front of him, without revealing itself completely. And then another one, just as dark and quick. The woods were infested with enemies toiling incessantly around his men. They were not showing themselves.. but were not trying too hard to hide themselves either. They were not afraid... Mehmet remained still for a few minutes, a bowshot away from the tree line. Memories of his great past victories were inciting him to attack, to trigger a decisive battle. But against whom? Where? He could feel the Wallachians staring at him, calm, hidden, in position, waiting for the right moment to charge. He felt hunted and, up to a point, he admired these lunatics failing to understand the simple fact that they had no chance against him.

The Sultan had already seen that this was Vlad's game; that the forest was filled with the

Wallachian's men, and that their intention was to dishearten the proud Crescent army, by any means possible. Cold chills were running down his own spine, that of the most dreaded man on earth. He had met Vlad at the Gate of Happiness, where the Wallachian had been held prisoner many years before. Mehmet could still remember that he was mean, defiant, disobedient and always up to evil. He had grown fast and turned into an undefeatable fighter practically overnight. The great Sultan had hoped never to have to face him in battle, but he needed the Wallachian's land. It was the shortest way to Hungaria and Wien. But now that he was here, in Wallachia, he was overtaken by a strange feeling...

"I believe this is what common mortals call fear", Mehmet thought. "I'm afraid of this damned sheitan and I don't even know whether he is man or entirely demon. I saw him come out safe from the most dangerous traps I laid before him. No mere human can be so clever. And he is patient like none other. Every time I challenged him at Edirne, trying to determine my beloved father Murad to kill him, he managed to stay alive and endure; although I could sense he wanted me dead. Now I am in his country and –"

Another horrific shriek tore the Sultan away from his memories. A few steps away, one of his spahija guards had been knocked down from his horse, by an arrow come from nowhere.

Immediately, all the Turkish soldiers arranged themselves in battle formation. But silence fell again... Heavy... Malignant...

'Gokuhn Pasha, to me!' the Sultan ordered, after a few minutes of waiting.

'Here I am, oh, Brilliant One!'

'In the forest, the Wallachians are well hidden from our eyes, but horses are no good in the thicket. I want you to take a thousand men and storm into the woods. At tree line, dismount and follow them on foot. There cannot be many of them out there. I am sick and tired of their tricks. In two days' time, I shall be in Targoviste!'

'So shall it be, king of kings! Soon, the evil Kazikli will kneel before Your Majesty!'

A thousand spahija broke into a gallop towards the edge of the forest where the arrow had come from. They were fast and well armed. Upon reaching the first trees, they dismounted and entered the thick forest, yatagans in their hands. Fifty of them fell right away, cut down by skilful arrows flying from behind the thick woods. Then, the small group of Wallachians began running towards the heart of the forest.

'Go! Let none live!' Gokhun Pasha shouted. 'Straight forward, the forest becomes thicker and we'll catch up to them!'

Shoulder to shoulder, the spahija were moving deeper into the wilderness, using the yatagans to cut path through the ever denser bushes. The tamely spring sun could barely make its way through the thicket, combining the green of leaves and the brown of bark into a softly coloured black. Every step the spahija took brought them closer to the Wallachians, who seemed neither many, nor fierce. But soon they reached a peculiar part of the forest, a sort of wide, well groomed path, cut through trees and bushes.

Gokhun signalled his men to stop. The Wallachians had vanished and there was no telling whether they had taken that strange path or sought escape forward.

The air suddenly whizzed and another hundred spahija fell, taken down by arrows, while that senseless road was filled with riders as fast as the wind. Trapped from all sides and without the advantage of horses, the Turks attempted to flee back to the camp, but the arrows and broadswords of the uplanders were striking them mercilessly from behind. It took Gokhun a second to understand that every Wallachian forest had a path just like this one, cut out especially for them. The arrogant Pasha

also understood that none of his men would live to tell the Sultan what to expect, and that many Turks would fall into the same trap in these damned woods.

He tried to run faster, to take advantage of the protection of the few fighters still alive, but suddenly a wall of fallen trees appeared before him, blocking his way. They had probably been cut beforehand – but pushed down to the ground only now. That was Gokhun's last thought. Eight arrows pierced his body at the same time, while a young Valach, disfigured with hatred, appeared before him. The uplander's mace blow marked the end of the brief encounter in the woods near the village Fratesti.

Further away, on the wide road climbing among forests, the Sultan was uneasily listening to the sounds of the ongoing battle. From that distance, he could not tell who was winning. Suddenly, a suffocating silence fell over; but this did not tell him anything about the fate of his spahija. Who or **what** could kill a thousand spahija so swiftly? What had happened in those dark woods?

A moment later, the forest shuddered with the sustained cry of a man who seemed to be undergoing terrible torture.

'Amaaaaaaan⁶⁶ ! Amaaaaaaan!' the condemned yelled in Turkish, shedding a veil of horror over Mehmet's entire army.

But soon this sinister begging died out as well and, for the following half of a clock, not a single sound was to be heard.

'We depart!' the Sultan commanded. 'Ibrahim Bey, you go ahead with a hundred spahija and keep to the road. Do not go into the woods and do not follow the Wallachians, should they provoke you. Just make certain that the village we will be halting in is deserted and that we could not be easily attacked overnight!'

'Understood, king of kings! I'm leaving!'

The colossal army began moving again northwards, to the capital of Wallachia. Common soldiers, as well as viziers and the Sultan himself, only wanted one thing: to sleep for at least a couple of hours and chase away the maddening fear that had completely taken over them.

But almost an hour had passed and not one of the hundred spahija had returned to say whether the way was clear or not. There had been no sounds of battle, so the army continued marching.

The road seemed to be getting wider, which meant they were approaching a village. But a heavy smell of smoke had begun to fill the air. Every now and then, the wind would twist around little pieces of ash. Soon, even the dust of the road became black and a signal to stop was carried from up front.

Erkan Bey, the one leading the convoy, quickly galloped along the rows of soldiers and stopped before Mehmet:

'Praised Sultan, the road ahead is completely scorched, as well as the grass on each side of it, all the way to the forests. There's no smoke, only ashes. The Wallachians have burned everything down before our arrival!'

'It couldn't be that they burned everything all the way to Targoviste!' Mehmet replied. 'Wallachians, just as we do, need grass for their horses. They must have set fire to a village or two, thinking they would frighten us. Vlad Bey is starting to disappoint me! I had thought him more clever.'

'You are right, king of kings!' Erkan answered humbly, although he believed otherwise.

He had seen the road and had a bad feeling. Straight ahead, Hell seemed to be opening its gates for them. But he had to obey the Sultan, no matter what he believed.

The rhythmical beating of drums began once again, along with the marching. The moon had made its appearance on the sky, fighting with the agonizing sun. The very last sunrays were dying out.

Camp had to be installed and secured as soon as possible. From beneath the forests around them and in the skies, twilight was enshrouding them insidiously, seemingly asking them to leave and never return.

On the road, the ash had become as thick as dust, blackening their eyes and mouths. The air was hard to breathe. In the end, a bowshot away, appeared the edge of a village. Covered by ashes, the village was barely showing a few inches of paint every here and there, from beneath the thick soot. In the middle of it, the church was standing alone, sorrowful and untouched by fire – a reminiscence of life beyond war.

Like a bad omen, a flock of ravens was circling the settlement and croaking at something that from a distance looked like bizarrely narrow spires or very tall flags.

Mehmet drove his horse next to Erkan Bey's, at the head of the proceeding. He had stopped and now he was signalling the troops to stop as well.

‘What say you of this, Erkan?’ the Sultan asked, eyes fixed on the puzzling image ahead.

‘Let us be prudent, Your Highness! When could the Wallachian have put up a thousand stakes? When could he have caught our spahija and how could he have killed them all?’

‘He steps fast and he already knows our moves! This filth has spent too much time at our Court! He knows us well... Hurry, bring down those stakes and keep the men quiet! Those that have not seen anything yet must not hear anything either!’

The Sultan's order was wise and could have avoided panic. Only that it came too late.

The news that the one hundred undefeated spahija had already been impaled had quickly made havoc among janissaries, spahija, akinci and auxiliaries. Some were even swearing they had seen Draculea himself, the son of the Devil, climbing one of the stakes, feasting on the flesh and blood of the dead. Others were saying there had been no fight at all, that the stakes had suddenly risen from the ground and killed the spahija instantly.

But the village proved to be deserted and they were thus able to set the overnight camp there. They dug ditches and settled the tents into concentric circles around the Sultan, in order to protect him. It was past midnight and very few had succeeded to fall asleep. A heavy feeling of foreboding had fallen heavy over the site.

A Turkish merchant that was apparently having trouble sleeping was slowly walking to the edge of the camp. He was trudging his feet, stooping, like a man that was not accustomed to such prolonged campaigns. His entire being showed humbleness and asked for pity.

The imposing figures of the two janissaries on guard were standing sharp against the bluish-black background of the surrounding fields. Moonlight and the fires burning at the extremities of the camp were shedding strange reflections over the nearest bushes, making them dance imperceptibly, menacingly.

‘Where are you going, man? Don't you know you have orders not to leave your tents?’

‘I know, brothers, I know! May Allah keep us safe through this cursed lands! I'm too scared to fall asleep and so I came to check the guards were watching out for us.’

‘Go back, man, and try to sleep; we'll mind the guarding! We've been through worse wars! We won't be scared now!’

‘I know, my brave comrade, except we are not fighting men now, but demons! I tell you no lies, I was walking among the first rows when we reached the village. On the greatest stake, Draculea himself – cursed be his name! – was crawling upwards like a giant maggot and had his sharp fangs stuck in the poor spahija's neck. When he saw us, he growled like an old raving dog. I swear his eyes were flaming coal, taken from the hell he came from. He was jumping from one stake to another,

slicing open the bellies of the spahija with his bloody muzzle. He was looking straight at us, as if he didn't want to kill us just yet... he wanted to keep on toying with us... And then he flew away like a giant raven and vanished among the clouds.'

'What are you talking about, madman?' the second janissary snapped at him, trembling. 'Did you see this with your own eyes?'

'I sure did see it, oh, brave warrior! And it didn't surprise me either. I heard from my grandfather that many unholy things come about in this country. Not even the glorious Baiazid was able to defeat these filthy Wallachians! Now I'm certain they're sheitan's spawn! We'd all better go back to our homeland now. It is said that the soul of every righteous Muslim fallen here will be damned and tormented for all eternity.'

'Be gone, man, go to your tent!' the troubled janissary said.

'Please allow me to stay one more hour beside you! I feel a bit safer here. I believe that it is from now on that the evil spirits will come upon us.'

The janissaries looked at each other, frightened by the merchant's stories. In an age ruled by superstition, such stories were common, and here, in Wallachia, the Country of Lord Dracul, all these fantastic occurrences seemed possible! All they wanted was for this damned night to be over and for them to be allowed to move somewhere else, towards the centre of the reposing troops. What could they do, faced with demons? The two young soldiers shivered slightly and felt extremely vulnerable.

Suddenly, demon-like cries burst from the surrounding hills, while great balls of fire were jumping up and down, horribly, like in a terrifying dream. It seemed as though a thousand beasts had gathered in one place and were descending towards their camp, to kill them all. Horses screeched and bears roared, pigs squealed and crows cawed, and above it all, a satanic choir was screaming:

OLUM⁶⁷! OLUM! OLUM!

The enormous fire balls were spinning around in menacing circles, lower and lower on the hills and closer to the camp. The merchant shouted in terror, right in the first janissary's ear:

'We're all going to die!!! Allah save us! A hundred of our men have already perished! The Wallachians are inside our camp! Run!!!'

Taken by surprise with the strength and the proximity of the shouting, the janissary passed out in fright, although he had witnessed many terrible things in his harsh soldier's life.

The camp was overtaken by chaos and only the spahija seemed to have held on to a bit of reason. Erkan Bey quickly mounted his horse and yelled as loud as he could:

'Protect the Sultan! Everyone in position! Align in defence formation now!'

A hundred thousand yataghans were drawn and arranged in a perfect triangle, tip towards the hills from where the devilish balls of fire and the maddening cries were still coming.

At the opposite end of camp, the frightened merchant crawled outside unseen, towards the nearest bushes, then stood up and started running in a large circle, going a long way round the Turkish encampment.

A half of an hour later, after the gruesome spectacle on the hills had ceased just as abruptly as it had begun, the merchant reached the Wallachian camp. He took off the Ottoman garments and presented himself before Lord Vlad Basarab.

'It was just like you said, my Lord! They're all unnerved and have started considering defeat. When you unleashed the horses with burning whisks tied to their tails, many began to tremble like they had the ague! Erkan remained lucid, but he didn't even think of attacking! He commanded defence. Even *he* was terrified!'

'Well done, Mihnea!' Vlad laughed. 'This is just what I wanted to hear! I know how they are

superstitious and very inclined towards believing this sort of foolishness. I pity these poor horses, though, we will have to frighten them every night; the same with the piglets and dogs, but I need the racket they make!’

‘Oh, never mind, Your Highness! That’s the least they could do for their country. From downhill, one could never tell it was horses and that ropes and burning wisps were tied to their tails. The only thing visible was the fire running around.’

‘Good! Now we leave! The Turks will not sleep until morning! It is time we prepare the next surprise! Tomorrow night you go into their camp again. Use other garments and another dialect, but tell the same stories!’

‘I have better, my Lord!’ Mihnea laughed. ‘If I took Stroe along, he could tell some even crazier tales, but he doesn’t speak Turkish, poor fellow...’

‘Bravo! Lucky us that you’re so smart!’ Stroe interrupted, pretending to be upset to the amusement of the surrounding soldiers and the Voivod.

A hundred soldiers neatly arranged themselves in a column and broke into a gallop towards the other side of the hill. They were not exactly the best fighters, but they did have the strongest voices. Vlad had chosen them especially for the nights they would frighten the Turks to death. A terrified and sleep deprived army could be defeated much more easily.

Downhill, in the Turkish camp, no one dared step out of formation. Their weapons were at hand and murmured prayers could be heard from every corner.

Their nightmare had just begun!



Three days had passed and Mehmet’s advance had been slight. All grass was burned to the ground, villages deserted and also charred, wells poisoned and there was absolutely nothing to eat. The entire Country looked dead. Night after night, terrible noises ruined their sleep. Every morning, at least ten or fifteen soldiers were found dead in their tents.

The supplies were almost gone and the Sultan *had* to make a decision.

