



Dracula's Secret  
Sepulchre

**Chavdar Mihov**

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## **Dracula's Secret Sepulchre**

**Chavdar Mihov**

The book is dedicated to the memory of the real-life Vlad III Dracula. On behalf of an array of authors, from Bram Stoker to Elizabeth Kostova, please accept my sincere apologies for the ghastly literary speculations with your name. It is my hope that this novel will at least partially rectify the historical injustice.

## A Word from the Author

In the early 1990s, following the fall of the Iron Curtain, large numbers of Bulgarians started traveling to Turkey for leisure. Being a recent graduate in Turkish language, culture, and history, I began work as a tour guide. During my visits to Istanbul, I would regularly stop at Kapali Carsi, one of the largest covered markets in the world. To escape the heat and the crowds, I often sought refuge in a cool little antique shop. Its owner, Uncle Mehmed, was an immigrant from Bulgaria. We quickly became friends and my host frequently treated me to fragrant linden tea as he asked nostalgically about the changes in the country. His eyes would tear up with the memories of having been forced to abandon his home in a picturesque village in the Rhodopi Mountains. One day, as we were dissecting our violent Balkan history, Uncle Mehmed suddenly became animated.

“Let me show you something I recently acquired.” For some reason, he lowered his voice and carefully produced something out of a wooden box, wrapped in a dirty rag.

“What is it?” I could barely contain a strange excitement.

“It’s a rare replica of a silver dagger specially commissioned by my great namesake, Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror,” my host whispered unfolding the wrap. “Its purpose was the destruction of the Wallachian Vampire.”

The gloomy shop was suddenly illuminated by a mysterious green light. For the longest time I stood there as if in a daze, not able to tear my eyes off the delicate emerald-encrusted handle. I listened to the strange enchanting story of this masterpiece of Ottoman art and

scenes of bloody battles, tender love, male friendship, betrayals, and corpses slithering out of their graves in search of revenge, unfolded before my eyes as if in a movie. I can't be absolutely sure, but I thought I could see some strange brown spots on the blade.

"How much?" I finally managed to say, my voice high with tension as I smacked my cracked lips.

"The dagger is priceless," Uncle Mehmed began magniloquently, the merchant in him reawakened. "For you, as a friend, five hundred."

Five hundred dollars was an enormous sum for Bulgarians at the time, almost as much as the average yearly income. Fortunately, I had enough cash for business expenses on me.

"I'll take it," I said without any deliberation. Not even considering for a moment how I would repay the amount, I counted five one-hundred dollar bills.

"Don't you want to haggle a bit?" Uncle Mehmed sounded somewhat disappointed but handed me the valuable object.

Under the pressure of everyday life in the ensuing turbulent years, I gradually forgot about the incident in the little Istanbul shop. It was only last year, during one of my infrequent household re-arrangements, that I happened to come across the exquisite dagger again and the inscrutable sparkle of the emeralds brought back the memories from twenty-five years ago, and I knew it was time to tell this enchanting story.

Dear reader, I am certain Mehmed the Conqueror's dagger designed to vanquish vampires has already cast a spell on you, as well. It can be yours. Yes, you can hold this masterpiece of Ottoman art in your hands and admire its magnificent emeralds. You only need to read the novel carefully and uncover the exact location of Dracula's secret sepulchre. The solution of the puzzle is in the novel, and the key is in the voivode of Wallachia's posthumous letter

to the sultan. Be the first to guess it and win Mehmed the Conqueror's dagger. Enjoy the story.

More details about the conditions and rules of the "Guess the location of Dracula's secret sepulchre" game can be found at:

<http://www.chavdarmihov.com/en/commingSoon.php>

## Prologue

March 1479

It was tight, dark, and uncomfortable, yet he was smiling as the clumps of soil fell on top of him. He was ready for the sultan's envoys.

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The last remaining sunlight reflected in the scimitars and the spurs of the four horsemen galloping west with no thought of sparing their sinewy Arabian stallions. Looking anxiously around, the riders mercilessly pulled on the reins of the exhausted animals. They did not particularly cherish the thought of spending the night in the open in this cold forbidding land. They had passed by the fort of Bucharest in the late afternoon and, according to their guide, were to reach the lake any minute now. He was the only one who had been there before and had seen the Devil's spawn alive; even after his death, Dracula was still flouting them. The guide rode a sturdy white horse, already foaming at the mouth. The Ruscuk janissary garrison commander, huge scimitar in his belt, was following closely. He was in charge of security. His chestnut stallion seemed tougher and was not showing any signs of exhaustion yet. The deputy judge of Istanbul, here to legitimize what they had been ordered to do, was barely able to follow next. His hidebound little black horse was at the end of its tether, plodding along the uneven path through the thick forest. Last, on a light gray stallion, came the sultan's trusted sinister hangman, who everybody called Dagger Aga. Even



though he brought up the rear, he was to take center stage in what awaited them.

A moment before the anemic winter sun disappeared behind the snowcapped forest hills, they caught sight of the glistening lake. The ferryman was just about to leave when the four horsemen loomed in front of him. When he saw them, the poor man shuddered in fear.

“Take us across to the island!” the guide ordered slowly in the local dialect.

“Yes, Aga,” the terrified man nodded. “But you have to leave the horses behind. The weight is too much.”

The guide said something to his companions and they all began to argue loudly.

“Certainly,” the stranger said. “But you take good care of them. Your head is on the line.”

A snotty little brat appeared from somewhere and took the reins. The villager rolled up his sleeves and took to the oars. It was getting dark. The howls of hungry wolves came from the distance and the skittish horses whinnied. The travelers eyed each other anxiously. When they reached the island, it was already completely dark.

“Meet us again here tomorrow after sunrise,” the guide ordered and threw some small change in the ferryman's hand; he quickly pocketed it and instantly vanished in the pitch-dark night.

The monastery gates had already been locked and for the longest time no one answered their loud knocks. The strangers stood outside in the open, the icy winter wind lashing at their faces. Bats, awakened by the noise, were flitting over their heads and squeaking eerily. Another sinister howl in the distance. At last the guide shouted at the top of his lungs that they would set the monastery on fire and butcher all the monks. It had the desired effect. Someone lifted the heavy latch and the gate slowly moved ajar.

“Who are you and what brings you here in this ungodly hour?” a frightened trembling voice said. “Why are you threatening the house of God with fire and his servants with your swords?”

“We have been sent by Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror, the ruler of the whole world,” the guide said pompously. “Who are you, old man?”

“I am Brother Eupraxius, father superior of the monastery,” the monk replied proudly.

“Our orders are to exhume the body of the unholy one and take it to Istanbul,” the guide gave a sign to the deputy judge, who produced a parchment scroll from his bosom and handed it to the father superior.

His hands shaking, Brother Eupraxius took the scroll, unfurled it eagerly, and quickly glanced at the intricate writing. The document was in the Ottoman language and it was so dark that he would hardly have understood any of it.

“Can’t it wait until daybreak?”

“No, we can’t risk him slipping away!”

