

*Coincidentally, Matthew Baugh's tale of vampires and Cossacks perfectly illustrates the subtitle to this latest volume of Tales of the Shadowmen for, indeed, who have more "esprit de corps" than the Undead and a savage "band of brothers" from the Russian steppe? But when great deviltry is at work, and supernatural powers must be employed to squash it, even these legendary bonds may be stretched to their breaking point...*

## **Matthew Baugh: *Quest of the Vourdalaki***

*Ukraine, June 13, 1598*

'Neath the light of the half-moon we rode, galloping across the steppe with reckless speed, as if pursued by the hordes of Hell itself. But we were not pursued, we were the pursuers—we were the riders of Hell.

I sat astride a great black courser as gaunt as death with eyes that blazed fiery red. To my left galloped Hella on a steed that matched mine, her naked body gleaming milk-white in the moonlight. To my left, Vseslav ran in the form of a great, lean wolf. Behind us came nine more mounted *vourdalaki*. It was a joyous experience for me, who had been a Cossack in life. Riding the Steppe had been my delight, and one I had missed since joining the ranks of the undead.

Our horses were fleeter and more tireless than any mortal steeds. Yet, for all that, we could not gain on the two riders who fled before us. We had pursued them for hours, but they continued tirelessly. One of the men truly was a sorcerer, or an alchemist, or something of the sort. Vseslav himself wielded dark magics and he made a great deal of these distinctions, but they all blurred together for me.

Wrecking the sorcerer's wagon and slaughtering his servants had been child's play, but he had picked up a traveling companion, a fine gentleman with a pair of geldings that could run like the wind.

"They are slowing," Gorcha cried. "Their horses are tiring."

"Not soon enough," Hella shrieked over the sound of the wind. "Behold, they come to Father Dnieper!"

At the sight of the great river, Vseslav gave a terrible howl and pulled up. We who were his lackeys reined in also and formed a circle around him. Vseslav stood, and was in a moment a tall, fierce old man wearing a wolfskin around his shoulders. His eyes, however, remained those of the wolf.

"Why do we stop?" Gorcha asked. He was an old man with a face so stern that he must have been a horror, even in life.

"Listen!" the old wolf replied.

We did. After a moment my preternatural hearing caught the sound of human revelry, laughter, music, songs... Cossack songs.

"We are near the Zoporoghian Sich," Vseslav said. "We can follow no further."

Hella grinned and tossed back her long red hair.

"Let me go," she said. "I'm not afraid of any man, be he Cossack or the Tsar himself." She made an eerily beautiful sight standing there, her flesh smooth and perfect except for one purple scar on her neck. I certainly would have been tempted to follow her to my doom when I was a living man. Of course, now all I could manage was a kind of nostalgic appreciation.

"No," Vseslav said. "We will not act openly."

"Then, what?" Gorcha asked.

"One of us will go into the camp, posing as a mortal."

"Who?" Hella asked.

I was wondering that too, but I kept my mouth shut. Such work was dangerous and I was too obvious a choice for comfort.

"I will go, Master," Gorcha said. "I will tear the man's throat out and bring you back his head on a pike."

That was typical of Gorcha, who was arrogant to the point of idiocy. I don't know how the old bastard had become one of us but suspected it was because he was too mean-spirited and contrary to stay in the grave like a proper corpse.

"Yvgeni," Vseslav said.

"Yes, Lord?" I replied trying to keep trepidation from my voice.

"You were a Cossack in life, were you not?"

"I *am* a Cossack, Lord."

"Anything you once were, you ceased to be when I claimed you."

"Alright then, I'm *not* a Cossack," I said.

Vseslav glared at me, then laughed.

"Well, it is my pleasure that you become one again. You have the clothes and the saber. More than that, you know their ways."

"Lord, my steed cannot cross Father Dnieper."

Vseslav nodded thoughtfully. Drawing his sword he struck the head off my horse. I rolled clear as the beast dissolved into smoke and ash. Gorcha chortled, Hella threw back her head in laughter and my Lord pointed his weapon at my unbeating heart.