Mehmet looked at his soldiers with worry. Their typical haughtiness and vivaciousness had completely disappeared; they were now walking with stooped shoulders, dragging their feet. They looked more like an army retreating than invading. Mehmet had to find cattle to feed his men!

‘Let Akalay Bey come to me! I have a task for him!’ the Sultan ordered.

Young Akalay – nephew of the great commander of the Constantinople siege, Abaza Beg – was a conceited lad, risen under the protection of his uncle’s name. He had taken full advantage of it and many whispered that this great name and his insane courage were his only virtues. But he was handsome like one of those carpet knights in Western Europe, and just like them, he took great care in choosing his garments. His gold thread woven waistcoat had enchanted many women, but there was no certainty it would withstand an arrow or a sword’s blow.

This time, Mehmet had made the right judgement. He needed a warrior that knew no fear. It would have been pointless to send anyone else to search nearby villages for food.

‘At your orders! Padishah of Padishahs and King of Kings!’

‘You shall straggle from the road for an hour or two and look for cattle and hay. The Wallachians could not have burnt everything; not even they are that mad. The villages have been devastated only along the way they knew we would take. Take three hundred akinci riders and go!’

‘I have been waiting for this mission for a long time, your Brilliantness! Worry not! By tonight, I

shall return with wagons overflowing with food and Wallachian slaves!’

‘So help you Allah!’ Mehmet replied, pretending to be confident. He needed to give his troops hope. To turn them into warriors once again. He was very much aware that if Vlad had had an army half as numerous as his own, and had attacked now, the Wallachians would have surely been victorious!

It was already well past noon and the Sultan had received no news of Akalay or his men. Still, he did not worry much. There was plenty of time till dark. Now they were preparing to pass through another village. Deserted and burnt down. He could no longer stand the smell and the thick soot and ashes everywhere, in the air, on the road, on their clothes and in their hearts.

They were cautiously advancing through the ravaged village, watchful of every movement. On a small slope beside the road, a pretty, well-groomed little house, with a red tile roof, and a beautifully engraved wooden gate immediately got their attention. For days, they had seen nothing but scorched ruins, houses burnt just like the ones in this settlement were. Why was this house untouched? What did it mean?

The door of the cottage opened with a long creak that, in the middle of the eerie silence, seemed to scratch at their eardrums. The spahija circled the Sultan, while the janissaries stretched their bows. The small cannons, carried in wagons pulled by oxen, were also aimed at the strange little house.

A time-stricken old woman, who looked around eighty or ninety years old, appeared in the doorstep and gazed at them calmly. And then she started laughing, exposing the last two teeth in her mouth. She was laughing like a madwoman. Spitefully. Bitterly....

A moment later, a group of akinci riders surrounded the cottage, trying to make sure it was not a trap, that there were not any Wallachians hiding behind it. There was no one.

The tiny old woman was slowly moving down the path, heading for the Sultan. Her ceaseless laugh sounded like a curse, a bad omen. A janissary that could speak a bit of Romanian cut her way to ask her why her house was still standing.

But she could not speak, she was voiceless. The words came out hoarsely from her old throat.

‘Say what, granny? I don’t understand! Speak louder!’ the janissary said, losing his patience.

The woman signalled him to bend a little closer. Then, she suddenly pulled out a dagger from her sleeve and cut the soldier’s throat, and then burst into laughter again.

Two more janissaries hurried towards her, but it was too late. She had already cut her own throat and collapsed stiff, as if she had been dead for days.

‘Search the house!’ the Sultan shouted. ‘Leave no living soul in this damned village! If you find anyone else, kill them at first sight!’

But nobody moved.

‘Search the house, mongrels!’ Mehmet shouted furiously. ‘Ibrahim, take your men and go inside!’

The one called upon, a janissary captain, chose ten of his soldiers and cautiously went inside the house. Two moments later, they all rushed outside and many of them started vomiting.

‘Execute them!’ the Sultan commanded, blackened with anger. ‘I don’t need cowards in my army.’

Then he drove his horse towards the cottage. Erkan Bey immediately followed and entered first. He managed to keep his composure and prayed that Mehmet would not notice his distress.

In the main chamber, there was a neatly set table, adorned with embroidered cloths and wild flowers. On the table, three plates seemed to be waiting for guests. On each one, there was a spahija’s head, turban still in place, but eyeless and with the tongue cut out and placed by the plate. At the

middle of the table there was a kettle filled with coagulated blood. Close to the kettle, someone had placed what Mehmet recognised to be the ruby that had not long since decorated proud Akalay's turban. On every wall, it was written in blood: olum, olum, olum...

'Erkan Bey, let no one know what we have seen here! Burn the house down!'

The Sultan's advisor did not reply. He merely went outside, lit an arrow and flew it in the house. He then ordered his men to do the same.

The flames burst immediately and consumed everything in moments.

Up in one of the trees at the edge of the forest by the village, Stroe swiftly dashed away a tear and said: *"May you rest in peace, aunty Ioana! You were brave and helped us greatly! Now you're resting next to your sons fallen by the Danube, as was your wish!"*

Then he came down, mounted his horse and broke into gallop through the young beechwood; it seemed filled with life, unaware of the war that had just begun, bathing carelessly in the hot sunlight and happy with the small and agile creatures scrambling away from Stroe's path.



It feels like I've been speaking to a different hermit today...He was the same, but acted differently! I told him I'm fascinated with his story and that I'm beginning to grasp the hardship of those bloody times.

He burst into laughter and looked at me as if I were a child that he had to be patient with. Between roars of laughter, he asked me:

“And what if I broke your arm now and knocked you with the handle of my broadsword and crushed the bones in your face? Would you still understand? Is this how you see it, how you think it was? You people today have forgotten what pain is and what it means to endure for your brothers and country! You all go and write un-lived histories and give judgements, but how about the fear you are not allowed to feel, when facing an army ten times greater than yours, or about the strength you need to overcome it and fight till death for the sake of the Country? Who writes about that??? Or about the endless years of crying secretly, crushed by the longing for your poor children slaughtered in wars; about the ages that pass you by, with oblivion and scorn? Who's to know about those? Nobody knows, just like you don't understand anything! You read dead books and think you understand living people...”

Arefu, March 31st, 2008

“And yet, great fear had overcome us, though the Romanian Lord had but a small army and we were always cautious and burying ourselves in ditches every night, still we could not feel safe. They hit us on one night, so hard that they killed men, horses, camels, they killed a hundred thousand Turks.”

Memoirs of a Serbian janissary, Constantin Mihailovic

Eight miles away from Targoviste, the main of the Wallachian army was waiting for the Lord's orders. They had not really set camp. Vlad Basarab had planned this war differently. There was to be no face to face battle between the two armies.

He had barely managed to gather thirty-six thousand men. He had called out even twelve year old boys. This was the best anyone could do. Europe had promised him help, but Matias Corvin and his troops were still in Transylvania waiting.

The Turks were bringing to Targoviste the greatest army raised since the conquest of Constantinople. Two hundred fifty thousand professional soldiers. Cannons, brand new weapons, and more than anything else, plenty of warfare experience.

Vlad was aware that this was precisely the reason why Christian brothers were delaying the promised help; no one believed Mehmet could be stopped! No one, except for him and his men...

An ingenious system of spies hiding in trees, signalling fires and pigeons being released at certain distances, was constantly informing the Lord about the advance of the Ottoman army.

The Turks were still far away from Targoviste, but progressing steadily.

Neatly aligned in rows of one hundred riders and two hundred footmen each, Vlad Basarab the Third's soldiers seemed at ease. The field outside Targoviste, the approximate location of present day Ghinesti village, was sunny and in full bloom. There was plenty of grass and it had not been burnt. The horses were feasting leisurely, and their masters looked peaceful and tranquil, as if they were participating in an exercise, not a real war. Cheerful laughter was coming from every direction, which pleased Tzepesh.

The spies had counted twenty thousand dead Turks up to that moment, perished during the daily harassing attacks, always short and unexpected. They had not lost a single man yet.

As ever, Vlad was surrounded by his knights. They were planning a new attack.

‘In two hours’ time, we shall pay them another visit! We will keep to the woods, until we reach them!’ the Lord began.

‘They’ve learned their lesson and they are waiting for us. That’s good! All this waitin’ is wearing them down!’ Stroe said in a pleased voice.

‘I say, my Lord, that we carry on today’s attack at dusk, when they start digging the ditches.’ Ler said, calculated and emotionless, like a lion measuring up his helpless prey. ‘That’s when many of them will be letting go of their yataghans, so they can dig. And should we strike when they just started work, the ground around them will be difficult, and it will slow *them* down, not us.’

‘Victoryyyyyyy!’ Stroe shouted as if he had already won the war. ‘Victoryyyyyyyyy!’

‘What has gotten into you, madman?’ Marcu asked amusedly.

‘Victoryyyyyy! Ler has spoken! I never thought I’d get to see this day!’

They all burst into laughter. They were happy, especially considering that, indeed, their brother Ler had become even more tight-lipped than usual, during the past few days. They were all afraid that somehow the pain of losing Tudor might have been amplified by the horrors of war and the burning down of the Country. They knew him to be as strong as a rock, but many thought that the brave knight might lose his mind after his beloved son’s death. But now, he seemed revived.

‘That sounds wise, brother Ler,’ Vlad said, a wide smile on his face. ‘We will keep to the woods until we reach them. Take Stroe and five hundred of our best riders and go through the woods on the left side, until you spot them. Marcu and Mihnea, and I, along with another five hundred riders will take the right side. When we reach the Sultan, we shall follow him step for step, until we signal you – a skylark’s song, repeated three times. Upon hearing this, you shall charge and make all the noise you can, as if our entire army were behind us; you shall not go further than a hundred feet away from the pagans. That’s when you will retreat, without engaging in battle. In the meantime, we will be coming from the other side, quietly, and will hit their flank. When they face us, you shall turn back and charge again, hitting them from the opposite direction. Do not stay longer than a quarter of a clock. Retreat quickly and meet me back here. *All of you!*’

‘So shall it be, Your Highness!’ the knights promised.

The Turkish convoy was crawling slower and slower towards Targoviste. The forests, filled with unexpected perils, were not appealing to them anymore. They needed grass for the horses, but they dared not approach the tree line, even though all grass was scorched, on both sides of the road. Every time the Sultan had sent soldiers to secure the woodside, they all perished, reaped by the evil spirits hidden in those endless forests. The survivors swore that arrows were springing from the ground of trees, that seemingly living knives were appearing out of thin air and hunting them down with a mind of their own. No one had any doubts anymore, this Country was cursed and Dracul, its king, was a true sheitan.

The uniforms were completely blackened, from the ashes and soot following them everywhere. The water provisions were slight and had gone stale. *All* wells had been poisoned. Every now and then, they would find a spring and take some water, to last them for another day.

Mehmet the Conqueror was still sitting up proud in his saddle. But he was overwhelmed with worry, as well. Not even he believed in victory anymore. His soldiers were wasted day by day, even though no actual battle had taken place. The horses were dying because of hunger and fatigue, and the nights were hunted by evil djins.

He let himself absorbed in thoughts, brooding over people’s disdain at his returning home defeated. He had grown to like the idea. During the past couple of days he had begun to love it. He could even see himself returning to Istanbul covered in shame. Humiliated, but... alive! Sometimes, he would lose all hope of leaving this damned place alive.

And once again, the shouts of the spahija tore him from the nightmare of his thoughts.

‘Alaaaaarm! The Wallachians are coming! Everybody to the left!’

The woods on the left flank were resonating with battle cries and drums. It seemed that Kazikli had finally decided to fight him openly. Maybe it will all be over today!

Ahead of the Wallachians emerging from behind the trees, there rode a tall knight, with long blond hair and a gigantic broadsword, tip pointed upwards. Mehmet had noticed him right away. There was something peculiar about this knight. He was the only Wallachian not yelling, but there was more to it... Despite the distance between them, he seemed to be looking straight at the Sultan, that he had come here precisely to hunt him like a helpless beast. The knight was standing up in his saddle, on his pitch black horse, outfacing Mehmet.

Although he had never met him before, Mehmet recognised him: it was Knight Ler, famous all the way to Anatolia and the Arab Countries for his virtue and craftiness. It was said that no opponent of his had ever gotten away alive. That every time he swore to kill an enemy of his Country, he would hunt that man down till the rim of the world and never fail.

Now, this knight was coming for him, clad plainly, wearing a white uplander’s shirt, with no

plastron and no helmet.

The group of Wallachian riders was approaching at full speed. The Turks fired the first arrows, but the Romanians were still too far away. The spahija circled Mehmet. But, like in a living nightmare, the Sultan could still see knight Ler, between the wall of his loyal men's shoulders. Now he thought he could actually hear the flutter of his shirt and his horse's hoofbeat. The Christian's ice cold glare pierced him and his grudge seemed personal.

But, suddenly, death cries burst from behind him and every one turned around in terror. Another group of Wallachians had silently come from behind, thievishly, and was already chopping at the opposite flank of the Turkish horde.

The Sultan wanted to draw his yataghan, but his hands would not obey. He immediately recognised Draculea's bear-like figure. Around the Voivod, janissaries were dropping like flies and no one dared challenge him. He was carrying a kargi in his right hand – a short spear with which he would swiftly pierce the throats or hearts of anyone drawing close to him. Where the spear failed, his enormous broadsword – which he handled like a feather – would succeed. From around him, infallible knives were flown towards all archers that could aim at the Lord. Mehmet also recognised Mihnea, the one that had pretended to be loyal to him for so many years, and, by his side, knight Marcu, with his hair cut short, like in Roman times. Next to them, a knight short and bulky like an ox was delivering death through a Turkish yataghan. The Sultan realised he was trapped between Vlad Kazikli and his loyal protectors. For the first time in his life, he knew he had no chance of getting out alive! The five of them were coming to get him. He glanced behind and saw that Ler's group had vanished back into the woods. An irrational hope, that maybe he could escape this attack, invaded his body and gave him the strength to draw his yataghan and charge. But the rest of the Wallachians were retreating as well, galloping towards the forest.

No one had the nerve to follow them. After a few more moments, everything grew silent. It was as if nothing had happened. But his dead soldiers stood proof that this attack had been more than a nightmare. There were over a thousand corpses.

Mehmet felt weak and faint. Never in his life had he been chased and hunted, the way he was now, in this untameable little Country. He had grown accustomed to *him* being the one condemning and spreading fear. Did these people not know who he was? He felt like howling with despair; he wanted to somehow teach these Romanians what fear was, to put an end to this grim, absurd dream he had sunk into after setting foot in Vlad's Country.