“How can a dead man slip away?” The father superior crossed himself as if fearing the wrath of God.

“Seytan can do anything. Take us there; we have no time to waste.”

“Come this way, then.”

They went across the shadowy courtyard, braving the sudden gust of wind, and reached the small well-kept church. Its interior was half-lit, the only light coming from a few candles almost completely burned-down. The father superior made the sign of the cross three times and mumbled an unintelligible prayer. He took them directly to the altar and pointed at a tombstone on the floor.

“This is the master’s final resting place, may God have mercy on his soul.”

“Get someone to dig him out!” the guide barked.

Brother Eupraxius tried to explain that no one would do such a thing at this hour of the night, but then the janissary commander slowly pulled his scimitar out and poised it threateningly over his head. This proved quite persuasive and shortly after, the father superior came back with two frightened servants. They were carrying old shovels and were vigorously crossing themselves. Prying the heavy stone slab out required a lot of time and effort. When at last the stone gave in and moved from its comfortable bed, the church echoed with sinister squeaks and the flutter of wings. An enormous bird flew indignantly overhead and hid somewhere above the high cupola. The peasants made the sign of the cross again and began digging. It took almost an hour before the shovels hit the coffin lid. Their muscles were sore with exhaustion and their faces were covered in hot sweat despite the winter cold.

“Bring it up!” the guide said, voice thin with tension.

“We’ll need ropes,” one of the gravediggers said, not looking him in the eyes.

“Well, find ropes then,” the Turk snapped. “You don’t expect me to go get you some, do you?”

Muttering under his breath, the abbot left. When he came back in a bit, he had a sturdy rope coil with him. The servants carefully tied it around the coffin, tossed the ends up, and got out of the grave.

“Pull up,” the commander hissed anxiously.

“Give us a second to catch our breath,” the older of the peasants complained. “We can hardly breathe.”

An even more bloodcurdling howl was heard outside; this time closer.

“Hurry up before the wolves get us.”

The servants grabbed the two ends of the rope and began to pull slowly. The veins on their necks bulged in pain and their eyes seemed like they would pop out any

minute now. Another flutter of wings and a sinister chirp. It startled them and they almost let go of the rope. With one last-ditch try the coffin was out. They placed it in front of the altar.

“Open it,” the guide said, voice rasping.

The janissary commander had his huge scimitar out and was looking around cautiously. Dagger Aga’s right hand was clutching an exquisite silver dagger encrusted in precious stones. It was a personal gift from the sultan and was meant to pierce the heart of the unholy one so that they would be rid of him once and for all. The servants crossed themselves again and their trembling hands lifted the coffin top.

The strangers stepped in fearfully and peered into the casket. Something was wrong, but they couldn’t quite put their finger on it at first. A dead man in royal attire, hands crossed on his chest, lay in front of them. The body was supposed to have been buried for over two years now and should have decomposed a long time ago. And yet, there was some ashen sickly flesh on the hands and the head of the corpse. And that wasn’t even the biggest problem. Their guide, who was the only one who had seen the evil one alive, could have sworn that was Kazikli lying in front of him. There shouldn’t have been a head on his shoulders, though. The head of the hateful Wallachian voivode had been severed in his last battle and sent to Mehmed Khan in Istanbul. It had then been displayed on a stake in front of the Topkapi Sarayi gates where it filled all visitors with trepidation for a long time. Now the same head was peacefully attached to the dead body in the coffin and seemed to be smiling at them. It was practically grinning, revealing two rows of sharp yellowish teeth. Suddenly the dead man opened his eyes and his icy glance pierced them.

“I was expecting your master to come himself, but as always, he is a pathetic coward,” the corpse whispered.

The frightened janissary commander raised his scimitar. Dagger Aga stopped him short. "Let me; this won't do," he said and leaned in. The silver dagger flashed in his hand.

At that moment, a gust of wind blew against the church doors and blended with the vicious howl of an enormous wolf. In a few leaps, the monstrous animal reached the altar, and before Dagger Aga could even move, the wolf snapped his neck in two. The janissary commander lifted his curved scimitar but the beast was faster; it toppled him to the ground and bit into his carotid artery. The deputy judge ran for his life as a black bird instantaneously swooped from the cupola above and mercilessly started pecking at his face. Looking in consternation from the side, the guide knew immediately that all resistance was futile and waited for his turn with resignation.

"Come closer and lean in," the corpse ordered him in a quiet commanding tone, motioning for the wolf to go away. The huge animal, tail between its legs, whimpered and slunk out of the church. The bird of prey that was pecking at the judge's face, also let its victim be and flew away into the darkness of the winter night.

The poor man obeyed the order with nary a word. A smell of death wafted from the coffin. The corpse lifted his ashen hand with long sharp nails. His fingers were tightly gripping a rolled parchment scroll, sealed with red wax.

"Take this to your perfidious master. If he wants to kill me, he would have to do it himself. If he is afraid to come to me, I will go to him and will drink his blood!"

## Chapter One

1443 - 1444

Voivode Vlad II Dracul was a tough ruler and a stern parent. When his eyes teared up, his young sons, Vlad, twelve, and Radu, eight, knew something awful had happened.

A month earlier, their father had ordered them to get ready for a trip. He had been anxious and frightened, which didn't happen often.

"What's wrong, Father?" young Radu asked worriedly and raised his beautiful almond eyes.

"We are going to Gallipoli," the voivode said, not looking at him.

"Where is this, uh-Galipali?" the boy went on.

"Gallipoli," his older brother corrected him. "It's in Turkey. On the Sea of Marmara."

"That's right," his father smiled in pain. "We are going to be the sultan's guests."

The problem was that Murad Khan was not a particularly gracious host. Following a long tiring trip, they finally arrived at the small, albeit important, fortress at the entrance of the Sea of Marmara. Instead of a hearty welcome, they were immediately put under arrest and locked in one of the Gallipoli towers. They were treated comparatively well; their jailers saw that they wanted for nothing. The guards responded to Vlad's persistent questions about the reasons behind it all only with shrugs and mumbles. The voivode was taken to see the sultan on the third day. When he returned, his eyes were filled with telltale tears.

“My dear sons,” his voice was shaking. “You have to remain in the sultan’s court for some time. I hope it’s not for long. Take advantage of your stay here. Learn the language and the customs of your hosts. Master their military abilities and knowledge. They would come in handy one day. Never forget your faith and your country. You are the future voivodes of Wallachia. Be strong.”

Done with these instructions, their father gave them a clumsy hug and left the tower, head down. He was filled with a sinister foreboding that he would never see his young sons again. Radu could no longer restrain himself and started crying, “I don’t want to stay here. I want to go back and to mother.”

Vlad was trying to keep his cool, yet his lower lip was anxiously trembling as he said, “Be a man, brother. We are the sons of a great ruler and must conduct ourselves as his worthy heirs!”

“I’m not a man, I’m a kid.” Radu’s beautiful eyes swelled with tears.

“You’ll have to grow up.”