"Have you any other objections?" he asked.

"None, Lord."

"I have another minion in the camp," he said. "His name is Liatoukine. When you are there, make yourself known to him. The two of you shall stay close to the foreigner."

"You wish him dead, Master?"

"It is less important that he die than that he be prevented from reaching Lysa Hora by St. John's Eve," he said. "If you can kill him, of course, that is always to be preferred."

I nodded and set out at a run. Behind me I heard the laughter of my kith and kin. Vampires are not good comrades, I have found, and are petty in the extreme. I had preferred the company of my steed—foul-tempered demon that he had been—to any of them. Vseslav should not have treated him so. A Cossack would never have treated any horse like that; not even a Hell-horse.

The river flowed strongly and was deeper than a man is tall, but that was no obstacle to me. Some of the undead cannot cross running water, but my kind knows no such limitation. I doffed my boots and strode through, gripping the rocks with my toes.

The Sich was located on an island in the midst of the river. Cossacks have no fortifications so they secure themselves against attack by Tatar or Pole by making the river their moat and changing the location of their base secretly and often. I was sitting on the bank, wringing out my clothes when a sentry came upon me.

The man—a veritable giant, more than six and a half feet tall and easily three hundred pounds—glared down at me and leaned on his musket.

"You did not cross on the ferry," he said.

"What way is that for a Cossack to cross a river?" I said. "I swam."

"A brave boast, if true," he replied.

"True enough, as you can see," I said, squeezing several cups of water from my sleeve."

"You say you are a Cossack?"

I nodded.

"I have not seen your face in the Sich before."

"I am a Cossack of the Don," I said, "come from Muskovy to visit my southern cousins."

The giant grunted, amused.

"Still," he said, "I must be certain. Is there anyone here who can vouch for you?"

"Liatoukine," I said.

The big man, whose name was Ayub, took me through the center of the camp. Everywhere I looked, men gathered around the campfires to sing and dance, to wrestle, to gamble and to drink. The corn brandy and vodka flowed freely and I felt both sad and nostalgic that I no longer had a taste for any drink that was not red and warm.

After a time, we came to a knot of men who were amusing themselves in a novel way. They had taken a Jew and stood him against a tree with his sidelocks pinned out to the sides with daggers. While the man stood trembling, the Cossacks took turns throwing axes at him to try and sever his locks. The officer supervising this was a slender, pale and elegant man who lounged off to one side, occasionally offering words of encouragement to his men. I knew him for a vampire at a glance.

"Hey, brother knights," Ayub shouted, "I have something for you."

"A foundling?" the vampire asked, rising and striding toward us.

"One 'Yvgeni' by name," Ayub replied. "He claims to be a Cossack of the Don and says that you will vouch for him."

"Yes," he said looking me over.

"In that case, I leave him to you." Without waiting for a reply the giant turned and strode away.

"He doesn't like you, that one," I said.

Liatoukine sniffed. He glanced at his men who had resumed their axe-throwing game.

"What do I care? He is a lout and a peasant."

"He is a Cossack," I said. We are all brothers and nobles to each other."

"You bristle," he said, his tone ironic. "Why? Human associations mean nothing to us."

"We have a mission," I said. "Two men came into the Sich earlier tonight. They were fleeing from our master."

"I know the men," Liatoukine said. "The Koshovoi Ataman ordered them placed in the stocks. Come, I will show you."

He strode off and, after a last glance at his men and their game, I followed.

"You don't approve?" Liatoukine asked when I caught up. His voice told me he was amused.

"What did the Jew do?"

"He's a Jew; what other reason do Cossacks need?"