'Bury the dead!' he ordered. 'We stop here! Dig the ditches and set up camp!'

'Your Brilliantness!' Erkan dared, hesitantly.

'What do you want?'

'Look there, by the forest on the left!'

At woodside, the same blond knight was staring at him, raised up in his saddle. When his eyes met Mehmet's, Ler pointed his sword at him, in silent menace. He stayed like that for minutes, without moving, without making a sound.

'Shall I send after him, oh, Brilliant One?' Erkan Bey suggested.

'What if it's another trap? Don't send anyone! Prepare camp. Triple the guard tonight!'

The Turkish camp was quickly set and encircled by ramparts and numerous guards. At the edge of the forest, the same threatening figure stood motionless. Darkness had almost swallowed it whole. But if looking carefully, one could still somewhat distinguish the knight's white shirt.

Inside his tent, Mehmet was twisting and turning, unable to sleep. He knew Ler was still out there, he could feel him waiting for the right moment to come into camp and kill him. The Sultan could

no longer bear the torment and walked out, hoping to see the knight had left. Deep inside, he wished that darkness would conceal his torturer, so that he could at least lie to himself he was safe.

But Ler was still there. Difficult to spot among the shadows, but nevertheless there. Swiftly, as if he had seen the Sultan coming out, he softly drove his horse towards the Turkish camp. He had lit a torch and was advancing slowly, as if he was out on a walk. He moved lightly and without a trace of fear. It was just him and two hundred thousand Turks. He felt no fear. He was like a wolf circling a flock of sheep.

The Sultan stormed back inside the tent. What was he to do? What orders should he give? To send an army against one man? What if it was another trap? What kind of war was this??? He only wanted for all this to be over. He felt his head bursting with pain and his heart throbbing its way out of his chest.

And then he heard a skin-crawling cry, from somewhere near his tent:

‘The Wallachians are here!!! Run!!! It’s knight Ler! Run!!!’

As a result, hurried steps circled the tent and then...nothing. After what felt like forever, Erkan Bey brusquely pulled back the entrance of the tent, scaring the Sultan even more.

‘There’s no one, Your Brilliantness! Ler has vanished into thin air. We don’t now who shouted. Maybe some poor frightened fellow that could no longer endure the terror. By morning, I’ll find him and cut his head off! Now sleep, Great Sultan! We’ll keep guard!’

Mehmet gave no reply. He had not even heard his trusted advisor’s words. He fell to his knees and spent the night in prayer. Neither the devilish barks that tormented them every night, nor the tumult at dawn – when his soldiers were being torn from their sleep by another surprise attack – could reach him now. He felt he had reached his limits. He could not endure any more. He had stopped caring whether he would live or die.



A whole month had passed since they had first set foot in this cursed Wallachia. They had planned to passage from Turnu to Targoviste in ten days. But the roads were burnt down and blocked. Every single day, small and swift groups of soldiers would attack and ceaselessly harass them, without engaging in any conclusive battle. They had no more supplies and grass for the horses.

Now they were fumbling through this labyrinth of roads, hoping to find one leading to the Royal City that was not burnt or blocked. Everywhere they went, the same sight awaited: smoking houses in ruin, comrades of theirs impaled and those damned crows scorning them day by day with their sinister croaking.

Not *one* of those gone for prey had returned alive. It seemed even Allah had forgotten them. A dreadful heat wave had descended upon Wallachia, the kind one encounters only in African deserts, and not too often there, either. This depleted their strength ever further, pushing them to the edge of despair.

Every night was just like the previous one: demons fallen to earth were howling at them and threatening them from the nearby forests and hills.

The compact group of janissaries led by general Batur had the worst fate.

‘This sun is bakin’ us like mice! Even *he* is against us!’ a common soldier said moodily to a fellow next to him.

‘You could cook kebabs on these cursed ring armours! But I still wouldn’t take ‘em off, be it a thousand times hotter! Judgin’ by how often the Wallachians attack us, we must be ready at all times!’

‘Ugly war we’re fightin’ here! We ain’t fightin’ nobody and droppin’ like flies! Let’s get to Targoviste at once or go back home!’

‘Look there, up front!’ his companion interrupted.

‘It looks like a whole village be comin’ our way, broads an’ whelps an’ all! You know why? They be surrenderin’ and comin’ to our side! Or else they wouldn’t be so quiet and bearing a white flag! I’d scream with joy!’

Mehmet was smiling for the first time in many many days. The Wallachian villagers must have tired of Dracula as well and were joining the Sultan. The same had occurred in every country he had conquered. Indeed, he had lost hope here in Wallachia, but Allah had not left him and was now opening the way to Wallachia’s heart for them. The poor fellows would surely tell them where to find food and water. Then he will storm to Targoviste and end this nightmare once and for all!

‘Let’s be cautious, oh, Radiant One!’ Erkan Bey suggested. ‘Lest it should be another trick. Maybe they carry knives or swords under their clothes.’

‘Yes, let us be prudent, but I doubt this is a trap. They are too many, they have women and children along and they look mighty out of spirits. This is how people look when surrendering, Erkan!’

The group of Wallachians was approaching slowly, hands raised to prove they hold no weapons. Still, the janissaries were ordered to point their spears and bows at them and charge at the first sign of hostility.

The group was pretty large, about a hundred souls. They looked like an entire village. But there was something off-key about them. They were wearing holiday garments, clean and well-groomed. Most of them were displaying a sort of total resignation, an incomprehensible serenity.

Mehmet could feel it in his bones that these Wallachians – smiling with acceptance, and calm – would bring about disaster. He drew sword, but no act of violence occurred. Some of them had even started to embrace and kiss the soldiers. Yet, that horrible feeling that something was about to happen was still lingering.

‘Get them out of camp! Have them checked and questioned!’ the Sultan ordered restlessly.

And then it began! The Wallachians were not attacking, but they started spitting in all directions and clinging on to the Turkish soldiers. They were kissing them forcefully, biting them, and trying to touch as many Turks as possible.

Suddenly, a spahija cried terrified:

‘Send them away! Run! They’ve brought the plague upon us! They’ve got the plague, look at them!’

The news fell like thunder over the Turkish camp! In those times, plague was the worst possible curse! It killed slowly, spread like fire and there was no cure for it.

This time, even the spahija lost their composure; they were all running as far as they could from the Wallachians, pushing each others, stepping on those fallen to the ground, only to get away from the plagued!

Erkan grabbed the reins of Mehmet’s stallion and pulled his lord away from the rows now governed by chaos. They burst into a mad gallop and did not stop before putting enough distance between them and the others. A few moments later, the spahija in the Sultan’s personal guard joined them.

‘Kill the Wallachians right now! Shoot them down from a distance and burn them!’ Erkan commanded, sensing his master was too worn with fear to think clearly.

‘Let one live!’ Mehmet ordered, regaining his composure. ‘Catch him with a noose and call for

me when you've secured him! I want to speak with him!'

For the following half an hour, the jumble ruling over the pagan army was hard to stem. Many of the auxiliaries, even some akinci riders and spahija had run back towards the Danube. They all knew it meant the death sentence, but at least they still had a chance, to disappear and hide, to settle in a village where no one knew who they were. But here, in this land of death, all hope was lost. Anyone staying here and continuing this damned campaign would end up dead, one way or another. There was no doubt about it.

After order restored, one of the spahija came before Erkan and reported:

'All Wallachians are dead but for one! We noosed him from a distance and now we're keeping him pinned to a tree, with the long hooks we use to hunt important prisoners when we go after prey. We're burying the others now and burning them, lest they should spread the disease!'

'Well done! Reinforce guard on the flanks and be ready for battle!'

Mehmet and Erkan walked towards the Romanian now lying half-dead, pinned to the large trunk of a solitary durmast.

'What are you doing here, mongrel? Why have you come? Why didn't you stay and die in your own damned villages?' the Sultan barked at the poor moribund.

The Wallachian gazed at him and replied scornfully:

'How 'bout you? What are you doing here, you filthy croaking crow? Why didn't *you* stay in your rotting country?'

The Sultan drew his dagger and wanted to stab the insolent man. But he was afraid to get any closer to him, because of the dreadful disease he was carrying.

'How many of you have the plague? And how did you figure to come to us?'

'You'll see who taught us how to do it, and sooner than you think! Because of you and the carcasses you leave behind, the plague had started spreading among us as well. When he learned plague was ravaging our village, Lord Vlad came to us and asked us whether we'd rather die slowly, in pain and meaningless, or choose to fight and rid the country of your stinkin' army. You're done for! You've been fooled, pretty boys!' the ill man burst into laughter.

'You lie, dog! Had he known about the plague, Kazikli would not have dared set foot in your village!'

'You're obviously not too smart, are you, mushroom? Don't you know that His Highness Vlad is untouchable? That no knife, sword or disease can harm him? Can't y'all see you've been trying so hard to catch him and he's already crushed your army, without you ever feeling him come and go? No doubt 'bout it, you're ugly *and* stupid!' the Romanian said.

The Sultan grabbed a bow from a nearby spahija and killed the impertinent Wallachian himself.

'Have all viziers come to my tent! We need a new plan!' Mehmet commanded.

For the time being, a forced march to Targoviste, without seeking food or water, seemed the best strategy. Whichever route they took, all kinds of traps and misfortunes would await them at each step. Trying to reach Targoviste – where the decisive battle was to take place – with a fresh and rested army was hopeless. No matter the tactic, no matter the road, the result was always the same. They had to strive for the capital!



At last, after so much bad luck, fate seemed to be shifting for Mehmet and his men. After a long, long time, it looked like the drought that had been torturing them was fading out. The first grey clouds

had appeared on the Wallachian sky.

Marching became easier, and, finally, the Ottoman army reached the first hills before the Wallachian capital.

The same aberrant silence ruled their new surroundings. The hill top was gradually being shrouded by deep dark clouds. The moist, chilly wind brought some nerve back into the Turkish soldiers and invigorated their horses. They decided to set camp early, long before dusk, and take advantage of the favourable weather and location! They needed to be in full shape the next day, when they would storm Dracula's Royal City.

Erkan Bey was personally inspecting the reinforcing of the camp. Everything was going well, the ditches were being dug properly, tents were being raised everywhere. The sight of the green and orange flags reassured him, gave him a feeling of safety. Wherever he was, he felt that nothing bad could occur in the middle of camp. It was their territory. He noticed that nobody was digging on the northern side, though. They had all stopped working and were staring at something on the hill top.

In the bright light beneath the storm clouds, one could easily distinguish the figure of a rider. The wind was blowing through his long black hair, giving it the appearance of a menacing flag. Every now and then, his stallion would rear up on its hind legs, as if it too was impatient for the battle to begin.

'It's Kazicli! It's him!' one of the workers whispered, letting his hoe fall from his hands.

'Yes, I recognise his red cape and his body like a strong beast's!' another one said, mesmerised by the Lord's appearance.

'What d'you reckon he wants? What'll he do?'

'Maybe it ain't even him...'

'It's him! *He* brought the clouds!' the first Turk whispered in terror.

Phantom clouds were chasing each other above the surrounding hills, making it look like everything was spinning and that the Voivod alone was standing motionless. The ashes - that had been covering the plains and the hill up front for days on end - began tearing into streams and flowing upwards, pushed by the summer wind. The soot was gathering to the top; it seemed that this particular blackness was materialising into the black horse, the black-clad Lord and his black hair. Jerked in all directions, his red cape was *truly* the flame that had burned everything to cinders and ashes!

In the end, Vlad softly reined in and turned around, disappearing behind the hill. A strange coincidence, or perhaps divine intervention, made the sky fill with lightning, in the exact spot that the Wallachian warrior had just left.

There was not a single soul in the Ottoman camp that was not convinced of Vlad Dracula's rule over water, clouds and wind!

On the opposite side of the hill, deep into the woods, seven thousand Wallachian warriors were waiting for the signal to charge. They were brave and determined. They could not stand seeing their Country and villages burnt down because of the pagans. They could not understand how some people had the nerve to invade other nations, in order to take their lands and their lives! Beasts with such habits had to be exterminated, and soon!

Now they were all lying on the grass, trying to get some rest, as the Lord had commanded. Their battle was going to start after midnight. The great battle...

Stewards Bratu, Gherghina, Nistor and Cazan had been granted command of the four bodies of men that were to attack the Ottoman camp from all sides...

After returning into the woods, Vlad spoke calmly, blankly, as was his custom:

'My beloved, tonight we shall crush the Turks once and for all. I shall kill the Sultan. I was

inside their camp last night and I know their formation. They are tired and scared. This is the best time to attack. They still have almost two hundred thousand men, thus we must be cautious! We must kill at least fifty thousand tonight! Commander Gherghina! You shall strike from behind! Bratu, you shall come from the right and not stop until you reach the Sultan's tent! Nistor, you will come from the left; if you must die, die there! Spatharus Cazan! You come with me, we shall hit them head on. After I cut Mehmet, we will stay there and kill as many as we can until dawn. In the morning, when they see the full damage we caused, they will run back towards Turnu and over the Danube. We will hunt them down and root out as many as we can. Let us rid Europe of this plague!

Ten steps away, the knights seemed oblivious of the Voivod's words. Ler was placidly sharpening his great broadsword. By his side, Stroe was softly whistling with a leaf. Marcu, who had just finished putting together the knife belts for later, signalled for Stroe's attention and whispered:

'Look at Mihnea!'

'Leave him be! He's repentin' and prayin' for the sins he is yet to make, but you and I both know he'll be havin' a lot more to confess tomorrow mornin'!' Stroe laughed.

Kneeling by an enormous oak tree, Mihnea had his eyes shut, emersed in prayer. *"Forgive us, God, for our past and future sins. Show me the way, Lord, to a sinless life! Make the Turks turn around now! I'll have to kill them, God, many of them, too many! And I won't hesitate! I lived among them and I know they're not all bad. They pay with their lives for blindly obeying their power-hungry Sultans. Forgive me, God, for I shall send many of them to the underworld tonight! I must protect my people! Were it just for me, I would turn the other cheek. Keep us safe, Lord Jesus Christ, and make it that tomorrow we are delivered from the Turks!"*

Mihnea crossed himself again, from head to ground, and got up. He sat by Stroe and said:

'Do not leave Vlad's side for a second tonight! Even if your life depends on it!'

