

City of the Nosferatu

Transylvania, 1830

The journey from Vienna to Transylvania had been straightforward, pleasant even, Boris Liatoukine thought. This diversion to see the Count was a minor delay, but a necessary one. Count Dracula was not a figure to be ignored in a matter as delicate as that which was to be discussed.

They were high up in Dracula's castle, overlooking the Borgo pass, sitting opposite each other over a table. It was night, Dracula's preferred time. Liatoukine knew that the Count could exist in the day—just as he himself could. However, Dracula's powers were far greater at night. Far more than his own, in fact—which was perhaps the point of making him wait until darkness fell to see him.

The Count decided to sum up their conversation thus far.

“The Habsburg Emperor Francis in Vienna believes that vampires are infiltrating his Austrian Empire? And your Tsar Nicholas as well?”

“Quite so,” replied Liatoukine. “It's based on a number of incidents, usually involving a vampire being caught. More often than not, they seem to be influential members of society.”

Dracula did not seem impressed by this.

“This is hardly new,” he said. “I myself wield some authority here. And you too carry some small influence at the Imperial Court in St.Petersburg—despite being a mere Captain in the Russian Army.” The unkind comment regarding Liatoukine's rank was delivered with a little smile.

Liatoukine knew it was best to ignore the remark; Dracula was not one to annoy or be trifled with. “It is the scale of incidents that concerns the ma; they are all too frequent,” he replied. “Of course, some of us are captured and destroyed on occasion but...”

“Us?” inquired Dracula.

Liatoukine decided to choose his next words very carefully. It would not be wise to imply that the Count was just another vampire who might be destroyed by mere humans. His history was substantial for anyone—~~any one~~, human or vampire. Had he not studied at the Scholomance, where he'd learned the secrets of the Evil One himself?

“Forgive me, Count. I meant the vampires of the Sepulchre. They have long had their people in positions within human society. Their being caught from time to time does have the benefit of ensuring a certain degree of fear amongst the populace. There have never been enough incidents to provoke the authorities into action. Some even harbor doubts as to the existence of those like us.”

“What, then, has changed? Why are the great powers starting to take the existence of vampires seriously?” asked the Count.

“Because the frequency of such incidents has recently multiplied. We know that the Sepulchre always have had their people hidden amongst the humans. So far, so good. But now, the Emperors seem to think that they are under threat. Their police have captured some minor vampires who were, frankly, just too careless. The large recruitment the Sepulchre appears to be indulging in is not providing the best quality of converts. From interrogation, scraps of information have emerged. The Sepulchre is being mentioned regularly. This only matches the rumors that the humans already knew—although they call the Vampire City, Selene. The Emperors are communicating with each other via their Royal families—this helps avoid any political issues. Action is underway in several countries: the Austrian Empire, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, France... even England.”

“England?” said the Count. “I have an interest in that country.”

“The Sepulchre has placed one or two of their people there in the past. A few years back, an expedition led by an Englishwoman to Selene led to chaos and the death of Otto Goetzi,” said Liatoukine.

“I am aware of that incident. The Radcliffe woman was a remarkable individual. I am intrigued by a nation which can produce such a woman. Goetzi was a fool—how could he permit her and her associates to cross Europe to destroy him in his very lair? What she did in invading the Sepulchre was another factor that brought her country to my attention. The British are now of great interest to me, especially their science and their ambitions. They do not limit themselves to Europe. They fascinate me, because they are the future. Here,” he gestured at the window to the country outside, “we are still backward and mired in superstition.”

Liatoukine thought that perhaps the local superstition was not so backward, given who was residing in this very castle, but he kept the thought to himself.

The Count pondered, stroking his large moustache.

“I have little time for the Sepulchre’s foolish games. I have my own dreams of the future in England. I do not wish to see them disrupting that country, or Central Europe, for that matter. Do they wish a full-blown war with the humans? Fools! What will they do when the Imperial armies stand outside Selene with their cannons? Yes, I know that the Sepulchre only exists in our reality for an hour every day, but do they think that no damage can be caused in that hour? Every day?”

Liatoukine nodded his agreement. The Count considered him, gazing at him with his red eyes.

“Pray, tell me... (they both smiled at the use of “pray”) What precisely is your involvement in all this?”

It was time for Liatoukine to expose his own interests.

“The Tsar has been in touch with the other Monarchs in this matter. There have been certain incidents in St. Petersburg. Indeed, I myself had to swiftly execute a nobleman. There are many who fear me there. Some are even aware that I am not what I seem. This works to my advantage. A more mistrustful, ever fearful, atmosphere, however, could achieve the opposite and destroy all my efforts.”

“For myself, I most certainly find fear to be useful,” Dracula said.