I shrugged; for what he said was true. There were usually quite a few Jewish merchants who made camp near the Sich to sell food or corn brandy, or clothing, or any of a hundred other useful things. This worked to everyone's advantage; the Cossacks got the supplies and the Jews were paid handsomely, for Cossacks cultivate a healthy disregard for money and usually pay with whatever they have in their pockets, even if that far exceeded the asked-for price. The problem came when a Cossack wanted strong drink, but had lost all his money gambling or spending freely. At that point, the Jew became—in his eyes—a devious, dishonest thief.

I had never cared for this. The Jews I have known seemed fair-minded, harmless folk. Most Cossacks despise them for not being warlike, but it always seemed to me their only real sin was being foolish enough to do business with such a dangerous and drunken lot. I say "drunken," for finding a sober Cossack in the Sich is as rare as finding a goat eating a wolf.

I was caught up enough in my thoughts that I didn't pay much attention to the merry antics of the brothers as we passed to the stocks, which stood a little away from the camp. I saw that the Koshovoi Ataman had given them the same penalty that is given to a Cossack who steals. Not only were they bound in the stocks, but a heavy cudgel hung from a tree nearby. Any Cossack passing by was welcome to strike them with the weapon. If they were still alive in the morning, they would be released.

"Your course is clear," Liatoukine said, gesturing to the cudgel. It seemed to amuse him to pass the duty to me rather than take it on himself. That made him the kind of officer who I had never cared for in life. In fairness, I have to say they are more like vampires than Cossacks. The riders of the steppes are brutal, but they are seldom so petty.

I picked up the knout and moved to the stocks to face the two. They were an interesting pair, finely dressed in some foreign fashion. The first was a bearded fellow, tall and thick with muscle and fat. The

other was also tall, but as lean as his companion was heavy. He had a clean shaven face and mismatched eyes, one brown and the other green.

"I suppose you've come to kill us," the bearded man said. He had a deep voice and sounded more weary than frightened.

"Close your eyes and I will make it quick as I can," I replied.

"I don't suppose it would make a difference if I told you that I came here seeking help to end a great evil, would it?" He studied my face for a moment, then sighed. "No, I suppose it wouldn't. You Cossacks aren't at all like I'd heard. You're more interested in your pleasure than in honor won in combat."

"Oh, you think so?" I said. My tone was a little heated, for his words stung the pride I still felt for this place.

"Do you tell me different?" he asked in earnest surprise, "then put down your club and listen to me."

His voice was made for giving speeches and intrigued me. I lowered the weapon and waited for him to say more. Liatoukine was less interested. He strode up to me and, with a growl of contempt, snatched the club from my hand and raised it.

"Ho, brother knight," a quiet voice said. Liatoukine and I both spun in surprise for it is seldom that one of the living comes upon our kind unheard.

The man we saw was tall and gaunt with age, with a gray mustache whose ends hung to his chest. He glowered at us from under shaggy brows with an expression both fierce and amused.

"What are their lives to you, Khlit?" Liatoukine demanded.

"Nothing," the old man replied, pulling out a corn-cob pipe and packing it with tobacco. "If you are bold enough to defy the Koshovoi Ataman, that is your affair."

"What do you say? He is the one who pronounced sentence on them."

"Aye," Khlit replied. "But that was before I spoke to them and heard their story. I think our leader will want to hear these words before they die. I have sent my foster son, Menelitz, to fetch him. But if you would see him disappointed when he comes..."

From the expression on Liatoukine's face, I could see that there was no love lost between him and the old Cossack. Khlit's face, by contrast, gave away nothing. His fierce expression was more a thing of habit than any emotion Liatoukine inspired. He lit his pipe and stood there smoking.

"Very well," Liatoukine said, slimming back into his superior smile. "We shall see, Khlit *bogatyr*."

I peered closer at the old man. Was he truly a great hero, as the vampire named him? I had been away from the Sich for longer than I had realized, not to know the name of a *bogatyr*.