'You don't say! As if I had the time to play with y'all? In an hour's time I'll be leavin' for Buda, to –'

'You're not going anywhere!' Mihnea broke out.

'Let him chatter, man! Can't you see he is talking nonsense? Where would he go? You listen to this madman?' Marcu laughed.

Mihnea laughed as well, slightly ashamed. He was too tense to have any sense of humour left. The previous night, Vlad had gone into the Turkish camp by himself. He refused to take anyone along, lest it should seem suspicious. It was easier for a solitary merchant to pass unnoticed, he argued.

Mihnea was afraid of losing Vlad. He knew him to be probably the most intelligent and skilled warrior of their time, but he loved him like his own son and was sick with worry every time they were apart.

He knew he had no reason to worry. The other knights loved the Voivod as much as he did. Nothing bad could ever come between the four of them and many a time it was Vlad who had gotten them out of trouble. He was trying to keep all this to mind. Only for him, Vlad was more than a child he had seen growing up, and the son of the friend he had sworn eternal loyalty to; he had come to admire the young Voivod for the man he had become, Vlad Draculea, for the fire inside his heart, for always being ready to give up his life on the battlefield for Wallachia; because on this very day Vlad meant the *freedom* and *pride* of Wallachia.

He looked at his Lord and his heart was once again filled with that love that would invade every corner of it, every single time. He loved the young man's proud and trimly posture; he loved the way Vlad was now speaking to his horse, how he caressed it and arranged its reins, pitying the poor beast for having to be dragged into battle again; he loved the way young Basarab would walk among

his troops and care for every man, how he taught them to better defend themselves and arrange their weapons and shields; he loved Vlad because he, in his turn, deeply loved and believed in everything Wallachian!

Openly or with the corner of his eyes, every Wallachian was looking at him. They all wanted to be like him, strong and undefeatable; they looked up to him, adored him and were loyal to him because he fought for them and their families.

The Voivod left his horse with Stroe, who took the reins while mumbling something despondently...

Mihnea did not like the sight. He intended to go talk to Vlad, but stopped. The Voievode had come before his men and began speaking:

‘We have one or two hours left till dark. I am going to sneak into their settlement first, so I can get close to the Sultan and slay him. When the time comes, you will also charge and we shall wipe them out! I will be waiting for you, my brave men!’

Mihnea was boiling inside. He was aware that Vlad had not told him about this plan precisely because the knight would never let him go by himself. Now his hands were tied. He could not say a thing in the presence of the soldiers. To them, any bit of hope was worth a hundred thousand soldiers come to help. The thought that their Lord was fearless and that he was always the first to face danger made them also feel invincible, just like Voivod Vlad Basarab was.

As if reading his mind, Vlad went on:

‘Our knight Mihnea has become grim! He is brave and he has sacrificed his entire life for our sake and Wallachia’s. Have no fear, my dear men, I shall not die tonight. My mission here is not done. I know the Turks are many and I am alone, but you tell me, how many wolves does it take to chase away a flock of sheep? I will go to Mehmet and tell him to his face, before I cut his heart out of his chest, that Wallachia shall never be conquered, by him or any other! And if I die, I shall rise again and die once more and a thousand times over, as many times as I need to, to chase the beasts out of my country. As long as Wallachia is still in this world, Romanians will know our names and will be waiting for our resurrection into their blood, when their turn will come to die for the Country. Then, or in the next century, our grandchildren or the grandchildren of our grandchildren will be shouting, as we are now: WE DIE OR WE LIVE FREE! The very sound of their voices will chase away every horde or army craving for our land!’

‘We die or we live free! We die or we live free!’ the seven thousand men thundered in one voice. Their voices blocked out the sound of the newly begun storm. The way they were standing in the innermost of the wood, hair blown by the wind and swords in their hands, they seemed to have risen from the age-old Wallachian land, from the earth and the air impregnated with the blood and bones of the Dacians and those before them. It was in that very moment that Lord Vlad Basarab’s army became invincible!

Vlad did not look behind, to where his knights were. He was ashamed to meet Mihnea’s eyes. And full of pity. He knew how much the old knight would worry, but he had had no choice. Had he revealed his plans to Mihnea, the knight would have surely disobeyed him, for the first time in his life, and come along. But he could move around the Turkish camp unseen only if he was alone. He spoke Turkish and could even reproduce a few dialects perfectly. He could easily pretend to be a janissary or a merchant or even one of the spahija. Two soldiers approaching Mehmet’s tent would surely look suspicious; a single one stood a chance to reach it. Him alone.

Side by side, the four knights were silently watching as their Lord was walking away from them, towards the wood side. The tall boots, adorned with silver studs, the tight black trousers and

the short tunic managed to hide some of his body's unusual strength. He was stepping through the thicket, lissom and agile, as if he were hurrying to get to a ball or celebration. His straight, stout as ever figure showed that his heart had never known fear.

Partially hidden by his broad shoulders, the Ottoman camp seemed less threatening. It was now clear that Voivod Vlad Tzepesh was going to attack the two hundred thousand Turks. And that he was going to win...

At the edge of the forest, Vlad stopped and pulled a flared Turkish tunic over his clothes. He neatly packed his own tunic and placed it by a tree. Then disappeared into the tall summer grass.

Lord Tzepesh was capable of sneaking like a lizard, fast and invisible. He had learned this skill of approaching enemy lines while still a prisoner at the Turks, then Zyraxes and Tudor had turned him into a master at it. He was patient and would advance little by little, making sure no one saw him. Many a times, he had to stop for whole minutes behind some solitary bush. As he got closer to the ditches around the tent area, he became even more cautious. He would now crawl on the tips of his fingers and toes. His hefty young body would feel no exhaust, but only that endless strength that seems to numb the mind a little and makes one think of victory and victory alone.

The guards' torches and the great fires lit all around made the camp look even bigger, as large as a city; an entire world moving from place to place and leaving behind nothing but destruction and sorrow, like a giant, crawling and venomous spider. More than once had he cut off this demonic spider's black legs, reaching for the Country's villages. Rows upon rows of akinci riders come after prey had been slaughtered by him and his men, but the giant spider's cursed legs would grow back, again and again, ceaselessly. Now the enormous creature was resting, cuddled to itself, waiting to bite his beloved Targoviste for the first time. The spider had to be crushed on that precise night, before it was too late.

He managed to sneak beyond the ditches, to where the merchants were. The night before, he had bargained trying to sell amulets against the plague, made from rabbit feet. He had asked for a small price and given them all, going from post to post inside the camp. Now he had a different disguise and was not trying to sell anything. He wanted to creep towards the middle of camp, as unremarked as possible. Circles inside circles of tents were set in the middle of the plain outside Vacaresti village. In the middle, the green tents of the spahija were closely packed around Mehmet's great white one.

It was an hour till midnight, when the Turkish guard shifts would change. Vlad decided to spend the time left by chatting nonsense with the spahija on guard. He had gold coins ready, to offer them in order to numb their vigilance. He was going to approach one of the couples of guards and ask that they allow him to stay by their side until the end of the war, to keep him safe. He had plenty of gold to pay them well.

Many merchants had given up their fortunes, in order to buy the protection of soldiers. Too much fear had driven them to it. They could raise new fortunes once they returned home or after the Wallachians would be defeated.

But another Anatolian merchant came to him and asked him in an old man's hoarse voice:

'What do you sell, righteous Muslim? Do you have fresh water?'

'No more, man,' Vlad answered, smiling friendly, although he was in no mood for smiling. 'What are you selling?'

'I have some remedies against the trots, guaranteed to rid one of it, even if he was to drink the foulest water! I sell them cheap!'

Vlad wanted to send away the nagging merchant, but it would have looked suspicious. The man's accent annoyed him; it reminded him of Egrigroz, where he had been held prisoner years

before. But he had to remain inconspicuous, to bargain and maybe even buy something.

‘Oh, I was looking for something like that! Show me your stuff, if you please.’

‘Let’s get out of the way, so I can empty my bag. I bet you’ll like many of my wonderful goods. I also have some herbs for sweating, which, in this heat, can save your life and –‘

The Voivod was no longer listening to the man’s words, but he was following him, while carefully observing the guard around the Sultan’s tent. They both sat on a large boulder and the Turk said:

‘I have good eyes and I know just what a sturdy young man like you needs! I’ll give you a present, for free, a flower that, when ground and drunk with water, will help you get out of camp alive, after your job here is done!’

Vlad swiftly reached for the long dagger, hidden beneath his tunic, while keeping his eyes on the merchant’s face. For a second, he feared he had been betrayed and thought the Turks must have been informed about the attack to follow.

Yet, somehow, under the bushy eyebrows and the wrinkled face of the man before him, he managed to distinguish some of Ler’s features. The hair cut short and black as coal made him even harder to recognise. But his clear blue eyes were no longer trying to conceal the love flowing from them.

Vlad was overjoyed. He wished he could be upset with his knight for disobeying his orders, but he found himself unable to. Alongside Ler, all his plans were easier to carry out. He did not intend to pull any of his men along, into this insane, dangerous scheme. When hell broke loose, they would be completely exposed. They would have to stand their ground until the Wallachian soldiers reached them.

The thought that the two of them, the most wanted and hated men by the Turks, were right there, twenty steps away from the Sultan’s tent, made him laugh inside. He could barely refrain from bursting into laughter; Vlad simply smiled to his loyal knight:

‘If you come by later, I’ll have fresh goods for you! I’ll give you, free of charge, for the goodness of your heart, a goldthread woven turban, adorned with diamonds!’

‘I know, oh, skilful merchant! I think you’re mighty capable of getting your hands on such treasure! If all goes well, I shall repay your kindness in good measure. I reckon that by dawn, I shall also have in my bag a few fine gaberdines, the kind Great Viziers wear.’

They went on blathering and bargaining for nothing.

All around them, the invaders’ thousands of tents had fallen into an uneasy silence, without anyone paying any notice to them.

At midnight, when many merchants and auxiliaries were still awake – hating those Wallachian nights, haunted by nightmares – the guard shifts were changed in perfect order. The two spahija standing in front of the Sultan’s great tent now seemed more cautious than the previous ones.

‘No more yatter!’ one of the spahija barked at the two merchants, although there was quite some distance between them. ‘Go to your sector, nothing is to happen tonight. You’re safe!’

‘We are afraid, oh, brave one!’ Ler replied, in his fake hoarse voice. ‘But we’ll be leaving now. We know order has to be kept. Let me give you this bag of gold coins before I go, perhaps you’ll remember me in the fire of battle. I swear to you, if we return home safe, I’ll give you ten times more!’

That kind of offer was nothing uncommon, during a campaign continuously followed by bad luck and fatalities. All merchants were paying enormous amounts to ensure protection by the most renowned warriors.

‘Fine, fine!’ the soldier answered. ‘Give it here and be gone.’

The merchants approached shyly, heads lowered. Suddenly, the eyes of the two guards grew wide open with surprise, and then were shut for ever. The two merchants had punched them in the temples, cracking their skulls. In less than a moment, the long black capes and well-polished yataghans – previously owned by the spahija – were resting on the shoulders and in the hands of the former “tradesmen”. All of this was accomplished in utter silence.

Vlad and Ler were standing side by side, cautiously observing any movement or sound around them. Well hidden in the shadow of a nearby tent, the two spahija were laying under a great cloth, that the “herbs merchant” had just happened to have at hand. Lord and knight were now both waiting in eerie calm, unusual in such circumstances. Many times, in the hardest moments, they seemed a bit drowsy, numb; they would drown into a state of maximum perception, out of which, when need asked for it, their arms and swords would burst at fantastic speed and with diabolical precision. It was a state in which nothing else but the fight was real, and which turned them into perfect war machines. In their dimension, they could not be defeated; they never even considered this possibility.

The doleful song of an owlet reached their ears, from the nearby hill. Vlad counted to ten and smiled satisfied when a similar sound came from the opposite side of camp.

He looked at Ler and they both started for Mehmet’s tent. They were faced with the Sultan’s twelve personal guards.

The question on the commander’s lips never got the chance to be uttered. Cries of terror burst from all directions.

‘The Wallachians are inside the camp! Everyone to arms!’

Vlad and Ler took advantage of the moment of confusion and cut the throats of two spahija each, in a single blow. The fight with the remaining eight was short and ruthless. Swords in both hands, Ler quickly disposed of his opponents. He intended to help Vlad, but he saw that his Lord was already storming inside the tent, after jumping over the corpses of the six spahija that had tried to stop him.

The tent was enormous and poorly lit. Vlad jumped on the bed and felt the Sultan trying to flee. He grabbed Mehmet by the hair and pulled him back. Ler had just thrown one of his flying daggers into the neck of the figure standing by the bed.

In Vlad’s grip, Mehmet struggled like a chicken held down for beheading. Without a trace of hesitation, Vlad slashed his throat in one long yataghan stroke, then pushed him on the ground and cut off his head. He shoved the head in a bag, which he then hung on his shoulder.

‘Ready?’ he asked Ler.

‘Ready! There was only one guard by the Sultan. Let’s go!’

They stepped out and were content to see that the whole Turkish army was in chaos. Everyone was running without knowing where to and were screaming in horror.

The fires lit everywhere grabbed the warriors’ trembled shadows and elongated them, making them look like giants descended from another world, a world built on wars, cries and flames, a world which many Turks would enter during that terrible night.

‘The Wallachians are inside our camp, clad in Turkish clothes!!!’ they could hear from all around them.

‘They’re everywhere!!! Run!’ others were yelling.

Erkan Bey rushed to the Sultan’s tent. He scrutinized everyone standing by, with the eagle-like eyes of an experienced warrior, and stopped on Vlad. He was the only one whose yataghan was dripping with blood. But he did not have the time to do anything about it. Vlad flew at him and cut off his head with a single broadsword sweep. Then he jumped on his horse and shouted in Turkish:

‘Erkan Bey has betrayed! He’s killed the Sultan! Run! We’re doomed!’

The spahija close to them were running around, yataghans in their hands, not knowing who to attack. Right now, they had all rather save themselves. The Sultan was dead; what difference did it make who the killer was? Now they were all huddling together and looking at the camp, lit ghastly by fires that had broken out everywhere.

Thick rows of riders fast as lightning were crossing the camp, like torrential rivers tearing up everything in their path.

Throughout the camp, Turkish soldiers were fighting each other. They were all dressed alike and were shouting the same curses. Had they looked carefully, they would have noticed that some of the “Turks”, about seven thousand of them, were wearing red scarves tied on their arms. Each time these particular soldiers ran into each other, they would stop and go after someone else.