Liatoukine ignored his remark and continued:

“Fortunately, the Tsar feels he can still rely on me in certain matters. I have been of use to him in the past, especially in the recent successful war we waged against your ancient enemies, the Turks. So he suggested that I should look into the matter, and see what should be done. I was dispatched to Vienna to discuss the ‘vampire problem’ with the Habsburg Emperor himself. The Austrians have a prisoner in their Croatian city of Zagreb, whom they are not even certain how to kill. I would speak with him, and then destroy him myself. Our position is especially perilous in the Austrian Empire, as such prisoners only increase the humans’ knowledge of us.”

“Even here, in Transylvania, I have become aware of the growth of these inferior vampires within the Austrian Empire,” interrupted Dracula. “Lawyers, petty officials, and so on. Wisely, they have avoided all contacts with me, presumably believing that I am still unaware of their presence. However, they have not been widely detected by the humans. I assume this recent increase is due to the infiltration strategy by the Sepulchre that you mentioned earlier?”

“Yes, I suspect so,” said Liatoukine. “The infiltration has been most intense in areas where our kind has traditionally been the strongest, such as the Magyar lands. My concern is that, if the humans are pushed, they will retaliate. We are powerful, but there are millions of them, and we are but thousands, if that. Hidden as we are, lurking in the shadows, our very existence denied by men of science—some in our employ—we thrive. The lower orders of life fear us as spectres of the night. But if we were to take over, resistance would quickly replace fear; we would be right in front of them—an open target. Using selected humans as our servants would no longer work; some of them are already being exposed. And as you said, human weapons could smash even our strongest holdouts.”

Dracula rose and strode to the window, gazing out. He placed his hand on the stone wall, as if to reassure himself of his castle’s strength. Tall, thin and pale, like many of his kind, he also had pointed ears and red eyes. Perhaps it was just as well that he was rarely seen outside his castle nowadays, thought Liatoukine.

“Yes, yes... this is so,” said the Count at last. “Vienna thinks it rules here. They would no doubt muster their troops against me if they felt my existence was a threat to them. I would prevail.

Nonetheless, it would be extremely inconvenient. However, I sense that you are not simply here for discussing the problem, Boris Liatoukine. You have other intentions in mind, don't you?"

"Indeed I have, my Lord Count," replied the Russian. "A name has occasionally been mentioned when the Austrians have interrogated the vampires they captured, prior to their destruction: Orlok. I believe I have heard the name before, always in relation to this region..."

"So you think I may be connected to all this?" asked Dracula.

"No, my Lord, not in the least. Your independence—as well as mine—from the Sepulchre is well known."

"Quite." Here Dracula started to almost look amused, "However, the name Orlok is indeed familiar to me, and it explains much. You may, in fact, be able to resolve matters far more easily than you might have thought..."

On horseback, Liatoukine approached Zagreb. What Dracula had told him was most useful indeed. He came to a military building in the center of town, where he knew he was expected. He was immediately taken to a commander named Sponz. The soldier couldn't help but wonder about his visitor. How was it that this mysterious, tall, gaunt Russian with his strange burning eyes had been granted such liberties? He had been ordered to extend every courtesy to him, and tell him whatever he wanted to know. In his career, Sponz had come across many strange things, but always kept quiet. His masters knew that he could be trusted.

"Tell me how your prisoner came to be in that cell?" inquired Liatoukine.

"Yes, sir," Sponz began. He was unsure on how to address a Russian army nobleman and officer, but "Sir" seemed to evoke no rebuke, so he continued: "Baron Grando was captured at the home of one of the mayor's most trusted advisers, alone in his office. Horrifying cries and screams were heard. Some of the servants burst in to see the Baron drinking the adviser's blood from his wrist whilst holding him down by his neck.

"Given that the Baron is seventy, this was a considerable feat. In fact, it took ten men to overwhelm him. Six others were killed in the process. A lamp was knocked over, causing a fire. We made use of this to tell the public that there had been an accident and that the deceased were burned to death. The survivors, who had helped subdue the Baron, were only too glad to keep quiet."

Liatoukine nodded. He rather suspected that the fire was started later on, rather than being the result of a genuine accident, but kept silent.

"I understand that the Baron was injured?" he asked instead.

"Indeed, sir. A number of men tried to kill him. It is best that you see for yourself"

They headed downstairs, to a long corridor, along which there were doors leading to what clearly were cells. A number of these seemed to be made out of the same stone than the building. Clearly, no ordinary prisoners were kept here. They stopped at one such cell, which had its own guard standing outside. The guard opened a spyhole and checked on the prisoner. He confirmed that all was well. Sponz, however, took a second look to make sure. With a little difficulty, the young guard opened the heavy stone door.

"You may wait outside," Liatoukine told Sponz.

"I regret, sir, but I can't cannot, sir. The regulations say that if a dangerous prisoner is to be visited, there must be a soldier present."

Liatoukine did not know if this was true, but Vienna clearly wanted their man to report back on what would be said. *Very well*, he thought, *they have sealed their servant's fate*.