The next morning they were loaded onto a covered wagon and in a few days they reached Edirne, the capital of the Ottoman Empire at the time. They were taken to a gorgeous palace and told they would have the honor of living under the same roof as the ruler of the world, Sultan Murad II. They were given a spacious room, much bigger than their quarters in Targoviste. The floor was covered by a thick Persian rug and the beds were so soft and comfortable that at first they had difficulty getting used to them. A personal tutor was appointed; he would teach them how to read and write in Turkish and explain to them the court etiquette and the Ottoman customs. His name was Yunus Aga; he had been born an Orthodox Christian Greek and had risen fast in the diplomatic circles of the last Byzantine Emperor, Constantine Palaiologus, but had fallen out with him over his policy of closer ties with the pope. As

a result, disappointed with the official Uniate position of the Constantinople Patriarchate, he had converted to Islam and put himself in service of Sultan Murad II. His specialty was history and he was trying to impart his vast knowledge in that area to the boys. He was an excellent teacher and very soon the young hostages took to him, especially Radu, who saw him as a father figure. Vlad liked him too, which did not stop him from acting up, arguing, and generally disobeying him. The tutor was a stern man and would often mete out severe punishment to his rebellious student. In spite of it all though, he secretly admired the boy and once even told him that he would grow up to be a great ruler. In a few months only, the boys were able to understand Turkish and in a year's time, could even speak it.

One spring day the following year, Yunus Aga told them that Prince Mehmed had come to the palace. The sultan's eldest son had died seven years before and the second oldest had recently been killed. That left Mehmed the only heir to old Murad Khan. Following tradition, he was appointed governor of Manisa, even though he was only eleven. Yunus Aga had been Mehmed's tutor in the past and they were still on friendly terms. The heir to the throne had heard of the two hostages from Wallachia and asked to see them.

They met in the palace garden. Faithfully following the court etiquette, Radu respectfully went down on his knees while Vlad barely managed a half-bow. Yunus Aga lost all color and whispered in his ear, "On your knees!"

The boy pretended not to have heard and raised his head in defiance. The prince eyed the disrespectful youngster contemptuously. They were almost the same age, but Vlad was a bit taller and physically stronger. His reptilian green eyes looked at Mehmed arrogantly, as if Vlad were mocking him.



“I am Shahzade Mehmed, son of Murad Khan and the future sultan of the great Ottoman Empire. Who are you to show disrespect?”

“I am Vlad Dracula, son of Vlad Dracul and the future voivode of Wallachia.”

“Your father is my father's slave and you will be mine.”

“My father is a great and proud ruler, I am his worthy heir, and I will never be anyone's slave, much less a slave to a coward like you.”

Mehmed's face lost all color.

“Have mercy on him, my lord. He is still a savage; he does not know the court etiquette yet,” the tutor cut in attempting to avert the brewing stand-off. “I am sure he does not know what—”

“My dear Yunus Aga, you have had enough time to teach him respect for the heir of the great Ottoman Empire,” the Prince interjected icily. “I sentence my slave Vlad to three days in prison and one hundred lashes for his insolence. Let this be a lesson for the future.”

The guards around Mehmed instantly swooped on the boy and dragged him to the tower where criminals were held. As they were hauling him past Mehmed, Vlad eyed him contemptuously and said sharply, “You are very brave, future sultan. So brave that you chose to hide behind the broad shoulders of your guards. If you are such a man, why don't you try and punish me yourself?”

The Prince's swarthy face blushed in anger. “You will have an occasion to find out what it means to deal with me soon,” he hissed, his voice trembling with the insult.

At that very moment Radu flung himself at Mehmed's feet. “I beg you, my lord. Have mercy on him! He does not know what he is doing.”

Surprised, the Prince looked at the whimpering boy whose tears were falling on his kaftan. He took him by the chin and felt captivated by the angelic beauty of this

creature. He could feel his anger ebb away and some other strange feeling take its place. “Get up, my beautiful boy,” he said softly and even smiled a bit. The tears had moved him.

Uncertain, Radu stood up and looked despairingly at the guards pulling away Vlad, who was twisting and turning in their hands. “My brother cannot get used to the life and the customs here. He is mad at everything and everyone.”

“He’ll have enough time to think it over in the tower. I trust the hundred lashes will make him forget his bad habits.”

“I doubt it very much, my lord. They will only make him madder,” Radu sighed and bitter tears filled up his beautiful eyes again.

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Vlad was lying on the cold ground in the narrow cell and his confrontation with the arrogant brat was playing out over and over again in his head. His first look at Mehmed had filled him with hatred, and he knew the feeling would be with him for the rest of his life. The prince thought of himself as the ruler of the world even now and assumed he had a license to humiliate everyone around him, no matter their station in life. His arrogance and presumptuousness had seriously hurt Dracula’s self-esteem. He had known very well that the court etiquette dictated he was to bend his knee in front of the heir, but he couldn’t make himself do it and he didn’t. So now he had to suffer the consequences. He was wondering what his father would say if he knew. Would he praise Vlad for his bravery or admonish him for his recklessness? Who could tell? The old voivode’s attitude to the sultan was ambiguous, to say the least—on the one hand, he was officially the sultan’s vassal and he even took part in some of the sultan’s military campaigns; on the other, he was constantly plotting

against the sultan with his other enemies and scheming how to escape his strangling embrace. That's what his father called "diplomacy." He would tell Vlad that he had dedicated his life to fighting the Ottomans, but since the two sides were uneven, sometimes it was necessary to compromise and act surreptitiously. It was the political thing to do. It was still difficult for young Vlad to understand the finest points of what he knew little about and he would ask uncomfortable questions that would make the old voivode angry.

"Some day, my son, you will understand that things are never as simple as they appear. Ruling a small principality is a difficult and sometimes impossible task."

"But you swore to your brothers-in-arms in the Order that you would fight the Turks to the end! How can you be the Sultan's vassal, then, and pay taxes?"

"Sometimes in order to uphold our oath, we have to pretend. Don't you know that Milos Obilic himself pretended to surrender to the Turks? That's how he got near the sultan and stabbed the tyrant with his deadly dagger. Is he less of a hero for that?"

It was an argument Vlad could buy. The legendary Milos Obilic and another eleven brave knights had founded the Order of the Dragon with the sole purpose of stopping the Ottoman invasion on the Balkan Peninsula and killing the sultan. Unfortunately they had succeeded only in the latter. In the memorable battle of Kosovo in 1389, all of them except one had lost their lives, but had lived up to their oath. The sole survivor had managed to preserve the Order of the Dragon and half a century later it was uniting thousands of fighters against the Turks and their sultan. The year Vlad was born, his father had been initiated into the brotherhood by the Hungarian King Sigismund himself. That's when he took the name Dracul.<sup>1</sup> At the time he had

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<sup>1</sup> Romanian for "dragon."

been the military commander of Transylvania, a Hungarian principality, but he was already eyeing the throne of Wallachia.