He was a striking figure in his boots of red Moroccan leather and pants of Nankin silk, spattered with pitch to show his contempt for appearances. His astrakhan hat was perched on the side of his head, revealing that his head was shaved, except for a long, gray topknot. It was his curved saber that captured my attention most. It was not the nearly straight and guardless *shasqua* favored by most Cossacks, nor the heavy Polish saber with its knuckle-guard, but a scimitar of the Turkish pattern, beautifully made and—unless I missed my guess—of Damascus steel.

"It seems we have an interlocutor," the man with the mismatched eyes said. From the humor in his voice, it seemed to me that he considered the stocks to be only an inconvenience. His fat companion only grunted in reply.

After several moments, a handsome, dark-skinned youth appeared, leading a man in the regalia of the Koshovoi Ataman and a large group of Cossacks. The youth moved to stand at Khlit's side and the Ataman glanced first at them and then at me and Liatoukine.

"Poor timing for your sport, Boris Liatoukine," he said. "The *bogatyr* tells me these strangers bear listening to."

"I do not agree," Liatoukine said. "A sorcerer like this has the Devil's own tongue to seduce the ears of the innocent."

"A good thing that no one in this camp is innocent, hey?" Khlit asked, eliciting general laughter.

"I appreciate the opportunity to be heard, noble Cossacks," the heavy man interjected. "I would appreciate it more if I was free to stand and face you eye to eye."

"Well said," the Koshovoi Ataman said. "Sabalinka, cut them loose!"

A big man with yellow topknot and mustache stepped forward and drew the sword he kept slung across his back. This was a massive, two-handed weapon, straight and double edged. It seemed more a sword for a knight of old than the agile weapon of a Cossack and was clearly the source for the name “Sabalinka.” which means “little sword.” The muscular man hefted the weapon as if it weighed no more than a *shasqua* and swung it at the lynchpin. Wood split and shattered and the stocks came open, releasing the foreigners, who straightened, rubbing their necks.

“I thank you, noble Cossack,” the bearded stranger said, raising his powerful voice.

“Tell us your story,” the Koshovoi Ataman replied. “Then we will decide whether to help you or whether to give you to Ataman Liatoukine for his men to sport with.”

The man nodded and looked out among the gathering. He had impressive charisma and seemed to catch and hold the gaze of every man there for an instant.

“Noble Cossacks,” he said, “I am Quentin Moretus Cassave, of the Flemish lands many thousands of *versts* from your steppe. I am no sorcerer, as your esteemed Liatoukine has claimed, but merely a scholar.”

That prompted rough chuckles and a few grumbles from some of the men. Scholars are not well thought of in the Sich. It’s all well and good for the *batkos* in their monasteries to study the Holy Scriptures, but no Cossack would ever indulge in such effeminate practices. Scholarship was considered a particularly Polish sort of vice and was highly suspect. Cassave seemed to understand this and dropped his voice dramatically. Though he still made himself heard, every man there strained to catch his every word.

“I am no fighting man,” he said. “I’m sure many of you have thought I would rather be in my comfortable home, poring over my books, and you’re right. But in my studies I have become aware of a dark prophecy.” He paused for a moment and looked across the silent assembly. This man might not claim to be a sorcerer, but with a few words he had captured the Cossacks with the magic of his speech.

“There is a mountain outside Kiev, so I have read,” he continued. “It is a barren place, so unholy that not even trees or shrubs will grow there. It is said that the witches gather there each St. John’s Eve to try to raise their dark master, Satan himself, known in pagan times as Chernabog!”

A murmur went through the crowd, and I saw more than a few of the men cross themselves.

“*Lysa Hora!*” one man said. “I grew up near that bald mountain and what he says is true.”

“You see?” Cassave thundered. “On St. John’s Eve, when all Christian folk are home abed, the witches and sorcerers gather to practice their unspeakable rituals and pray their abominable prayers. On that night, the spirits of the dead rise up to share an unspeakable orgy with all the fiends of Hell.”

“This man is playing on your superstitions,” Liatoukine cried. There was a touch of anxiety in his voice, for he and I both knew that the stranger was uncomfortably close to the truth. His story was inaccurate, but only in the details and those he was probably shading for dramatic effect.