Liatoukine strode in, followed by Sponz. The guard closed the door behind them. The cell was bare, without any natural light. There was what appeared to be a block of stone with a figure sitting on it. It was tied down to the stone by chains. On a table nearby, a lamp flickered. Sponz went over to it and turned it up. The increased light provided more details of the figure. Thin and pale, the creature smiled at his visitors. To anyone else other than Liatoukine and Sponz, this might have come as a surprise—if they had recovered from the shock of seeing a stake sticking from the man's chest, where his heart should be.

Liatoukine pointed to the stake.

“The men who overwhelmed the Baron attempted to destroy him by traditional means,” explained Sponz. “As you can see, it failed, but I thought it best to leave things the way they were.”

Liatoukine also noticed several holes in the Baron’s shirt that looked like bullet holes. Clearly, other methods of destruction had been tried, which had also proved unsuccessful. Not all vampires could be killed in the same way, although the stake was the most common method. The Russian was surprised they had not tried decapitation. Perhaps orders had already come through that the prisoner needed to be interrogated first.

“Come to see what cannot be killed?” sneered the Baron. “Another servant of that useless Emperor in Vienna?”

Liatoukine looked at him more closely. Grando seemed to shrink back. From that look, he had not only understood that the Russian Captain was a vampire, but also a powerful one. The Baron did not know how he knew. He just did.

“Are you here to free me, my lord?” he asked.

The sneering tone had gone. Sponz picked up on this and shifted uneasily. Clearly, this Russian was of some significance.

Liatoukine ignored the question. He looked at the floor. There was a layer of ash on it. He crouched down, touched it, and sensed the remnants of departed vampire spirits.

“My Lord,” said the Baron, “what you feel is what’s left our kind—the ones killed over many years by the Austrians. They leave their ashes here to intimidate those of us they capture.”

Clearly, the Austrians and their Croat subjects knew more about vampires than they’d let on, thought Liatoukine. Something to be remembered.

“*Our kind?* Does he mean, noblemen?” asked Sponz, although his real suspicion was painted on his face.

Liatoukine turned to him. He grabbed him by the throat so he could not scream. He didn’t bother answering the question. He stared deep into Sponz’s eyes. The Commander felt waves of terror flood through him. He could no longer move. He realized what was strange about the Russian’s eyes: the pupils had turned into vertical slits, like a cat’s!

Then, he could no longer think of anything. His heart had given out.

Liatoukine dropped him to the floor.

“That is how I dispose of people,” he said.

Grando looked awestruck. “What of his blood?” he asked.

“His life-force is what I take. I do dislike having blood on my uniform.” He went over to Grando and removed the stake. The hole started regenerating. “We must move fast to leave here...” He went to the chains and pulled at them. “This will take a few moments...” He grappled with the chains behind the Baron.

Grando was clearly pleased with these developments.

“Of course, you are obliged to help me. Vampire is loyal to vampire, vampire does not kill vampire! Not like the humans, who slaughter each other for no reason. They would have killed me if they could, but they couldn’t find the right method...”

Liatoukine ignored his talk.

“Tell me,” he said whilst seeming to grapple with the chains, “it is clear to me that you have only recently become one of us. I sense a familiarity about you, although we have not met before. Perhaps I am aware of the one who created you. Who is he?”

“It was Orlok, my lord, *Graf* Orlok.”

Was the emphasis on the title of “*Graf*” supposed to impress him? Liatoukine thought? “Orlok!” he exclaimed. “A dear friend of mine. I have not seen him in many decades. I hear he has some new plans?”

“Yes, yes, my lord! He has plans to extend our influence into the Empire. He is selecting many of the more influential of us for his purpose. We will soon control the Empire and will not have to hide anymore. He has promised me that I will be a young man again.”

And Orlok is doing all of this himself? From the Sepulchre?”

“Yes. From time to time, he visits certain cities, changes select people such as I, and then we carry on with his work in our areas. He intends Selene to become the capital of the new Empire. He has great ambitions for Russia, too, which is perhaps why you’ve heard of his plans?”

Liatoukine had heard enough; this confirmed what he already knew. Best to get onto the other reason why he was here. He noted that the hole in the Baron’s chest had already healed. Good.

Liatoukine pulled a knife from inside his tunic and plunged it into the Baron’s chest. There was a gasp from the uncomprehending nobleman. Then, the Russian Captain proceeded to cut out the Baron’s heart.

“What are you doing?” cried the Baron.

Liatoukine ignored him. He never felt the need to explain himself to fools. Besides, time was a factor. The last thing he needed was for the guard outside to wonder what was going on, although he could hear nothing through the heavy door.

Once finished, he placed the heart in the small box he had brought in with him. Inside was a bottle of oil, which he poured over the heart. Lighting a small splinter, he set it alight. It burned with extreme intensity—the oil had special properties that made it so. Nothing was happening to Grando; sometimes the burning of the heart would destroy his kind of vampire. *No matter*, thought Liatoukine.

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE BOOK