Vlad's father was the bastard son of the Wallachian ruler Mircea the Elder and considered this his birthright to the throne. In theory, Sigismund supported his claims and even made him official voivode, but in practice, Dracul had had to wait for another five years. His brother, Alexandru I Aldea, died in December 1436 and Vlad the Elder was finally able to ascend the throne. At the time, Wallachia was a vassal territory in the Ottoman Empire and he had to take the sultan's will into consideration. Dracul had to deal with several impossible tasks at the same time, the most important of which was to keep his country intact against the constant aspirations of his powerful neighbors, Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. He successfully played them against each other. When the Hungarian king's protégé, Janos Hunyadi, voivode of Transylvania, stripped Vlad the Elder of his powers, he was forced to ask Murad II for help in order to reclaim his throne. The Sultan was quick to support him and Vlad ascended the Wallachian throne again. There was a price to pay, though. Sensing what it might be, right before they left for Gallipoli, the voivode sent for his second eldest son, Vlad, and initiated him in the Order of the Dragon. Thus the boy became Dracula,<sup>2</sup> a name that would remain in history.

“My son, I don't know if I have the time and the strength, but I entrust you with the goals of the Brotherhood and beseech you to uphold them until your last breath.”

The voivode's misgivings came true. Murad Khan had three conditions under which Vlad would be able to keep his throne: first, swear on the Bible and the Quran that he would never take part in any attacks on the Ottoman

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<sup>2</sup> Romanian for “the son of the dragon.”

Empire; second, pay ten thousand ducats into the Sultan's Treasury; and third, leave his sons, Vlad the Younger and Radu, hostages for an undetermined time. Dracul accepted the first two immediately and tried to worm himself out of the third, but the padishah did not budge. "You should be thanking me. After all, I am letting you keep your eldest son."

The voivode did not dare argue any further.

Young Vlad did not know all of these details, but he was a very clever boy for his age and could pretty much imagine what had transpired. He was convinced that his father had had no choice. "The one who holds the power is always right," the old voivode was fond of saying. The maxim informed all of his actions and he was trying to instill it in his sons. Shivering on the freezing floor in the dark jail cell, Dracula had enough time to think this over.

*I must be strong. Stronger than Hunyadi, Murad Khan, or that brat, Prince Mehmed. But until then, I must pretend. Like Father and like Milos Obilic.*

Happy he had reached a decision of some sort, Vlad wrapped himself in the tattered blanket and fell into a slumber.

*It's a dark night. He secretly finds his way into the chambers of the heir to the Ottoman throne and stabs him in the heart. The prince tries to rise, and his bulging eyes fixate in terror on the dagger sticking out of his chest. Red blood gushes out of his mouth and he falls dead on the soft Persian rug.*

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On the third day, two guards took Vlad out of his cell to the palace square where the public flogging was to take place. They undressed him unceremoniously and made him lie feet up on the special contraption. Of course they were to beat him on his bare feet where it hurt the most. He was trying to look unperturbed but his hands were already

shaking tellingly. Would he be able to endure the hundred lashes without crying and asking for mercy? At that moment, the heir to the throne appeared suddenly and looked down at him in amusement. “Well, Vlad, I hope you’ve had enough time to think this over and are ready to repent.”

Vlad’s first thought was to say something sarcastic and spit at the bastard, but he remembered he was supposed to bide his time and pretend. He would not demean himself as much as to beg for forgiveness, though. Hence he just shook his head vaguely.

“Brother, plead with Prince Mehmed for mercy. He is ready to forgive you.”

It was only now that he noticed Radu who was standing to the side. His beautiful young face was full of compassion and concern, his almond eyes moist with tears.

“Voivode Dracul’s son cannot humiliate himself.”

“Didn’t our father humiliate himself in front of the Sultan? Didn’t he leave us here to keep his throne safe?”

“To keep his country safe, Radu. There’s a difference.”

“It’s all the same to me. Please, do not persist any more.”

Vlad shook his head.

Mehmed was looking at them intently. Although he could not understand them, the prisoner’s demeanor spoke for itself. He lifted his hand and signaled for the flogging to begin. The hangman cracked the whip and lashed Vlad’s bare feet. The bullwhip pierced his flesh; the pain was horrific and all-encompassing. Despite his tightly clenched teeth, he could not help it, and an inhuman howl escaped his mouth. He could see his tormentor smile gleefully and crack the whip again. The second time it was even more unbearable. With the third one, he almost lost consciousness.

Radu prostrated himself at Mehmed's feet, desperately begging him to spare his brother. The hangman was ready for the fourth lash; he was really getting into it. It was obvious he took pleasure in his task.

"Enough!" The Prince's commanding voice boomed.

The hangman's arm stopped in midair, his eyes filled with disappointment.

Mehmed looked down on Vlad's torn feet and whispered sarcastically, "A big man you are, indeed. Crying like a spoiled little girl. Just be thankful that I have a soft heart and can't stand to see your sweet brother's tears for you."

Vlad could not even respond. His head was swimming with the terrible pain. A moment before he lost consciousness, he saw Mehmed put his hand over Radu's shoulders tenderly and whisper something comforting. His brother's teary eyes were looking at the prince in awe and gratitude.

## Chapter Two

1444

Soon after Vlad's humiliating punishment, Prince Mehmed left for Manisa. He gave Radu a warm good-bye hug and promised to write. Then he looked ruthlessly at Dracula and said sarcastically, "I hope the lashes taught you a lesson. You have your brother to thank for your getting away with three only."

Vlad wanted to say something equally biting but managed to restrain himself. After that, he was never as close to Radu as before. Dracula did not feel any gratitude to his brother for having saved him from the remaining ninety-seven lashes. On the contrary; he denounced his brother's 'cowardly disgraceful' conduct in front of the prince.

Other than that, the next few months passed without major upheavals. Yunus Aga was still in charge of their education and edification. However, no one was keeping tabs on their free time. Even though they were hostages, the boys enjoyed almost unlimited freedom. Nobody was barring them from getting out of the palace and taking walks around the town and the surrounding areas, as long as they were back in time for dinner.

Radu preferred to stay inside. He was forever seeking the company of Yunus Aga and other scholars whose teachings he hungrily devoured. Vlad, in turn, made friends with some of the palace guards and with Yumit, a janissary of Serbian origin, who agreed to teach him the art of fighting.



The two of them spent long hours in the fields around Edirne. They fought with scimitars, shot arrows, and rode spirited stallions. The janissary thought of Vlad as his younger brother whom he had not seen since he had been forcefully separated from his family. Yumit had a lot of friends at court; he knew all the news fast and willingly shared it with his new friend.

One hot summer day, the janissary had an intriguing piece of news for Vlad. Old Murad Khan's health was shaky and he was very tired of ruling, so he had stepped down of his own accord and retreated to a religious sanctuary in the outskirts of Manisa. Prince Mehmed had immediately arrived in the capital and had been declared sultan, even though he was only twelve. Dracula was worried that this meant the new ruler would now really come after him. The sultan, however, had bigger fish to fry and did not pay any attention to Vlad. He was so busy that he had almost no time even for Radu, his favorite.