But no one had the time for such details. The night they had all dreaded was here. This one. The demonic Wallachians were in their camp, invading them, and they were invisible, too!

Tents were burning in flames and powder kegs were exploding. The sound of swords and crushed bones was deafening.

Outside his white tent, Pasha Erbakan, one of the Sultan’s most important advisors, had gathered about a thousand spahija around him and ordered:

‘Kill anyone who approaches! The Wallachians are wearing Turkish garments and will try to reach us. Our own men have no business here!’

Vlad and Ler drove their horses to where the Turks’ food supplies were. The janissaries had grouped there and were resisting the Wallachians’ crushing attack.

But their path was crossed by a group of akinci riders that seemed to have recognised them. Yataghan blows were falling from all directions and it was their agility alone that kept them alive. Sword in each hand, Vlad and his knight could barely block the dozens of attacks. They drove their horses side by side, facing in opposite directions, so they could defend each other; they were ceaselessly striking to the left and right. For a few minutes, they hardly managed to maintain defence. Two yataghans flew towards Vlad’s neck at the same time and Ler froze. Such blows were impossible to block!

But the Voivod swiftly leaned back, below the Turkish yataghans and at the same time, thrust his swords towards the two akinci riders. Blood burst from the pagans’ chests as from two spring wells, clotting among the sounds of that cursed night.

For a second, Vlad remained lying on his stallion’s back. He looked at the red blood drops standing out against the clear, starry sky. Impetuously, his mind was flooded by one of his frequent visions, which he had only told Tudor about.

He could see all soldiers and kings passed, buried in the Wallachians dust, as they stood up straight in their green afterworld, and looked at them, the living ones. Each drop of blood given by him and his soldiers would slowly seep into the ground, straight down; and after joining its brothers, would transform into bright red stars on the other realm’s sky.

The passed soldiers before them were smiling, and each father or brother was proudly pointing upwards, towards the “stars” born from the blood of their kin. He could see them: thousands of them, holding hands and praying for their victory, from there, in their afterworld.

Then, suddenly, that make-believe sky was ripped by a huge – and very real – yataghan aimed for his head. Torn from his vision, Vlad answered with his brutal force, wrenching the sword away from the Turk’s hands. He was going to strike him in the head, but there was no need to though. Two daggers had already flown whistling into the pagan’s throat. From behind him, Vlad heard Stroe’s

high-pitched voice:

‘Evenin’, Yer Highness! Gone huntin’ without us?’

‘I did, Stroe, and I have some fine game in my bag, too! Now, let us lessen these beasts!’

The Wallachians stayed inside the Turkish camp until dawn, sowing confusion and death everywhere. The supplies had been destroyed. Not one tent was still standing.

Over and over, the four armies led by Stewards Gherghina, Nistor, Bratu and Cazan, met in the middle of the pagans’ camp. Over and over, they started back towards the sides and returned to the centre of the camp marked by the green tents with the same rage, each time cutting deeper furrows through the groups of Turkish soldiers. Few Turks would attack them. Most of them were only trying to defend themselves. In most cases, it was futile!

After so many hours of continuous slaughter, the Wallachians began to feel their arms as heavy as lead. But somehow, they would still find in their hearts – somewhere between love for the Country and boiling hate for the invaders – one last drop of energy; and then another, and another...

Before the break of dawn, groups after groups of Romanians had begun to leave the site, according to plan. Without trumpets or shouting. The terrified Turks noticed nothing. No one could tell without a doubt which were the Christians and which were the Turks.

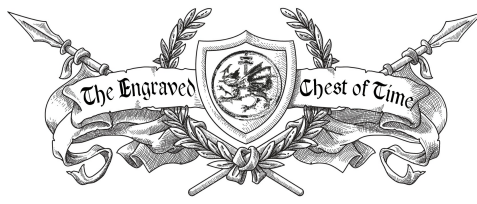
This damned idea the Wallachians had – of dressing up like Mehmet’s subjects – made the Turks distrust everyone. Now they would cut anyone approaching them. It was the only way to stay alive!

The Wallachians had regrouped on top of the hill above camp; for over an hour, they had been watching, with grim faces, the war the pagans were fighting among themselves. Death cries reached all the way up there, along with the clashing of swords and the rare thundering of the cannons.

‘Retreat!’ Lord Vlad ordered briefly.

The small Romanian army began to orderly descend the opposite side of the hill. Quick messengers were sent to Targoviste, Arges and Brasov, carrying the long-awaited news: more than half of the Sultan’s army had been destroyed!

Five riders were still waiting on the hilltop. Knights Marcu, Ler, Mihnea and Stroe were watching silently, one step behind Vlad Basarab the Third, the Voivod of Wallachia. Above the remains of Mehmet the Conqueror’s army, the last stars of the terrible night of June 16th-17th, 1462, were dying out one by one.



I'm afraid! I AM AFRAID!

As an archaeologist and a historian, I should be happy...But I can't get myself to be.

Last night, I was the witness of a fantastic apparition in front of my ancient interlocutor's house. All my fears and suspicions have come true and have even been exceeded! I'm still shaking, but wise or not, tomorrow I'm going back again. This of course, if my courage isn't going to leave me completely...

I had left long before dawn to take some night pictures which I planned to exhibit at the University. But what I actually saw wholly surpasses any photography, however masterfully taken.

The man was hanging upside down, a few metres above the ground, arms spread out, as though crucified, and a storm had risen only around him. Pieces of clothing and flesh were flying away from him, and blood was oozing from his arms and legs, as if he were nailed to a cross of wind.

All around there were skinny wild apocalyptic dogs that gnawed on the fallen pieces of flesh, growling sinisterly. The old man however seemed very at peace with his suffering and was bearing all this with the stoicism of soldiers heavily tried during endless years of war.

I ran away immediately, and I'm not afraid to admit it. The scene was too much for me, too unexpected!

I won't try to explain to myself anything now...

Maybe I'll return again tomorrow night...

If you think me mad, then go to Arefu and look for the old hermit of the clearing, whom people call Mihnea!

But be careful! Never visit him at night time!

Arefu, April 2nd, 2008

„Even the Emperor (Mehmet), in deep wonder, said he could not take away the country of a man who does such great things, and above nature, who knows to bring his ruling and his subjects to such use.”

Laonic Chalcocondil – “Historic Expositions”

The five men had been riding for over an hour towards Targoviste. Lord Vlad himself had planned in great detail their return to the capital. News that the Turkish army had been destroyed and the Wallachians had lost very few men had to reach first. After that, he, the Voivod, would bring proof that Mehmet was indeed dead. The joy of his soldiers would be immense, and would give them the strength to resist the last Ottoman attack – if the Turks still had the courage. He needed to take into account the fact that after last night the Turks’ army still counted at least 50 000 men, if not twice as many, and it could be easily led by one of the great viziers.

The sun was rising higher and higher to their right, lighting up the whole plain.

‘Let us stop, gentlemen!’ Vlad commanded his knights. ‘We have to prepare Mehmet, to put the turban on his head, so that all our people recognise him.’

‘And prepare him, we shall, Highness, why not? But I don’t think there’s any better preparation than the one you gave him last night!’ Stroe laughed.

Everyone dismounted, except for Ler, who reined his horse a little backwards, to make sure they were not being followed.

Vlad emptied the contents of the sac he had filled the previous night with Mehmet’s head. From inside however, rolled out the head of a younger man with chestnut coloured hair: it most certainly did not belong to the Sultan. Vlad froze. He stood nailed to the ground, eyes on the head grotesquely tilted over to one side.

Mihnea turned to look at Marcu and said worriedly:

‘He got away this time! Tomorrow night he won’t escape again! Don’t be upset, Lord! He won’t get away from us the second time!’

Stroe signalled softly to Marcu who planted himself as though accidentally in front of the Voivod’s horse.

For a while, Vlad said nothing, then pulled out his sword and cracked the Turk’s head in half.

‘You won’t get away from me again, even if I have to chase you to Istanbul and back!’ he growled and made to jump on his horse.

It was the first time his friends saw him out of his mind with rage. They had been expecting it.

Vlad had put great stakes on killing the Sultan. This would have meant certain victory for them and the Country’s freedom. And Vlad had another reason for wanting the Sultan’s death so ardently. Another very personal one.

Marcu stepped quickly before Vlad to stop him jumping back on the horse. Vlad however pushed him violently and pointed an angry finger to his face, saying through his teeth:

‘Don’t you dare! I’m going after him!’

‘Never mind, Highness, I’ll dare!’ said Stroe, closing his arms around the Lord like a claw. But he flew through the air in the same moment and landed heavily on the ground. It was only his battle skills that saved him from breaking his bones. Marcu and Mihnea ran together to Vlad, trying to hold him down. Stroe and Ler – who had come in great hurry – flung themselves over the Voivod, but hit their own companions instead, thrown through the air like ragdolls.

The Lord raised his sword at Stroe, who remained still.

‘This isn’t right, Vlad!’ Mihnea said softly, fatherly.

Vlad kept his sword above Stroe for a few moments longer. Then he let it drop, gently and quietly. Without a word, the Voivod slowly made a few dragging steps away from his knights. He let himself fall in the tall grass, his eyes set on the blue June sky. Among summer's vividly coloured flowers and the raw high grass, he felt dead, as though lain in a huge shrine, covered only with flowers and sky.

His mind fled this world. His eyes were heavy, but he could somehow manage to see *beneath* them. Strange things flashed through his mind, clashing maddeningly and meaninglessly against each other. He could hear the laughter of his little brother, Radu, only a few years old, come out of his mother's mouth who seemed to be trying to tell him something. He could see Wallachia's soldiers fighting against each other and falling down, their ears covered, cowering from the same laughter of the young one. And again, his mother's face, her hands desperately reaching for him, this time from outside, near the Royal Church in Targoviste; priests were chanting voicelessly, wringing incense and mercy from the sky. Over everything, he heard the same laughter of the roguish child, turning to fog everything in one senseless and endless scene. He had a glimpse of his father, galloping furiously toward him, but passing right through him, like a ghost. The horse's neighing was beginning to resemble too much a child's laughter.

Throughout this whole twisting nightmare, his eyes kept searching for Radu. In the end, he found him. The child stood quietly on the bank of a red-blood river. He wanted to approach him, but huge moths sprang from the waves continuously whipping his face. And again, that crystal-clear laughter covered everything up.

The moths' wings kept whipping his face harder and harder, until they succeeded in rousing his anger. He wanted to catch at least one of them, but it turned into a powerful and at the same time protective hand. He somehow managed to enter his body again and recognised Mihnea bent over him, slapping him to bring him back to his senses.

He was panting heavily and wanted to rise to his feet, but his knees would not listen. He fell to the ground again, ready to lose consciousness once more. He heard Stroe's words coming from very far away:

'Don't you leave us, Your Highness! Don't you leave your Country in hardship! Don't you desert us!'

The last words burnt his mind and his heart and had over him the effect of a large bucket of ice-cold water. He, Vlad Basarab, Lord of the Romanian Country, could never desert! Death was not allowed for him. Nor was madness!

He rolled to one side and pulled himself up on Ler's belt and shoulders till he managed to steady himself on his feet. After struggling to remember why he rose in the first place, he said thickly:

'To Targoviste, gentlemen! Let's give the Turks a proper welcome!'

Ler helped Vlad on the saddle, after which he mounted on the same horse. He told Vlad to cling well to him and to sleep if he could. They had but mere hours. After that, the fight would begin anew.

In front of them, Mihnea was riding alongside Stroe; Marcu was behind them, and Ler and Tzepesh in the middle.

'It's obvious that Mehmet was expecting Vlad to come after him!' Stroe said spitefully.

'Maybe...'

'What do you mean, *maybe*? You're driving me crazy! Why wasn't he in his tent then?'

'Mehmet was scared to death, that's a fact! I lived with them for a long time and know their habits. Sometimes, the Sultan leaves his tent and wishes to spend the night with one of his favourites, or with some young soldier. Foul ways! And foul timing it was, too, that he should leave last night of

all nights!’

‘Ever since I’ve known Vlad, I was never so scared that he might lose his wits as I was a moment ago!’

‘We’ll defeat Mehmet’s army anyhow. Now they’re terrified and unorganised – they simply cannot win! But there’s something else that upsets His Highness, something above himself.’

‘Radu?’ Stroe asked in whisper.

‘Yes, Radu! They were caught together by the Turks. Radu was just a kid, knowing nothing of the world. It was easy for the Turks to turn him into one of their own. Vlad got to see his little brother becoming more and more of a Turkish stranger to him everyday. He would beat the hell out of him, commanding him to stop talking with the Turks. But this only made Radu resent his brother even more, estranging one from the other for ever. They were both children.’

‘Too young for such a trial...’

‘Vlad carried everything with this determination and obstinacy so typical of the Draculea family. Yet, his heart remained forever broken. He wants Radu back, he’s the only family he’s got left. He hopes that if he kills the Sultan, Radu will come back to us, forgetting all about the years he spent with the Turks. Rumour has it, the Voivod’s brother is with Mehmet’s entourage and seeks to be anointed Lord in Vlad’s place.

This is what hurts him the most. Now he must *hate* Radu and kill him. He’s got no other choice. He’s the Lord of Wallachia and the Country will always be his first love!’

‘The Sultan couldn’t have hurt Lord Vlad more!’

‘Be patient, and you’ll see how Vlad will punish the Sultan for all of this!’

‘And how *we* shall punish him!’ Stroe completed the sentence firmly.

The proud walls of the city of Targoviste were already rising before them on the horizon. From behind them, the Chindia Tower searched them with its shrewd eye, then allowed them to approach the gates. Everyone was preparing for siege...



Mehmet was still numb after the previous night. Only luck and Allah’s mercy had made him change tent in the last minute. Otherwise, he too would be now lying dead with his soldiers. He had had the fallen counted: more than one hundred thousand! He had not lost so many men during the last *five* campaigns. This was the biggest disaster for his army up until then. He looked at the destroyed camp site with empty eyes and for a moment, he actually feared that his whole empire would follow on the same destructive path under Dracula’s blows.

He was however immensely relieved that *he* at least had made it out alive.

He could no longer endure in this dark land, in the Country of this odious tyrant, who knew how to make use of every dirt mound and every shadow of the night in order to defend his rule. Mehmet knew that were he to retreat now towards the Danube, he would surely be hunted and chased by Dracula. He could sense him everywhere, hear his whispered curse in the wind, imagine he saw his strong agile silhouette hidden behind every tree.