“Superstitions?” Cassave boomed. “Is the werewolf that runs the steppe at night a superstition? What about the vampire with her seductive song who slips behind the rider on his horse and sucks the blood from the back of his neck? No, noble Cossacks, these things are not superstitions... and neither is the prophecy.”

“What is the prophecy?” a big voice demanded and I saw the speaker was the giant Ayub.

“What is the prophecy?” Cassave repeated. “Only that this year—Anno Mundi 7065<sup>1</sup>—the ritual will succeed. The witches will raise Chernabog from Hell to shroud the land with perpetual night and to sit enthroned on the Bald Mountain, from whence he would rule the world.”

“Preposterous!” Liatoukine protested. “Brothers, what this man says is superstitious nonsense! Even if it weren’t, why come to the Sich? Would not a foreigner go to the Tsar and his court in Muscovy where there are other scholars to listen to him?”

“I did,” Cassave said, his voice quiet again. “I went to the Muscovites and told them my story. Alas, they said the same thing that the noble Liatoukine says, that there are no vampires and werewolves, that

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<sup>1</sup> Cassave is figuring this by the Byzantine Calendar which started counting years at the supposed date of Creation. It was used in Imperial Russia until the 19th century reforms of Peter the Great.

the sorcerers do not gather on the Bald Mountain on St. John's Eve and that only superstitious fools would believe such a tale."

There was another murmur through the crowd, for Cassave's words hit home. The Muscovite court has always seemed far off and foreign here in the Ukraine, and these days even more since the nobles had given up speaking Russian in favor of French. To hear that they dismissed the beliefs of the steppe-dwellers as foolishness was no surprise.

"I came to the Zoporoghian Cossacks for two reasons," Cassave continued. "First, because I knew that you would understand that these things are a real and present danger. Second, because I had been told that no one but the Cossacks of the Steppe would have the courage to take up sword and ride against the forces of darkness."

He paused and glared around. For all that he was a scholar, his expression was as fierce as that of Vseslav himself.

"Was I told true?" he demanded.

There was more murmuring. Cossacks are not cowards. And had the challenge been to ride into battle or even to certain death they would not have balked. The supernatural is quite another matter, though.

"My godfather will lead and my sword is with him!" young Menelitza said. He strode to stand at Cassave's side, Khlit following a little more slowly.

Cockcrow saw a little band of ten Cossacks and two foreigners heading north, a modest increase to the group Khlit, Menelitza and Ayub had started. Ivan Sabalinka had joined us, as had Zaroff, an aristocratic Cossack who preferred a Tatar warbow to the set of pistols most of us carried. He was attended by man as huge as Ayub whose name was Ivanushka. Liatoukine and I had joined the expedition, of course, as had two of his men, the stout Taras and his older brother, Doroscha. With Cassave and his companion, whom he called "Magister," we were twelve strong.

"Like the Holy Apostles," Ayub said. "It is a good omen."

I was not so optimistic. A group of Holy Apostles ought not have *two* Iscariots.

We rode hard that day for we had 500 *versts* to travel and only nine days to do it. I was surprised to see how well the two foreigners kept up. The Magister rode like a Cossack and never seemed to tire. Cassave, while not a natural horseman, bore up uncomplaining, apparently through sheer force of will. I rode close to them, remembering my master's instructions.

That night, we huddled around our little campfire, sharing a simple dinner and the small daily ration of corn brandy.

"Why such a small fire?" Cassave asked. His tone was not complaining but curious.

"A big fire would give away our position," Zaroff said.

"The undead don't need a fire to know where we are," Ayub said with a shiver.

"More light might be a good idea," Cassave said. "These creatures thrive in darkness."

"The fire is small so the Tatars do not see us," Menelitza said. "If they do, we'll have more than vampires to worry about."

"I must say, I admire the ways of the Cossacks," Cassave said. "They are very different from the ways of my homeland, though. For example, in France, a soldiers' camp is a place of discipline and drilling. Your *Sich* is so much livelier."