The coronation of the underage sultan was seen as a sign of weakness by the Ottoman Empire's enemies, and they were quick to rebel. In early September, Yumit told Vlad that the Karaman bey had attacked the Ottomans in Anatolia. The Venitian fleet in turn had reached the Dardanelles. At the same time, the Polish-Hungarian King Wladyslaw III Jagiello and the Transylvanian Voivode Janos Hunyadi crossed the Danube at Orsova, at the head of a huge Christian army, and moved swiftly west.

"What about my father?" Vlad said, voice shaking with anxiety. "Did he join?"

"It's not clear," the janissary shrugged. "Some say he supported the effort; others, that he is still waiting to decide."

"Can't you find out for sure?" the boy implored.

"I have a friend from Wallachia in my company. I'll ask him. He may know more." Yumit looked at him sternly. "Under one condition, though."

“Whatever you want,” Dracula interjected impatiently.

“Promise me you will not do something stupid.”

“I promise.”

According to Yumit’s friend, the voivode of Wallachia had officially refused to support the campaign. His excuse was the fact that he was the sultan’s vassal and did not want to provoke him. He had even told King Wladyslaw that Murad had more soldiers when he went hunting than there were crusaders altogether. At the same time, he had sent his eldest, Mircea, along with four thousand well-armed and equipped cavalymen to join the united Christian army.

“Typical,” Vlad said with a crooked smile. “That’s what my father calls ‘diplomacy.’”

“We have a different expression—to have the best of both worlds.”

In a week, Yumit confided that the grand vizier was very worried about the young sultan’s inability to deal with the complicated situation in the country. That’s why he had written to Murad pleading with him to come back to the capital. In the meantime, the crusaders were pushing east without much resistance, even though they had failed to capture two important forts, Veliko Turnovo and Nicopolis.

The uncertainty did affect the two Wallachian hostages. Vlad and Radu received an official warning not to leave the palace grounds. They heard rumors that the Venitian fleet had blocked the Straights and so Murad and his army had not been able to reach Thrace. Still, aided by Genoese ships and under fire from both sides of the Straights, the Ottoman army finally managed to get to the European side. At the end of October, Murad arrived back in Edirne and after a few days’ rest, pushed on north. Despite the young sultan’s fervent pleas to join the campaign, his father refused and left him in the capital to take care of its safety. Mehmed Khan was the ruler of the

Empire on paper, but he dared not confront his mighty father and agreed, albeit unwillingly. Considering the seriousness of the situation, the former sultan ordered the two hostages arrested and locked in the Egrigoz fortress in Anatolia. Mehmed tried to ask for Radu to stay behind in Edirne. He pointed out how malleable the boy was compared to his brother. In all this time, Radu had internalized the Ottoman customs and way of life and had no intention of running away. Murad unceremoniously stopped his son and tersely explained that in Egrigoz the two hostages would be safer. Swallowing his tears, the sultan had to give in again.

On a rainy November day, the brothers were awoken early and ordered to get ready. They quickly gathered their few belongings and went out into the courtyard. Mehmed Khan came to say good-bye to Radu in person: "I promise you won't be exiled for long. As soon as my father is done with the infidels, you'll be back in Edirne. Please take good care of yourself." Then he hugged him tightly. Tears rolled down Radu's beautiful face and he was speechless.

"And you behave," the sultan told Vlad. "They are not fond of recalcitrant Wallachian princes in Egrigoz. There won't be anyone to beg you out of your punishment there."

"Don't you worry about me," Dracula said defiantly.

The guards rushed the boys onto the covered wagon and the horseman cracked the whip.

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After an exhausting week of travel by land and sea, they finally got to the small Egrigoz fortress in western Anatolia, close to Kutahya. The welcome was not particularly warm. The boys were instantly thrown into a cold damp prison cell. Radu was hysterical and began to

sob inconsolably. Vlad looked at him with disdain and didn't even try to comfort him. It was the end of November and the nights were getting colder. Shivering, the brothers could barely get a wink of sleep. The blankets they were given were more like rags and the only thing one could get from them were fleas, not warmth. Radu kept whimpering through the night. In his slumber, he fervently implored Mehmed Khan to get him out of this nightmare. Vlad, who had already experienced a Turkish jail in Edirne, curled up and tried to think of something else.

*The crusaders trounce the Ottoman army and begin their victorious march to Edirne, where Mehmed Khan is seized by mortal fear. A short siege and the city falls. The young sultan flings himself at the feet of King Wladyslaw Jagiello and begs for mercy. At the same time, Mircea, leading the heroic Wallachian cavalry, swoops into Anatolia, invades the god-forsaken place, kills the Turkish sentry and opens up the door of their cell. Vlad embraces him and thanks him profusely.*

The jail door did open in the morning, but instead of Mircea, in came two well-dressed Turks. They looked carefully at them and the older said to the sniveling younger brother, "Are you Radu?" The boy nodded fearfully and the men took him away.

The bars on the window let little light in. It was only now that Vlad noticed another man in the cell. A 'man' was probably not the right word, for the other prisoner did not exactly look like a human being. His long dirt-matted hair was a strange grey color and his thin scraggly beard was dirty white. The dark skin on his face was sagging and looked unhealthy. Deep wrinkles furrowed his forehead, his cheeks were hollow and his lips deadly pale. However, the most sinister thing about this cellmate were his eyes. Although of a tender age, Vlad had seen many dead people. His father was a merciless ruler and almost daily, one or another of his subjects was sentenced

to death. The voivode insisted his sons attend the executions. Vlad had been struck by the way life seeped out of the dead people's glazed eyes and how they went on looking at him with empty stares. The mysterious cellmate's eyes had the same deadly glare. Chills ran down the boy's spine and not from the cold. The stranger was leaning against the wall at the opposite end of the cell without so much as a stir. Vlad wondered if he was sleeping with his eyes open or if he was dead.

"Good morning," Vlad vainly attempted to hide the shaking of his voice.

The creature with the dead man's expression did not reply, although his glazed eyes continued to pierce him. He was wearing a tattered robe that might have been white once but was now grey. His legs were wrapped in a dirty rag of a blanket. It was almost dark in the cell and Vlad could not take a good look at him. As far as he could tell, the man was rather emaciated. His thin leathery arms ended with gnarled fingers topped by long sharp dirty nails. *Good thing I noticed him only now, not yesterday*, Vlad thought in relief. *I wouldn't have been able to close my eyes the whole night. If Radu had seen him, his little cowardly heart would have burst in fear.*

His thoughts were cut short by the door opening for the second time. A guard appeared at the threshold with two bowls of food, which he slid towards the prisoners and quickly locked the cell behind him. Despite the cold and the lack of sleep, Vlad was as starved as a Wallachian wolf and pounced upon the runny bulgur gruel. In a second, it was all gone. His cellmate showed no interest in the food; eyes still vacant, he didn't even move.

"Aren't you hungry, my good man?" Vlad said and smacked his lips gingerly. His voice was calmer now. The terror the stranger had spread in his young heart subsided and was replaced by curiosity. "You should eat something; you don't look too well."