And at night ...night time was the worst! Every noise could bring the Wallachian’s footsteps closer to him. He had a vision of Vlad in the big tent, in the spot where he, the Sultan, would have been safe. He could see him cutting off the head of his guard, young Ergun. He asked for a cup of fresh water to cool himself, but when he made to drink it, the moving water produced Vlad Kazikli’s head, with eyes full of hate and threat. He dropped the cup, and could barely repress a scream of horror.

He was nauseated and retched loudly, violently, like one who has not eaten in days, and therefore has nothing to vomit. He no longer tried to hide from his army. They were all stinking cowards! Who were they to judge him, Sultan of Sultans and Conqueror of Constantinople?

Half of what was left from his army was already chaotically turning back to the Danube border. When he returns, he will make sure to punish every single traitor. When he returns to Edirne. If he returns.

In Targoviste, Vlad and his knights were received with cheers and acclamations by the army gathered beneath the wall of the city. Ranged on ten rows in front of the Royal Court, Wallachia's brave men made up a very colourful army. For the first time since Mircea the Great's age, the Voivod had summoned the Great Army of the Country: every boy and every man who could carry a weapon; children not older than twelve stood beside well-built experienced warriors, and old men with white hair, in their late years. All were in battle formation and had proved their mad courage during the last few days. They were the only army in Europe that had dared to face Mehmet the Conqueror. They were the undefeated army of the Romanians!

Vlad was now holding himself straight and proud in saddle, as though nothing had happened. In front of the army, the warrior nobles – Bratu, Gherghina, Cazan and Nistor – were waiting for him, one knee to the ground. Vlad commanded them to rise and embrace each one of them like brothers.

‘Bratu! You’re to take your army and lock yourself inside the Hill Monastery. Abbot Paisie is waiting for you there. He was Mircea’s archer and knows very well what to do and so do his monks.’

‘Forgive me, Highness!’ the High Steward said. ‘Let me stay here and defend the city with you. I believe we shall need all the available arms.’

‘No, Bratu! We shall do things differently. The Turks are still many. If we were to resist here, in Targoviste, they would set their cannons against our city and destroy it. We shall let them come up here and chase them from all sides like we’ve already done, and they shan’t know when and where we’ll attack!’

‘So be it, Lord!’

‘Commander Cazan! You’re to descend with your soldiers in the grove over Ialomita. Every time you see random akinci riders soldiers, you’ll cut them without pity!’

‘I shan’t let even one escape me, Highness!’

‘Nistor! And you, Gherghina! Find the Turks’ tracks beyond the city and attack them twice shortly before they get here! I shall be waiting for them inside the city!’

‘Highness!’ Commander Cazan began fiercely. ‘It’s not right for you to remain alone here, even if you know all the corners of the city. Too dangerous!’

‘I shan’t be alone, Cazan!’ Vlad answered dearly. ‘We shall have by our side our knights Ler, Stroe, Mihnea and Marcu.’

Cazan raised a furrowed brow. He did not like this plan at all! He knew the Lord to be brave and skilled for all sorts of cunning things, but he could not imagine what five men could do against a whole army.

‘Here come the stake carts, Lord!’ Stroe announced genially.

On the way from Targoviste to the mountains, around twenty carts filled to the brim with long polished stakes were approaching them.

‘I want everything ready by this evening,’ the Voivod ordered and then headed hurriedly to his chamber in the palace in Targoviste. No one would have guessed the faintness Vlad had just awakened from an hour before, judging by his firm movements and his strong voice. He was himself again, Vlad Basarab Draculea, the undefeated Lord of Wallachia.

In the Lord's great chamber, simply decorated with a single tapestry and whitewashed large walls all around, the four knights, Chancellor Ilie and the Lord seated themselves together around the great encrusted nutwood table.

'Gentlemen, sadly, Mehmet is not dead, nor is he completely defeated,' the Voivod began. 'We expect him to reach Targoviste in a few days. Outside, our men are already at work for the enchanted forest we are preparing for the Sultan. He won't succeed in defeating us, no matter what!'

'Our spies bring good news, Lord!' said the Steward, full of hope. 'Mehmet is running back across the Danube. Your Highness has brought him great fear!'

'Not as great as I would have wanted!' Vlad answered pensively. 'How certain is this news?'

'As certain as always!'

'You are right, Ilie, I did not mean to try you. Who is now in charge of the army?'

'Baykurt Pasha, Lord! I've known him since Giurgiu. He's a soulless evil man! Even Death seems to avoid him, sickened by so much cruelty gathered in one person!'

'Yes, I know him too,' Mihnea intervened. 'He's skilled in warfare, he never backs away before the enemy, no matter how difficult it were.'

On the other side of the table, Ler was watching Stroe with a beaming look. The latter burst into laughter:

'We know him, too! And most especially, *he* knows us! When we were returning from Venice on our way home, brother Ler and I passed by lower Belgrade, through Podgorica and then on to Serbian Pristina. The place was controlled by Baykurt Pasha, who, somehow, learnt we were there.'

'He had put a nice price on our heads!' Ler laughed out loud, to the others' surprise.

They knew him to be a quiet person and only rarely had they heard him booming with laughter. Now he seemed to have forgotten all his worries and was talking like never before.

'What do you think we did, when we heard of such an honour? We said, let's go look for him and hear what is it he needs to tell us!' the blond knight went on, his face lit with a smile. 'So, we put Turkish clothes on: Stroe had painted his face and had tucked a pillow beneath his vest, so that no one would recognize him. He'd thrown a veil over his head like those the odalisques wear and you could swear he was a bad, fat, loudmouthed Turkish woman!

He'd fixed me in some way, too! I had a twisted black moustache stuck with glue and my eyebrows were dyed with nutwood colour. I'd bought a pair of white shalvars with red stripes, so baggy that our horses had enough space to jump around freely.

Thus prepared, we went to the mansion where Baykurt Pasha had settled and found something or other to do outside till night came. Then we entered the big house unknown and unseen and grabbed the pagan by his large beard, from in his sleep.

He looked at me and the fat odalisque beside me in bewilderment, not understanding what was going on. Stroe bowed deeply and spoke something in Turkish, sweetly on his nose, like a woman, while I was holding the hatchet stuck to the Pasha's throat:

"Why, oh Radiant One, you allow men to beat us and treat us like dogs? Why it's only them that have harems – why not us, too? You know, I myself long to have a harem of my own with fifteen men? You know how nastily this good-fer-nothing treats me and how he makes me cook for him everyday? Make me stew, make me pilaf make bla bla bla, make whatnot! From tomorrow on, you shall leave away the yataghan and grab the frying pan and see for yourself what it feels like to have hot oil burns!" then he started to slap me on the back like a mad woman, to Baykurt's complete amazement, who asked us very seriously, as though not wanting to upset us:

"Sorry, but are you insane?"

“No, Radiant One, I’m not insane!” Stroe went on. *“I mean, I am, ‘cause I’ve remained with such a waste of a man till now! Why don’t you pass a law that all beautiful girls like me choose their husbands at will and change them every three months!”*

‘And what did Pasha say?’ Chancellor Ilie asked, unable to stop laughing.

‘Poor fellow, didn’t say anything!’ Ler went on. ‘I’d taken my hand off his mouth, but he wasn’t screaming for help or anything. He stayed there, gawking at Stroe, who went on squeaking nonsense like a tittle-tattler. Then we removed our Turkish clothes and he saw who we really were.’

‘And didn’t he try call the guards to stop you?’ Mihnea asked amused.

‘No! We told him we’d let him live and bring to Wallachia’s rule one Vlad Basarab, who wanted to settle terms by the Danube. As long as they didn’t come here with army, we were to stay in peace.’

‘You won’t believe how the Pasha himself laughed afterwards!’ Stroe said picking up the story line. ‘He invited us to stay with him for a week and honoured us as his own men. We couldn’t refuse him, because we didn’t want to upset him. But I was about to get myself in bigger trouble.’

‘True!’ Ler laughed again. ‘During the first day, we kept seeing Baykurt Pasha’s eldest daughter bustling around our tables while her father kept praising Stroe on and on. That night, I heard frantic knocking at my door and on the other side, Stroe’s voice:

“Oi, mute! Wake up! Have you got some rope? Kinda’ a foot I need!”

What could I say? I jumped with fright, thinking Stroe had had a brawl with somebody and needed to tie the man up, but a foot was much too less! I let him in and asked what he needed the rope for.

“I can’t get rid of Semiha! Pasha keeps forcing her on me; he wants me to marry her! I wouldn’t want to upset them, they’re good folk nevertheless. As we were sitting outside on the porch, watching the moon like two lovebirds, I didn’t know what else to say not to wed me so I told her I’ve got a tail! That I’m not man like all men! That’s why I’m telling you, stop goggling at me like a toad to a flood and give me quickly a foot of thick rope to tuck at the back of my trousers, ‘cause I promised her she can touch my tail to convince herself I ain’t lying!”

I gave the rope to the poor fellow and he put it right in his trousers, a little upwards, like a happy dog that’s found its bone! The next day, Semiha had completely disappeared! Her father’s eyes however kept flashing to Stroe’s behind, in a way that made us laugh our hearts out!

Chancellor Ilie was also laughing loudly, amazed at the nature of these fairytale knights. They could find the strength to amuse themselves and make good plans in the worst situations and in the darkest of times. He would have wanted to be like them, but did not really succeed. He knew the Turks to be a few miles away from Targoviste and this made him lose all laughing mood.

‘This being said, we sure know Baykurt, Your Highness!’ Ler continued. ‘And we also know he’s as superstitious as five old hags put together! After we left, he burned Stroe’s chair and bed. He called for a Christian and a Muslim priest to cleanse their house of all evils. None of them succeeded in clearing up to him what type of animal Stroe is! And honestly, I still haven’t exactly found out myself to this day!’

‘He is brave and cautious in battle, we must be careful!’ Stroe said, shaking off the pleasant memories he had let himself sink into earlier. ‘He’s a tough one to be scared, but if we manage to loosen the hinges of his mind, he’s lost!’

‘We’ll take care of that!’ Vlad said darkly.

Outside, in the palace courtyard, the Wallachian armies were forming rows and columns and heading off one after the other wherever the Voivod had ordered them to. In the entire city, there were

only the six men left, gathered in Lord Vlad's chamber.

Still, one of history's hardest sieges was about to begin for the Turks.

After two days, the Ottoman army was regrouped less than a few miles from Targoviste. Cruel and cold-hearted, Baykurt Pasha was gently caressing his long, still black, beard. The furrowed brows, almost a continuous line above the nose, showed a fearless and determined nature. He had but one good eye left; the left one had been touched by the tip of an enemy sword many years before and it had swollen horribly, almost bursting out. He knew many laughed behind his back and he blamed his misfortune on the whole world anyway!

For a moment or two, he looked at his men. There was about a fourth left of his proud army that was crossing the Danube at the beginning of May under the command of Sultan Mehmet. Now, it was upon his shoulders to save this campaign and the Empire's image to the world. He had decided to go straight to Targoviste and make siege on the city. It was their last hope. His soldiers would not resist psychically for yet another month in Wallachia. They had to end it all now! He knew that were he to fail, the Sultan would cut off his head, naming him the sole responsible for the disaster. But he also knew that, were he to win, he would be covered in gold and honours that nobody in his family had ever dared to dream about.

He gave the departing order, taking his place at the head of the army. He wanted everyone to see that he feared nothing and that he deserved all the privileges the Sultan would bestow on him.

The city wall of the Romanian Lords' royal citadel was beginning to stand out against the line of the horizon. A powerful smell of putrid flesh was beginning to reach them with every step. As they marched on, a scene as if depicting the kingdom of Eblis⁶⁸ was clearing up before their eyes.

At the foot of the Wallachian city, a large thick forest of stakes had grown, with the hanging bodies of at least ten thousand Turkish soldiers. Above them, a black cloud of crows were rising and dropping again and again, never leaving any openings of clear blue sky. The fluttering of black wings and of clothing remains, continually flapping against the wooden stakes, would have been enough to freeze the heart of the bravest of pagans.

The eyes of the soldiers Kazikli had impaled were already being plucked by the birds. The crows had built themselves nests between the now flesh-clean ribs of many of the corpses. The stench and horror of it all were unbearable.

Baykurt Pasha suddenly realised that every second ticking away made his soldiers more and more vulnerable. Death thoughts had engulfed him too for a moment. He measured with his sharp eyes the red brick walls of the Wallachian city. They stretched cold and wavy, built with defence towers like black memories from place to place.

He recalled that Baiazid too had been vanquished here by Giaour⁶⁹ Mircea; nor had other Ottoman rulers had a pleasant experience in this small country that was determinate to stay in their way. The Romanians seemed just like the rock fortress in front of him. Soldiers strong as the thick walls, and from time to time God raised in front of them, cruel and more worthy than those before him, a voivod - proud and tall as the unconquerable towers that marked the four corners of Targoviste.

Strangely, he felt the dark ominous shadow of Giaour Mircea craving for war and floating in the air above his soldiers. He had somehow been reintegrated in Vlad Kazikli's entire being, and when the latter is dead, they shall walk together, descending upon the next Wallachian Lord, who would stand against them with tenfold powers. He felt that that would be the shape of things till the end of time, and that the Turks would never break this people, hard-headed and brave to the point of utter madness - but he simply *had* to fight! He was one of the most courageous army commanders of the

Empire and was known everywhere for his unbroken nature.

‘FORWARD! For the Sultan and the Empire!’ he bellowed, spurring his horse.

Nobody followed him, however. The soldiers behind him had remained still as statues, eyes fixed on the forest of stakes before them. Every spahija, akinci rider or janissary that had come to Wallachia seeking war prey was here, hanging from Kazikli-Bey’s stakes.

No one dared to charge the stake forest, where Death, laying still in thick layers from the highest spike downwards, was making the air tremble, like a heat risen from Inferno. They stood an arrowshot away from the walls of Targoviste, as they had desired to do since long ago, but none of them had even the courage to move. The reek and terror had paralysed all of them completely.

Many had started to retch violently, covering their eyes. Such horrors they had never seen or heard of before.

From the defence wall, Dracula’s defying voice reached them like thunder:

‘You are somewhat late, your Lordships! I was expecting you sooner, so you can help grow my beautiful forest!’

The Voivod was speaking the Turkish tongue, as though he were a Turk himself. Some soldiers more spirited, found the strength to reach for their arrows and aimed at Kazikli. Yet, the voievode disappeared in order to reappear a moment later up in the round tower in the centre of the Royal Court.