"There is time enough for swinging swords when there are heads to split," Ayub said and several of the others chuckled in assent.

"Very true," Cassave said, seriously. "I am certainly impressed with how quickly you go from revelry to a disciplined advance."

"It is the way of the Cossacks," Ayub said. "In times of war, our whole life is the campaign. In times of peace, we celebrate being alive."

"Your celebration is also different than I am used to," Cassave said.

"How so?" Menelitza asked. "Don't French soldiers gamble, drink and dance?"

“Certainly,” the scholar replied. “But in France, they tend to do those things in the company of pretty girls.”

“Women have no place in the Sich,” Khlit said, taking his pipe from his mouth.

“True!” Taras cried, springing to his feet. “Home and hearth are death to a Cossack, and a pretty girl’s arms are damnation. Too much time with women steals a man’s strength. What a man needs are a fast horse, a good sword, the company of his brothers, and plenty of Polish throats to cut!”

This brought cries of approval from the assemblage, though Sabalinka remained silent and Menelitzka blushed. I noticed Khlit’s stern eyes on his godson as well and wondered what the old wolf was thinking.

My thoughts were interrupted by a woman’s voice raised in song. It was an old ballad, lonely and beautiful, and the singer had a voice to break a man’s heart. The Cossacks were held silent, staring into the darkness.

“*Vourdalak*,” Ayub finally said, crossing himself. “No living woman could sing such a song.”

He was right, of course. I recognized the voice as Hella’s and I saw lust blossom on the other faces in the firelight. They were thinking of slender arms entwining them, of red lips to kiss and milky skin to caress.

It is an effective technique, though not one I particularly approve of. I am enough of a Cossack still to prefer the honest shedding of blood in open combat to lying promises of love. And they are all lies, of course. No vampire I have ever known desires a lover, and certainly not a human one. For us, the only true passion is the hunt and the kill.

Khlit rose and kicked dirt on the fire.

“Doroscha, take the first watch. Ayub will relieve you at midnight.”

The Cossacks slept—except for Liatoukine and myself, who pretended to sleep—until midnight, when Ayub roused the camp.

“Doroscha is gone!”

“Gone?” Taras yelled. “How can he be gone?”

“The vampires have taken him,” Ayub said, making the sign of the cross.

“Bah!” Liatoukine said. “He was frightened of these children’s stories and fled home with his tail between his legs.”

“Have a care,” Taras said, his hand on the hilt of his saber. “My brother is no coward and any man who calls him that will face my steel.”

Liatoukine looked at him with an air of regal disdain. He did not touch his sword, but I knew that he could move with the speed of the undead. He could draw and strike Taras’ head from his shoulders in less than the space of a heartbeat.

“Perhaps I spoke too soon,” Liatoukine said. “Perhaps he went to take a piss and got lost. Perhaps he will be back any minute.”

Taras’ knuckles whitened on his sword haft and the fight seemed inevitable, then Khlit stepped between them fixing his wolf’s gaze on first one then the other.

“There is no time to fight amongst ourselves,” he said calmly. “Taras, at first light we shall find your brother. If he has been killed by an enemy, then Boris Liatoukine shall beg your pardon. If he has fled, you shall beg his.”

“We should search for him now!” Taras said.

“No,” Khlit said in a quiet but fierce voice. “If there are enemies abroad, human or devil, I do not want to meet them while we are scattered and stumbling in the dark.”

“You sound more like an old woman than a Cossack!” Taras said. He moved to the place his horse was saddled and sprang on its back.

“Cossacks, we search for Doroscha!”

Several men started toward the horses but hesitated when Khlit drew his curved sword.

“Taras!” he shouted, pointing the blade at the mounted man. “Go and search, but no man from this camp goes with you; and whether you find your brother or not, do not come back.”

Without a word, Taras wheeled his horse and rode into the night.