Again, he got no answer, but something unexpected happened. The stranger lifted his bony arm almost imperceptibly and pushed his full bowl towards the boy. There was no change of expression on his face, his eyes were as vacant as ever, and Vlad wondered whether he even knew what he was doing. Yet the sign was clear enough, so he greedily pulled the bowl in and gobbled up the tasteless gruel. He was not particular about his food. At home and especially during his stay at Edirne, he had never lacked for delicious, hearty nourishment. Even so, he had never had anything as tasty as this half-boiled disgusting bulgur. A loud belch, then he relieved himself in the dirty bucket that served as their toilet. This was his excuse to walk up to the stranger and take a closer look. The man's hollow chest was barely moving in and out and he lay completely motionless. His eyes were still open, yet everything seemed to point to him being asleep. Soon the door opened again and the warden appeared. He was surprised to see the two empty bowls in front of the boy and eyed him suspiciously: "Did you have his ration, too?"

Embarrassed, Vlad looked down and said grumpily, "He offered it himself."

"What do you know! First time for everything!"

"What everything?"

"Him letting someone else have his food. All other prisoners in this cell complained he would empty his food in the shit bucket himself. I told my boss time and again it makes no sense to bring him food. But the boss insisted he was entitled to it, and he was free to toss it in the crap if he so wanted."

"Why is he doing that?"

"You ask him," the jailer grinned.

"He doesn't want to talk to me."

"He doesn't want to talk to anyone. But then again, it's the first time he has offered his food to someone else, so he must like you. He could yet talk to you."

With these words, the man burst out laughing and slammed the door. Vlad looked at his cellmate again. He was still propped against the wall, not moving, and not appearing to be alive except for the almost imperceptible shallow breathing. After lunch, Vlad was allowed to take a short walk around the small prison yard. Needless to say, the stranger, whom the prison guard addressed as 'sheikh,' did not even acknowledge the invitation to go out.

"Doesn't he ever get out?" The boy was baffled.

"Not in the daytime," the guard whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, curiosity killed the cat, young man. You'll find out in good time."

"What about my brother? Where did they take him?"

"The boy seems to be in our mighty master's good graces. The governor received an order from Mehmed Khan himself to let your brother out immediately and provide the absolute best for him. You, on the other hand ... the orders for you were quite different."

"Like what?"

"Like I said, curiosity killed the cat," the warden scolded him, but his tone was indulgent. "We're to treat you with no mercy whatsoever, so wrap up your walk and get back to your stinking hole."

Vlad took a deep breath in the crisp November air and reluctantly set for the cell. The prison guard shoved him in and locked the heavy door behind him. The pungent stale smell of urine and feces hit him at the threshold. There was something else, too—the bitter-sweet smell of rotting flesh he knew well. His cellmate was in the same position he had left him—propped against the wall, his body limp, his arms crossed. His hollow chest moved up and down imperceptibly, and his dull eyes stared at Vlad without seeing him. The man neither moved nor uttered a single sound until the evening.

When they brought in the measly dinner, Vlad quickly lapped up his thin broth and eyed the sleeping man's ration hungrily. He wasn't sure if he was imagining it, but he thought the sheikh pointed his bony hand at the bowl. The boy did not hesitate for a second and gobbled up the cold tasteless slop. He managed to quiet the rumble in his stomach and wrapped himself in the tattered blanket to try to get some sleep.

He was already dozing off when the door opened and the night sentry called his cellmate out. The creature rose unexpectedly fast and took for the door. Then Vlad could no longer keep himself awake. In his heavy slumber, he thought he heard some strange screams in the yard outside, but he could not be sure it was not just a nightmare.

When he woke up in the pale daylight seeping through the bars on the tiny window, the sheikh was back in his spot, sleeping with his eyes open. Vlad wondered if he had really left the cell at all during the night or if it had been just a dream. Then he remembered the jailer's significant remark that the sheikh did not go outside in the daylight. After that, the prison guard had changed the topic.

Vlad stared at the sleeping man again. Nothing seemed to have changed—same posture, same open vacant eyes. The door opened and the guard brought in breakfast. The boy was going to ask him about the sheikh's midnight walk, but it wasn't the same guard from yesterday. This one was a grim-looking man who left as soon as he delivered the bowls. Vlad quickly gobbled up his and looked expectantly at his cellmate. Then came the familiar motion of the hand and the boy grabbed the full bowl.

"Thank you, my good man," he murmured, looking at the sheikh in gratitude. And then he noticed the change. The stranger's sagging darkened flesh seemed fresher and even his eyes looked more alive. But that was not what stunned the boy and caused his hands to shake



involuntarily. It was the two trickles of brownish dried blood on both sides of the sheikh's mouth that did.

## Chapter Three

December 1444

Vlad quickly gobbled up the watery bulgur mush. His hands were shaking and a few times he spilled some. When he was done, he slowly placed the empty bowl aside and looked timidly at the sheikh. He was still half-lying, half-leaning against the wall, dozing off with his eyes open. Suddenly his bloody lips stretched into something like a grin. It gave the boy an additional scare and he shuddered. Some guttural sounds that initially seemed incomprehensible came from the sheikh's mouth, but then the boy realized his cellmate was speaking. It was a strange voice—low, coarse, and languid. His Turkish was fine except that he also used some obsolete words whose meaning Vlad did not know.

“Don't be afraid, young man,” the sheikh was droning on. “If I wanted to harm you, you would long be gone into the afterlife, where the unfortunate souls of all my enemies are banished. But you are my friend, Voivode.”

“I am just a prince. My father, may God grant him health and strength, is the voivode.”

“Ah, yes, indeed... Sometimes I am confused about time. I can't tell the future from the past and completely forget about the present. But time is all one.”

“I don't understand.”

“You will be voivode. Very soon. I can see it clearly.”

“How can you see into the future?” Vlad asked, his voice still shaking.

"It's very simple. When you look back, you see the past; when you look ahead, you see the future; when you close your eyes, you are submerged into the present. I don't close my eyes ever, though—I hate the present."

"Who are you, my good man? A prophet, a magician, a priest? The guards call you the 'sheikh.' Are you a sheikh indeed?"

"The simple souls think anyone who's smarter than them is a sheikh."

"But what are you really?"

"You are very inquisitive. So typical of young people. You will live for hundreds of years. You'll learn a lot of things, including those you never wanted to."

"Hundreds of years? You must be kidding," the boy looked at him in disbelief. "Almost no man in our family has ever made it to a normal old age. Most of them died in battle or were vilely killed by our enemies."

"That's so true, young man," the sheikh agreed and there was something like sympathy in his tone. "Your father, your brother—"

"What about them?" Vlad cut him short anxiously. "They are alive and well, aren't they?"

"Yes," his cell mate said quietly. "They are alive and well for now. For now—"

"What do you mean?" He could feel panic seizing him.

"I am very tired. I've had a difficult night," the sheikh sighed. "Difficult, but good. I quenched my thirst for days to come."

The boy looked surprised, but the old man only shook his head.

"We'll talk again. Now I have to sleep because the sun disturbs me. You can have my lunch and dinner."