‘Do not waste your arrows! No weapon in this world can touch me!’ the Giaour called to them. After that, he disappeared again and after less than a moment, reappeared tall and proud and ominous at only a few metres away from them, with the same black cloak tied over the French silk tunic.

‘Come in, if you have the courage! The city gates are open for you!’

No one dared move. This filthy sheitan appeared and disappeared in thin air at will; he was untouchable in his own city. And now, he had raised between them and the city gates this wall of stakes that made blood curdle in their veins.

From behind, a quick stream of Wallachians, about seven or eight thousand souls, suddenly charged them. Still petrified, the Turks barely found the will to fight back. The battle was short and the Wallachians disappeared as quickly as they had appeared. The only proof of their passing remained the hundreds of dead bodies.

Many soldiers of the back rows began to run for it, without listening to the angry screams of their commanders.

‘WAIT! I command you! HOLD YOUR POSITIONS!’

Baykurt Pasha’s yells were in vain. The main army was backing off, step by step. He too decided it was better to escape this forsaken and cursed place as quickly as possible. He could not understand how the Wallachian was able to move so fast from a place to another. This had to be dark magic, surely, and he was powerless in front of such evil forces!

His message reached Sultan Mehmet in less than an hour. He had been waiting for the result of the siege two miles backwards, together with his personal guard and an army of two thousand men.

‘How could I take the Country away from such a man who knows, above nature, how to use his men and his places?’ Mehmet whispered hopelessly.

He did not manage one single coherent thought. He had fallen into himself, and looked ten years older. He absolutely hated the fact that he had to lay hidden in the forest, waiting for news and always praying the Wallachians would not find him.

Looks or words of support and encouragement came from nowhere. He had become a poor runaway, chased and hunted from all sides. His mind began to wonder. He loathed the forest in which

he had taken refuge, with everything in it. With badgers making whooshing noises on purpose, to frighten him, with bright red fragrant strawberries, certainly put there to poison him! Neither could he stand the beautiful green light of the woods, filtered through rich and happy canopies of leaves. Because everything was purposefully set by the Wallachian to drive him mad and to destroy him!

With this, he ordered the immediate retreat across the Danube as soon as possible!



Through the tunnel that even today starts from Chindia Tower beneath the river Ialomita and goes up to Hill Monastery, six men dressed identically were rushing, lighting their way with great torches. Nobody spoke. They had succeeded in frightening the Turks once more with their terrible forest of stakes and to trick them with a childish game, making them believe the Lord could actually appear and disappear at will, wherever he chose.

Now they had taken off their disguises, their fake moustaches and black wigs. They had all kept however the lordly gaberdine.

As they ran between the narrow walls of the tunnel, the Voivod found it strange to see “himself” running before his own self. He knew in fact it was Chancellor Ilie, but this image was haunting him, like images from dreams – you are not certain whether they were real or not after you awake. He wished he truly had five other embodiments of himself, or perhaps ten thousand. Then, he would have gone to Edirne and buried the city whole!

He was interrupted from his line of thought by the light flooding the end of the tunnel. They all came out in the courtyard of the reinforced monastery, where old Paisie was waiting for them.

The monk had put away the black church clothes, and was now wearing his old archer’s red tunic from the service of Great Mircea, and white tights closely tied beneath the knee with long laces from his opinci⁷⁰.

‘Forgive me, Highness,’ Paisie spoke, visibly shaken. ‘I have bad news!’

‘Say it!’

‘Commander Gherghina with his nobles army have betrayed you! The Turks have found their families hidden in the mountains, towards Brasov, and brought them as hostages before Gherghina! If they did not bow, they Turks would have cut their wives and children!’

‘Of Bratu and Nistor’s armies you know nothing?’

‘Nothing, Lord!’

‘Send message now and tell them to bow before the Turks as well!’

‘Your Highness!’ the old soldier-monk yelled.

‘You will not send anyone at commander Cazan’s. He will not bow before anyone, even with the price of his life! I know him well and he would rather die than betray!’

‘But, Lord –’

‘Tell the men not to let down their weapons and be ready at any moment. I shall go to Transylvania, and bring Matias Corvin here. When I come back with Hungarian and Transylvanian armies, I want all men ready. We shall crush the Turks and throw them over the Danube. Then we shall hunt them down to Edirne and crush the Empire as well. Now is the time!’

‘If only Matias Corvin had come sooner...in time –’

‘But he did NOT come!’ Vlad burst in old Paisie’s face. ‘He stayed there, waiting to see whom Fate favoured most! He stayed, even if we had an agreement! Now I shall go there and bring him

here! You make sure the men will be ready!’

‘Here comes a messenger!’ cried one of the guards on the walls of the Hill Monastery.

Vlad sprang up on the wall and searched with his eagle eye the messenger approaching in great haste on the way from Targoviste. As he frowned and squinted, trying to see better, his heart gave a jolt of happiness. The rider, barely larger than a dot, was growing bigger and clearer with every passing second.

The large black billowing cloak was entirely covering his body thinner than that of a normal soldier. His long wavy dark hair flowed down to the waist. The rider was springing agilely in the saddle, ever closer to them. Everyone was now expecting fresh news.

Suddenly, Vlad whispered relieved: *Malina!*

One step behind him, Stroe asked Ler:

‘Can your eyes reach there? Can it really be Malina?’

‘No! No one can reach there. Only Vlad alone can tell us if it really is Malina! I do not doubt that it was his heart that saw before his eyes did!’

The great monastery gates opened and the lone rider entered the courtyard, at full gallop. He reined in the horse before Vlad and jumped down from the saddle. He took off his hat and, to all the soldiers’ surprise, it was truly Malina, the Lord’s wife.

They embraced shortly, passionately. Ashamed by the presence of so many soldiers around them, Malina wanted to escape her husband’s arms, but Vlad did not let her go. He took her face in his palms and let himself fall in his woman’s beautiful gaze. He had missed her every second. His heart had twisted with jolts of fright and panic every time word came; he had been terrified at the thought that the Turks might have found her hiding place and killed her or taken her hostage. Now she was again with him, but both knew they could not remain together for too long.

‘Why do you come alone? Where are the others?’

‘The Turks have found our hideaway. Radu is with them and has begun to eat at the Romanians’ hearts. He is telling them Your Highness is leading the Country to misery and that the Sultan’s rage is not with the nobles, but with you alone. That it would be better for everyone if they denied you and accepted Radu as Voivod...’

Everyone was listening with renewed anger boiling in them, but none said anything. They knew how his brother’s hate hurt Vlad.

‘They didn’t catch me,’ Malina went on. ‘I sneaked out through the woods and came here on the roads only we and our soldiers know.’

‘It’s fine, Malina! Thank God He brought you to me safe and sound! We are leaving for Transylvania now, to Lord Matiasas.’

His heart ached at having to take her with them in their flight across the mountains. He would have wanted to give her at least an hour or two to rest awhile and eat something. He knew however that any moment could be fatal to them now. Without Bratu, Nistor, and Gherghina’s resistance, the Turks would be free to follow them. They were aware that the Wallachians would take the road across the mountains, trying to reach the Hungarian king.

Stroe, Marcu, Ler and Mihnea were already at the gates, waiting. Vlad and Malina jumped on their horses as well, storming out through the monastery gate.

Behind them, abbot-captain Paisie locked the gates and had already begun to spread the defensive orders.

On lower grounds, near Targoviste, the war had taken an unexpected turn. The defeated and crushed Ottoman army, now under the command of Baykurt Pasha and Radu-Bey, seemed to be

winning the war after it had lost all the battles.

Mehmet had already crossed the Danube and was on his way to Edirne.

Scattered pagan groups were still heading towards the river, trying to escape alive from the Wallachians' lightning-fast attacks.

News that the Wallachian noblemen had laid down weapons before their Turkish armies did not reach them anymore. They would not care much about it either. All they wanted was to get away from this Hell – to go anywhere, just out of this country where the devil had taken a human form and impaled them and drank their blood!

Commander Cazan was raving mad and more dangerous than three armies put together! He condemned Gherghina and Nistor and their own in his mind tirelessly. His well-chosen soldiers were with him to the death, without rest, without conditions. They had been named "*Madmen*" by the other Wallachian soldiers. They knew no fear and were ready at all times to give their life, even for the honour of taking along with them in death a dozen pagans.

For days, they had been sleeping only a couple of hours a night; now they were crossing hither and thither the plain from Giurgiu, crushing and destroying any Turkish regiment they found. They were embittered and angry they had been left alone! But they had sworn to fulfil the task Voivod Tzepesh had given them to the end! No matter what this end may be!

From the Hill Monastery, Lord Vlad, Malina, and their knights kept climbing up the steep path to the mountains. They passed by Branesti and Runcu, with the purpose of reaching the Bran fortress. They were riding restlessly, hurrying for Transylvania. Every second was precious. They had to return, along with the transylvanian army, as soon as possible, while the Turks were still weakened and could be crushed once and for all.

The green of the forests was becoming more and more coarse, while the oak woods were left behind sighing: they were unable to climb to such heights, to where the mighty fir trees ruled. Reaching the root of the mountain, they stopped for a moment. Before them, Ler was standing motionless, one arm raised. He had felt something. There was still nothing in sight, but they had all learned years before to trust Ler's beast-like, sharp senses, which would always warn them of potential dangers. They all drew swords, waiting silently. All around, the thick fir forest whispered nothing. The road stopped here. To the front, left and right, the climb through the dark woods began.

Storm, Vlad's trusted stallion, let out a short snuffle, as it did when wolves or bears were near. It was its way of letting his master know any time they were at risk. Stroe and Marcu suddenly jumped to the left, immediately followed by the others. War cries burst from their front and right. About a hundred Turks were running towards them, swords and nooses in their hands, which meant they had orders to capture them alive.

Ten steps after having entered the forest, the knights reached an almost vertical wall. It was a gigantic, moss-covered rock. Ler went sideways along it until he got to two tall fir trees, practically intertwined, roots at the base of the rock.

Behind them, the Turks' shouting seemed closer and closer. Two sets of six arrows, shot at the same time from the woods, hit their targets among the pagans.

They all dismounted and Ler hurried between the two firs. He climbed, agile as a monkey and using their trunks as support, and in a second he reached the top. From up there, he began firing arrow after arrow, forcing the Turks to stop at the tree line. Vlad, Mihnea and Marcu's arrows were also striking their targets, without fail. Malina quickly climbed between the two firs as well, and began firing her own infallible arrows. One by one, the knights climbed the gigantic stone wall.

Down below, The Turks could be heard cursing. Storm, mane bristled, was biting and kicking

anyone he could reach.

‘Y’all go ahead! I’ll catch up!’ Stroe shouted.

Ler gave him his arrows and belt of knives. Armed to the teeth, Stroe hid behind a thick tree, in waiting. A few moments later, the first turban became visible between the two firs they had used as a ladder. Stroe aimed for the Turk’s head, sending him flying backwards, up till his companions’ feet.

For a few minutes, no one dared to climb the massive rock.

Time was passing and the Wallachians were getting away. Stroe bent over the edge of the rock and fired two more arrows at the Turks below. Then he retreated slowly, careful not to make any sound. The Turks had to wait for at least another quarter of an hour. They could not be certain whether the archer was still stalking them from above, blocking their way, or had left.

Climbing through the woods was tough. They would often slip on dead leaves and had to pull each other up again. Without a man’s strength, Malina fell a bit behind. Never stopping their forced march, the knights switched positions. Stroe, who had caught up to them, ended the convoy, along with Marcu; in front of them, Vlad had caught Malina’s hand and was pulling her after him, helping her keep up; Ler and Mihnea walked in front of them all, leading the way, watchful for every movement.

Soon enough, they left the forest. Before them now lay a great pasture, sprinkled every here and there with large white boulders.

There was no time to rest. They could hear the Turks approaching through the forest as well.

Malina fell again and all the knights stopped instantly, bows drawn, aiming towards the trees. The Turks were not in sight yet. They continued running, and soon reached the peaks.

From where they were now, descent over the opposite mountain side, towards Transylvania was impossible. Any attempt at the vertical stone walls would mean certain death. The raging wind was pulling at their clothes and making it difficult for them to keep their balance on the narrow paths.

They started for Creasta lui Traian, one of the few spots where they could cross the mountain. The path was meandering among sharp rocks, keeping them hidden from Turkish eyes. But they could hear the pagans growing closer and closer.

Up front, Ler sprang and landed beyond the precipice blocking their way. Mihnea followed him without a trace of effort.

Malina looked at the abyss before her and stopped, frightened to go on. Vlad put his arm around her waist and rushed her:

‘Jump!’

Pushed by Vlad’s strong arms, Malina landed safely on the other side, where Mihnea caught her. Death cries burst from behind them. The Turks had come too close, and Stroe and Marcu’s arrows struck down their targets, as usual.

Another deep pit was now blocking the knights’ way. On the other side, they could see a steep wall that seemed very difficult to climb.

Malina felt her head swirling. She could no longer stand this insane chase! Her legs were numb and useless. Suddenly, she started running back, towards the Turks, arrow ready. Before he could react, Vlad saw her bring down another Turk. Then she stopped and her angelic face was lit by a smile filled with all the love in the world.

‘Save Wallachia, Vlad! And don’t forget me! Take care of yourself, my beloved!’

And then she jumped. Stroe screamed in horror. They heard the low thud and rushed for the edge of the precipice. Below, between rocks, by Malina’s body, a stain of red blood was growing larger and larger. It had all happened so fast. And it was so terrible!

Thunderstricken, Vlad saw Malina’s soul fly away from her tender body. He felt it lingering on

the red sky for a moment, as if saying “farewell”. A sharp pain invaded his bones and ripped his heart into a thousand pieces. He fell to his knees, fingers frozen, entangled in his long hair, that had gone completely white in a second. Sticking his great broadsword in the ground before him, he got up, barely holding on to the dragon-encrusted handle. He stared at the sky for a while, as if gone from this world. His lips were mumbling soundless words; he was speaking or trying to speak silently, already a step into the other realm. The fierce pain was biting into him; He couldn’t bear it anymore!

And then, he let out a scream that stunned the knights and scared every single creature on that mountain. He broke into a mad race towards the Turks and disappeared behind an enormous rock, before anyone could stop or follow him.

Ler began running after him, but the distance between them was too great. He was afraid Vlad would not make it alive and that everything they had struggled for would be forever lost.