The stranger fell back and in a second quieted down in peaceful sleep. Or so it seemed. Vlad didn't know if he was imagining it or not, but his eyes seemed a bit more

closed than before. The young man took advantage of his generosity and wolfed down his lunch and dinner rations. During his short walk in the prison yard, he tried to strike up a conversation with the warden. He had to find out what the sheikh had been up to during the night. The jailer was in no mood to talk though and shut him up. In the evening, as he was getting ready for sleep, he heard a muffled whisper: “You have to try to sleep during the day and stay awake at night.”

“Why should I?” Vlad was startled.

“For millions of reasons.”

“Name one.”

“It will set you apart from everyone else.”

“Why do I want to be set apart?”

“To be stronger. At night even the strongest are vulnerable, because even if they are not asleep, they are dozing off. Their self-preservation instincts are dulled. If you learn to sleep during the day and be up at night, you’ll have an enormous advantage over your adversaries. You’ll be able to defeat your mightiest enemies this way.”

“Is that all it takes?” Vlad was unconvinced. “Just a small change in my way of life?”

“It’s not that easy.” The sheikh’s grin revealed his curved fangs. “You’ll have to change your way of life completely, not just a little. But you can start with something as simple as sleeping during the day and staying awake at night.”

“And when would I eat? The jailers do not bring any food at night.”

The sheikh looked at him as if this were a test. “Good question. It’s a very broad topic, though. We’ll return to it when you get used to staying up at night.”

Vlad wanted to continue the discussion with the stranger but he had had a hearty meal and was beginning to doze off. He covered himself with the torn blanket and soon fell into a deep stupor.

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One cold evening in late December, the prison guard unlocked the door and motioned the old man out. The sheikh rose surprisingly fast for his age and winked conspiratorially at the boy, pointing at the small window. He seemed happy and somewhat excited. Even though it was almost midnight and Vlad was barely awake, his curiosity won over his fatigue. The little window was very close to the ceiling and no matter how much he tried, he could not reach it. He looked desperately around and his eyes fell on the bucket they used as a toilet. The guards emptied it every evening before bed so he could use it now. He turned it around and placed it under the window. Then he folded his ragged blanket, put it on top, and stepped on it on tiptoe.

He took a hold of the bars and then he could see the narrow courtyard where they let him take walks during the day. Vlad had found out from things the prison guards had let slip that sometimes at night the same place was used for the execution of those on death row. It was clear and cold with not a single cloud in the sky. The numerous bright stars and mostly the full moon cast enough light around. What Vlad saw made him shiver, not with cold but with horror. At the far end of the courtyard, a prisoner, arms tied behind his back, stood flanked by two guards. The poor man was shaking with consternation and incomprehensible sounds poured out of his mouth.

Across from him, under the careful watch of three armed janissaries, the sheikh was sharpening the end of a six-foot-long stake with a curved dagger. Vlad's cellmate was completely absorbed in what he was doing, a thin cruel smile frozen on his lips. An unusual flame was dancing in his eyes. Despite the sinister feel of the scene in front of him, Vlad could not look away and was transfixed by the preparation for the execution. The sheikh completed his

task and nodded at the janissaries. They took his dagger away immediately and said something to the guards. The stake was laid horizontally and one of its ends was jammed into an opening in the wall almost at the level of the ground. Then they tied the convict's legs with ropes and dragged him to the opposite end of the yard. The wretch was desperately twisting and turning but he was clearly paralyzed with fear and could offer no resistance. Some strange sounds resembling puppy whimpers were coming out of his mouth. The jailers seemed very used to such proceedings and were not moved by his pleas in the slightest.

The prisoner was placed on the ground on his stomach and in the next moment, the sharpened stake tore his anus and went in. An inhuman scream pierced the night silence. Vlad closed his eyes for a second. He wanted to move away from the window, get under the shabby covers, fall asleep, and forget about what was happening in the courtyard. But a force bigger than him seemed to keep him glued to the cold window bars and wide-eyed, he kept watching the ghastly execution. The guards pulled the rope tied to one of the prisoner's legs. Two of the janissaries pulled the rope on the other leg. The sheikh was watching the victim intently, smacking his dry lips from time to time. Moving along his spine, the stake penetrated deeper and deeper into the man's body. The wretch appeared to have lost consciousness, for no sound came from his lips; his body, though, continued to twist and turn to such an extent that the third janissary had to step on his back to put an end to the spasms.

Finally the sharp end emerged from the back of his head and the torturers let go of the ropes, sighing in relief. After a short break, they pulled up the stake vertically and placed it in a hole into the ground. The blood-covered body of the prisoner hung limp on the stake in some unnaturally twisted posture. The guards motioned for the

sheikh and he stepped up slowly. Vlad could not tear his eyes from the way he was smacking his lips staring at the bloodied corpse. Suddenly, his cellmate rose on his toes with a shrill squeak that curdled Vlad's blood and sank his sharp teeth into the neck of the victim. When he had slaked his thirst, he reluctantly let go.

The boy thought this was the end of the horrors and was about to step off the bucket, when the sheikh released another piercing scream and thrust his angular hand in the impaled victim's left side. His long crooked nails tore the flesh open and ripped the still pulsating heart out. The poor man's body twitched for the last time and finally quieted down with the serenity of death. The sheikh brought the bleeding heart to his lips and bit with obvious pleasure.

This was too much for Vlad. He lost his balance and almost fell. He narrowly managed not to hurt himself as he jumped off the bucket. It took all he had to turn it up before he vomited loudly in it. Then he quickly placed it back in its original place and immediately slipped under the thin cover of the blanket. He quieted down in his corner and closed his eyes. He wanted to fall asleep before his cellmate returned, but the image of the heart ripped out continued to haunt him even in his sleep.

When the sheikh came back to the cell he found the boy tossing and turning wildly, talking in his sleep, overwhelmed by nightmares. The stranger smiled maliciously and lay contently in the corner.

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Vlad woke up at dawn, startled by his latest horrific dream. Despite the cold December night, he was sweating profusely. He wiped his dripping forehead on his sleeve and looked fearfully around. The sheikh was looking at him gleefully. "I warned you, sleeping at night is not good for you, but you didn't listen to me."

"Who are you?" Vlad's voice was quivering.

“Legend has it that I come from an ancient family that traces its origin to the Great Prophet Zarathustra,” the sheikh spoke quietly, but clearly. He looked rested and in a good mood. “My father must have had a good sense of humor, though, since he named me Ahriman.”

“I don’t understand at all,” the boy ventured, still scared but intrigued by the story.

“According to my famous ancestor, the primordial god of good is called Ahura Mazda. He is destined to fight a long hard battle with his twin brother Ahriman, who is the god of evil, darkness, and death.”

“There is only one God and Jesus is his son and messenger to the world,” Vlad objected furiously.

“Maybe,” the sheikh smiled condescendingly, baring his blood-stained incisors. “But Zarathustra was alive hundreds of years before Jesus and had no way of knowing that.”

“But you must be Muslim. Why would they call you ‘sheikh’ otherwise?”