From behind the rock, dreadful screams and grotesque sounds of cracking bones were heard. The cries of death, many and somehow all at once, betrayed rather fear than pain. Above everything, there was another different howl – a howl such as the knights had never heard before. It was a sort of wordless curse, a wolf’s howling melted into a human’s angry cry.

Bow stretched, Ler hurried around the rock, ready to rid Vlad of the closest pagan. But the arrow was never shot. The bow slowly lowered and remained there. Stroe, Marcu and Mihnea were standing side by side, like stone statues.

Before them, the voivod had grabbed Hell by the hair and brought it to earth, to give it a taste of his pain! Scattered on the steep, about thirty Turks were lying dead, crumpled and torn to pieces. Blood and chunks of flesh were everywhere. Vlad had knelt over a pagan, pinning him to the ground. The hand fastened around the Turk’s throat seemed made of iron, and the pagan had stopped wriggling. He was still alive, but every ounce of strength in him was gone. He lay on his back passively, nailed by Vlad’s arm and knees, awaiting his gruesome end.

The Lord leaned over the Turk and ripped his jugular with his teeth, like a raving beast. Afterwards, still crouched over the Turk, he looked at them with bloody, fierce, fiend-like eyes. The hair, utterly white, was smeared with blood, pieces of the Turk’s neck still in his mouth.

‘God save us!’ Marcu murmured, crossing himself briefly.

‘Hurry!’ Vlad ordered with different, husky voice. ‘We go to Matias. I need his armies to catch the Turks! As for the killing, I will kill them all. I alone!’

The knights did not reply. They simply set off quietly and quickly to Transylvania. The same heavy question haunted them all. How could Vlad have slaughtered all those Turks in such a short while? They too had heard the tales others had invented on the Voivod. The opposing noblemen and the Turks were claiming Vlad had sold his soul, that there was no other way he could have come out alive of all the trials he had been through.

Could it be true?

Behind them, off the crests of the Carpathians began to roll downhill, towards Targoviste and Bucharest, the legend of one of the greatest Romanian Lords; a demigod, who would be remembered for hundreds and hundreds of years, for his best or worst.



As early as spring, King Matias had raised an army to fight alongside Vlad.

According to tradition, Pope Pius the 2nd had sent him – the apostolic king of Hungaria – the money necessary for the raising of this crusading army.

But Dracula had been waiting in vain for help from his brothers across the mountains. Maybe Matias had been terrified by the gigantic Ottoman army. Maybe any man would have been... But had he had the strength to keep his word to the Pope, to the Wallachian Lord and to the whole of Europe, the Ottoman Empire would have perished during the dreadful year 1462.

And the Christian countries' history would have been different.

Now, the King of Hungaria was in Brasov, at the head of his army. Waiting. Still waiting...

News of Dracula's victory had rejoiced and amazed him at the same time. Thus he was still waiting...

He had learned from his illustrious father, Iancu of Hunedoara, the artistry of leading an army. But he had learned something else, from the courtiers he had grown up with: the skill of speaking, of throwing empty words and then hiding behind them. He was said to be a fine warrior and a brilliant diplomat.

His face – rather gentle than warrior-like – had grown accustomed to smiling kindly even when his mind was brewing revenge, invasions or ... betrayals.

'Soldiers are coming from Wallachia!' one of the guards shouted.

All Hungarian soldiers camped outside Brasov rose from wherever they were sitting and tried to get a better view. They were all eager to receive news and to see with their own eyes those that had defied Mahomet. The entire Hungarian army was cheering for the brave men descending towards them, covered in blood.

Unnoticed, a group of two hundred halberdiers discreetly got into defensive positions around King Matias.

Vlad and his knights quickly passed through the corridor of curious soldiers, and stopped in front of Matias Corvin.

Their clothes were torn and they looked exhausted. But they were keeping the same straight, proud bearing, which had been part of them since they were born and never faded away..

Vlad greeted briefly, with a grave bow.

He was about to say something, but the King cut him off and ordered dryly:

'Arrest him!'

There followed a maelstrom of blurry thoughts, short gestures, sky falling on top of people and plans scorched in the ashes of betrayal, all crammed into a second as heavy as a history.

Mihnea threw Vlad a fierce look. The voievode met his eyes and nodded towards the mountains they had just come from. The knight knew the Voivod was right. They needed to stay free and raise the Country once again. They had to escape, so they could come and rescue the Lord.

This time, Ler and Stroe had seen things differently. Four soldiers fell to the ground around them, violently struck by the two knights on their way to their Lord. They would have wanted to pull him away from the crowd and take Corvin hostage. But they were surrounded by hundred of well-trained hostile soldiers. They were cowardly hit in the backs of the head and fell to their knees, struggling not to lose consciousness. Their Lord still needed them!

Ler looked at Vlad with teary eyes and managed to hear him shouting to the Hungarian soldiers that had attacked them:

'You dare hit these brave men, you filthy cowards? You hit my brothers? Look at me! Even if it takes me two eternities, I will still be looking for the four of you and kill you with my own hands!'

The knights barely found the strength to stand. A large group of Hungarian men had already planted themselves between Vlad and them. There was nothing that could be done. Matias avoided their eyes and turned his back to them, entering his tent – a tent whose pennants now seemed bleak,

useless, deceitful...

Two hundred battle axes were pointed at the Wallachian knights.

‘You’re free to go, your lordships!’ the captain of the guards told them. ‘No one shall cause you any harm!’

His face was burning. His words had trouble coming out. He felt the heavy burden of shame: had it been in his power, he would have ordered his men to serve under these heroes, these fine warriors that he was now forced to chase away like traitors! They would have crossed the mountains, to join the Wallachians he had heard so much about during the past three months!

‘Give them good horses!’ the captain commanded.

In the eerie silence now enshrouding the Christian army, Stroe was looking at Vlad’s white hair, his heart filled with grief:

‘Your Highness!’ he shouted, in a voice drowned in spite and pity. ‘Keep your faith and our Country in your heart. See you in Targoviste!’

Vlad turned to him, knocking down the ten soldiers trying to hold him off:

‘And make sure you be there! In Targoviste!’

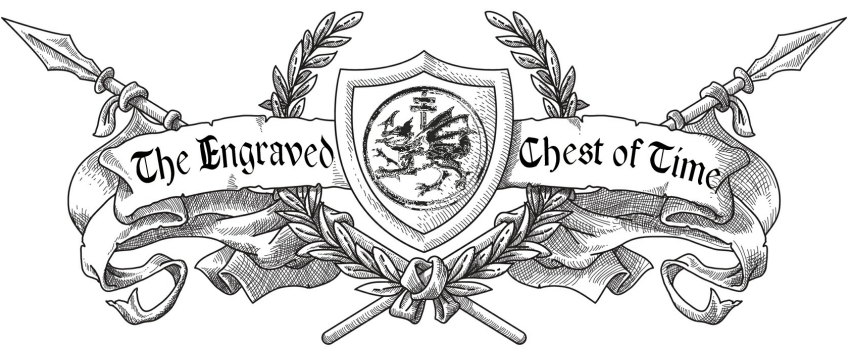
Stroe reined in and stormed out of the camp in full gallop, followed by his brothers. He feared that, had they stayed a minute longer, Vlad or the other knights would have tried to do something. Surrounded by Corvin’s army as they were, this would have meant certain death.

What was the meaning of all this? Why had Matias Corvin betrayed them? How could he explain the arresting of Vlad to the whole of Europe, who was already celebrating the great victory over Mahomet?

They stopped in the forest they had just passed through. They dismounted and erased any traces of hooves they might have made.

‘We’re going after him tonight!’

Ler’s voice did not sound spiteful, nor passionate, nor nothing. It simply sounded like the voice of a man doomed to do his duty, again and again and again...





‘Drăculea: The Engraved Chest of Time’ is the book that people have been waiting for since 1897. Finally, after Bram Stoker’s century old success, we have in our hands the true story behind the myth of Dracula.

Extremely well documented, and using many of the era’s sources, this historical novel brings to light a long forgotten story that shaped Europe more than 500 years ago.

Compared by some with ‘The Three Musketeers’, and by others with ‘The Lord of the Rings’, ‘The Engraved Chest of Time’ is a fascinating true tale of insane acts of bravery, endless love and supernatural devotion to an ideal.

In less than a year since its launch, this book has inspired a very successful theater play, a rock opera, and soon to be in production is the movie following the same story of the real King Vlad Dracula.

Surprisingly there is just as much blood as in Stoker’s story, more action and surely more suspense. And surprisingly there is no vampire. Or is there?



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Observații

[←1]

Dacians - old inhabitants of Romania. Builders of a very advanced culture.

Mircea The Elder - Lord of Wallachia between 1386-1418. Grandfather of Vlad Dracula. One of the most important Romanian rulers. He defeated the sultan Baiazid on the 17th of May, 1395 after a terrible battle.

[←3]

Dracul - 'The Devil' in Romanian. It was the nickname of King Vlad II, received after winning the tournament in Nurnberg in 1431 and after being inducted into the great Order Of The Dragon along with other european kings and princes. The symbol of the order was a dragon.

Wallachia - The medieval name of southern Romania.

Basarab - The name of the medieval Romanian dynasty, as named after King Basarab the 1st, c.1320 - 1352

Voivod - Medieval title meaning ‘Lord’ used in many eastern european countries around that period.

Condottiere - Leader of mercenaries working in the service of a city, of a prince or of the Pope, in Italy.

Sheitan - Demon in Turkish.

Prince Stefan Mushat – The future stefan the Great of Moldavia. Immense figure in European History. Cousin of Vlad Dracula.

Boyar - member of the highest rank of Wallachian aristocracies

Arcan - Romanian type of lasso

Fragment from the letter sent by Vlad Tzepesh to the people of Brasov on the 10th of September 1456

Pasha - a high rank in the Ottoman Empire political system, typically granted to governors

Piatra Craiului - literally 'The King's Stone', spectacular mountain in Romania

Pope Callixtus III supported and admired Iancu of Hunedoara. On the occasion of the crushing victory over the Turks in 1456, when Iancu of Hunedoara succeeded in defending the city of Belgrad, Pope Callixtus III decided that, as homage and remembrance, the Catholic church bells would toll every day at noon. It was at noon that Iancu of Hunedoara's army defeated that of Mehmed II, the conqueror of Constantinople in 1453.

Sarsailuh - playful name for an apprentice of the devil in Romanian mythology

Scaraotski - another name for the devil in Romanian fairytales

Mihail Ducas - “Turkish and Byzantium History (1341 – 1462)”

Azaps - irregular light infantry of the Ottoman Army

Spahijas - members of the Turkish cavalry

Vizier - a high ranking Ottoman official

Padishah - a superlative royal title in the Ottoman Empire

Bashibazouk - irregular soldiers of the Ottoman army, noted for their lack of discipline. Literal translation: “damaged head”!

Arquebusier - a fighter using an arquebus; an early firearm

Bey or Beg - a Turkish title for "chieftain,"

Epitaph carved onto Iancu Corvin's tombstone by monk Ioan de Capistrano

Tara Barsei - territory situated in Transylvania, but under the rule of the Wallachian kings

Mamaliga - a traditional Romanian food made then from millet, and nowadays from corn, very similar to polenta

Tzuica - strong plum brandy

A Romanian play on words switching 'inot' (swimming) with 'inec' (drowning)

Kargi - short Turkish spear.

Gate of Happiness - name given to the capital of the Ottoman Empire

Akinci soldiers - brutal and merciless light cavalry of the Turkish military usually sent after prey before any declaration of war

Historical work, written in the 17th century by Stoica Ludescu - logofat of the Cantacuzini.

A religious mass celebrated on the eve of Easter

Stefan the Great was sanctified by the Romanian church

Easter is still the most important religious celebration in Romania with beautiful traditions unchanged for hundreds of years

Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374) - writer and humanist, one of the most prominent poets of Italy

Fragment from the chronicle regarding the domains of Govora Monastery, dated April 1st, 1551.

Saint Nicholas - In Romanian tradition, on the night of December 6th, Saint Nicholas leaves gifts in the shoes of good children and twigs in those of naughty children to spank them, but of course in the recorded history, no kid has ever received twigs.

[←42]

Avva - learned holy man whom, based on his life experience, was recognised as wisdom bearer (pnevματοφορ), qualified to offer spiritual advice to those around him.

Kitai - old word for the Chinese

Istanbul was the name given by the Turkish to Constantinople after conquering the city

'Harsh necessity, and the newness of my kingdom, force me to do such things and to guard my frontiers everywhere'

Lala - erudite that was entrusted with the education of the Sultan's sons (in Turkish).

Djins - dark spirits of the forest in Turkish mythology

[←48]

Conocoșia - allegorical wedding discourse, with lyrics, that tells of how a group of „hunters” on a hunt have seen a „doe” that the groom likes, and they ask the father of the bride for it.

Društe – young girls that accompany the bride and have certain attributions during the wedding ceremony.

Dacia - a great and very advanced kingdom in antiquity situated on the territory of modern Romania. The Dacians and the Romans are the ancestors of Wallachians, present time's Romanians

Burgmeister - head of a German city

Polis - an old greek word for city

Millet - an Ottoman Turkish term for a confessional community in the Ottoman Empire

Djin - evil spirit of the forest in the ancient Turkish folklore.

Crescent - another name given to the Ottoman Empire, according to the representation of a crescent moon on their flag

Vornic – high counselor of the king

Constantin Mihailovici of Ostrovița - janissary of Serbian origin – has described in detail the Turkish campaign against Wallachia, having attended it personally. According to his writings, many Turkish soldiers lost their minds out of terrible fear during the war lead by Mehmet the Conqueror against Vlad Tzepesh.

The Sphinx - a superb ancient megalitic construction located in the Bucegi mountains in Romania, representing a human head

Kazikli – ‘The Impaler’ in the Turkish language

Aeneas Silvio Piccolomini, erudite philosopher, Pope from 1458 until 1464, advocate of the idea of Crusade.

Pashalik - a fully subordinated Turkish provence

Kara Iflak - name given to Wallachia by the Turks, meaning The Black (dangerous) Wallachia

Emergy Bey - the name the Turks used when referring to the great Romanian, Lord Mircea the Elder.

Aman - Mercy (in Turkish).

Olum - Death (in Turkish).

Giaour - an offensive word used by the Turkish to describe all who are non-muslim

Opinci - traditional Romanian shoes made of leather, usually laced all the way up to the knees