“Zoroastrianism was widespread in ancient Persia at the time of the Achaemenids. The great King Darius even declared it the state religion. With time, the cult of Ahura Mazda waned in influence, and after the Arab conquest, the Persians gradually converted to Islam. Contrary to the Ottoman Turks who are Sunni, most of the Persians are Shiites and still believe in the return of the hidden imam.”

“I know that. Yunus Aga, our tutor, told us a lot about the various factions in Islam,” the boy said proudly.

“So my parents were Shiites, but I suspect my father was not a particularly devout Moslem if he gave me this name.”

“Are you a Moslem?”

“I must be,” Arhiman said pensively. “Then again, I never changed my name to a Muslim one. In the violent times of my childhood, though, nobody cared about it. Everyone was distraught and sick with fear of the Mongol



invasion. All anyone could talk about was Genghis Khan's repute for cruelty and about his hordes ransacking our towns and villages."

"Ghengis Khan?" Vlad was puzzled. "You must be joking. Genghis Khan has been dead for two hundred years."

"I see you know your history. Yunus Aga must have been a learned man. If we wanted to be precise, Genghis Khan passed away exactly two hundred and seventeen years ago. He was a great man who died a ridiculous death."

"You say that as if you were there."

"I was. With the first Mongolian invasion, I was taken captive along with many other kids my age. Clearly someone must have noticed and appreciated my abilities, since I was sent to the khan's court. I have no idea why, and he must have had his reasons, but Genghis Khan took to me and over the years I became one of his most trusted men."

"That cannot be true," Vlad cut him off furiously. "You cannot have been born over two hundred years ago."

"What you probably mean is that I can't be still alive if I was born two hundred and thirty-five years ago," the sheikh was looking at him wickedly.

"That's right," Vlad was even more confused.

"How do you know I am still alive?" Ahriman laughed out loud and the boy shuddered. "At least in the sense most people think of 'being alive.' By the way, Genghis Khan could still be alive, too, if it hadn't been for that crazy Tangut princess. The master was so in love with her and he wanted her for his next wife. However, the girl had been engaged to a young man killed during the Mongol invasion. Her father and brothers had also been killed, so she craved revenge. I have no idea how she managed to sneak her weapon past the fierce guards, but after the master satisfied his carnal desires and fell into a slumber,

the young woman took out a short sharp dagger and cut off the balls of the mightiest soldier at the time. Then she stabbed herself in the heart. Genghis Khan lost a lot of blood, his wounds got infected, and a few days later he died a horrible death.” Ahriman was silent for a minute, deep in the throes of ancient memories.

“But I digress. You asked why they call me ‘sheikh.’ After Genghis Khan’s death, his sons and grandsons divided the empire. I spent a lot of years wandering around, then finally returned to my homeland, which was now part of the Chagatai Khanate. I became a prophet and many people listened to me. My teachings were based on Zoroastrianism, Islam, even Christianity. I had thousands of followers. It was then that they first called me ‘the sheikh.’ While Chagatai was still alive, no one dared do anything to me because his son and I had grown up together and they didn’t want to incur the Khan’s wrath. After his death, though, the orthodox imams attacked me like a pack of starving wolves. They accused me of distorting the holy Quran, which was absolutely true. They said I was corrupting the young people and that I was Seytan personified. I was locked up and my disciples were persecuted. Many of them were sentenced to death, others rotted away in prison, still others left for different parts of the world. The imams came after me immediately upon Chagatai Khan’s death, but his successor, Qara Hugelü, put in a few good words on my behalf and saved my life. I was released on the condition of leaving the country, so my wanderings began. I went to the Seljuk beyliks, the Latin lands, then to Byzantium.”

“Did you ever get to Wallachia?” Vlad was curious.

“I did. It was under the Bulgarian Tsar then.”

The boy had to ask himself again if the sheikh was making fun of him. Was he really that old that he could remember things so long past? But the sheikh seemed entirely serious.

“I visited the kingdom of the Magyars, stopped in Venice, too; in general, I was trying to go where there were wars.”

“Wars? Were you a mercenary?”

“Oh, no, although occasionally I had to pretend to be one. It's just that war is where I find my sustenance.”

It was only now that Vlad understood what his cellmate meant and shivered in horror once again. “Yes, but this way you were risking being killed.”

“Well, if you can't handle the pressure, get out of the way,” the sheikh offered another maxim. “When Tamerlane began his raids, I went back to my homeland for a while. Then I followed him west and saw the battle of Ankara, where the mighty Ottoman ruler Bayezid the Lightning was defeated and captured in shame.”

“And how did you end up in this dark cell?”

“I am getting on in years,” Ahriman said forlornly. “I have no more desire to go to the battlefields. It works here for me.”

“You don't mean you are in this hole voluntarily?”

“Well, one needs one's meals,” the sheikh said without specifying any further and yawned. “It's daylight now and I need my rest. You should get some sleep, too.”

With those words, he reclined blissfully and dozed off, eyes half-open. Vlad took advantage of this to look him over more carefully. His skin was really dark and seared, although after last night's orgy, it looked better than usual. His face was wrinkled, probably not any more than the face of anyone over sixty. The muscles on his skinny body, if he had any at all, were limp; however, the boy had not forgotten at all how swiftly he had pierced the prisoner's chest and ripped his heart out. What kind of a man was that and was he a man at all? Was it possible that he was over two hundred years old and was still alive? Was he really alive or was he a ghost of some sort? Tormented with questions that had no answers, Vlad soon fell into a heavy

slumber, haunted by new nightmares. He spent most of the day half awake, trying to forget the horrible visions in his mind. He had just finished with his dinner when Ahriman stirred and stretched his gaunt frame. “I hope you had some sleep and are rested, Voivode. Because this is our last night together and we have a lot to discuss.”

“How do you know that?” the boy looked in disbelief.

“The sultan has sent orders for you to leave for Edirne tomorrow morning.”

“The crusaders didn’t win, then?”

“No,” the sheikh crushed his hopes. “Murad won a glorious victory. The Christian army is decimated and King Wladyslaw was killed in battle.”

“What about my older brother Mircea?”

“Your brother is still alive and well. He withdrew back to Wallachia. But let’s not waste time discussing the battle of Varna. We have more important things to talk about. I am very tired of living. I can feel my time is coming.”

“What do we need to talk about?”

“Patience,” the sheikh chided. “A little before his death, Genghis Khan sent for me and told me his sons and grandsons had disappointed him. That’s why, he said, he had decided to pass down the Great Secret to me. He thought I was more deserving of being his successor than they were.”

“What secret?” The boy could not contain himself.

“Do not interrupt,” Ahriman scolded. “Despite his terrible pain, the master patiently initiated me into the Great Secret through the night. At dawn, as he has just finished with his directions, he passed on, confident that his life’s work was in safe hands. I have been looking for someone to pass my knowledge to for over two hundred years now. There were many brave and smart men among my students, yet not one who completely deserved the Great Secret. I

had started worrying that I will not find anyone and it will die with me. And then you appeared, Voivode. You are destined to be initiated into the Great Secret.”