“Ayub and Menelitzta, finish the watch,” Khlit said. “From now on, no man watches alone. Beware of vampires coming in the form of our former comrades.”

“What if Taras or his brother return, and they are still human?” Menelitzta asked, gathering his weapons.

“Kill them,” Khlit said. “Vampires and deserters deserve the same fate.”

I sat up with them for the watch, as did Cassave.

“Your companion seems remarkable untroubled by all this,” I said. “He never even stirred.”

“The Magister is not bothered by much,” he replied. “I only wish I had his calm.”

“Feh!” Ayub said, and spit into the campfire. “A Cossack is calm in the face of death, but only a fool sleeps so soundly when the hordes of Hell are abroad.”

“The Magister is no fool,” Cassave replied with a soft chuckle. “He had taught me many secrets of the seen and unseen worlds, and I have only begun to touch the surface of his wisdom. If he sleeps, we can rest assured that there is no danger... at least, not to him.”

“A strange man,” I said. “How do you know you can trust him?”

“We have a bargain, he and I,” Cassave said. “Besides, he is the one who gave me the means to our victory over Chernabog.”

“A holy weapon?” Ayub asked.

Cassave’s eyes twinkled with humor as he produced a slender silver urn from his robes. The bright metal was covered with mysterious glyphs that I could not read. In honesty, though, having never learned to read even my mother tongue, all letters are mysterious to me. I could only say for certain that it was not Russian writing.

“I will catch him in this,” Cassave said.

I shook my head and Ayub laughed.

“Surely, the Prince of Darkness is too big to fit in such a little vessel?”

“Have you heard of the Jinn?” Cassave asked.

“I have,” young Menelitzta said. “The Turks and the Tatars speak of them. They are evil spirits made of smokeless fire who wander the Earth doing mischief. Their king is Satan, whom the Muslims call Iblis.”

“We have another scholar among us,” Cassave said in an appreciative tone. Menelitzta bowed his head shyly and glanced at me and Ayub, no doubt worried that we would deem his knowledge effeminate.

“Tell me, mighty Cossack,” Cassave continued, “is the campfire bigger than you or smaller?”

Ayub’s forehead puckered in thought, something I suspect his brain was unaccustomed.

“Smaller,” he said.

“And if we were to pile a dozen stout branches on the campfire... would it still be smaller?”

Ayub shook his head slowly with an expression that mingled suspicion and awe.

“No,” Cassave said in an even tone with no hint of mockery. “It would be the same fire, but grown greater than any man. And if the fire should dwindle for lack of fuel?”

“It would become small,” Ayub said, feeling his way through the question.

“And?” Cassave prompted.

“Small enough for your little pot...”

“Excellent!” Cassave said clapping the giant’s shoulder heartily. Ayub beamed proudly and I could see that the foreigner had won him over.

“As it is with fire, so with the jinn,” Cassave said.

“But how would you compel the Devil?” Menelitzta asked. “Would that not be an act of dark sorcery?”

“One would think so,” the scholar replied, “but that is not so. Do not the Tatars and the Turks tell how the wise King Solomon captured the jinn and bound them to lamps and rings and many other vessels?”

The youth nodded, a little uncertainly.

“It is not sorcery that will help us, but the holy wisdom of this man of God,” Cassave said.

My companions were clearly impressed by the foreigner's words, but I was more suspicious than ever. For all his words flowed like honey, Cassave was no holy man.

We lost two more the next night. All the men slept soundly except for Zaroff and his servant, Ivanushka, who were on watch, and myself and Liatoukine, who feigned sleep.

Around midnight, Hella's sweet song was heard and the handsome Cossack picked up his bow and slipped away from the camp, forbidding his servant to follow. A short time later the singing stopped and Zaroff screamed in terror.

The camp roused in an instant. Khlit called for order but this did not stop Ivanushka from drawing his saber and racing into the dark to go to his master's air.

"Torches!" the old wolf shouted. "We follow but we stay together."

Each man lighted a brand and mounted his steed. It took us less than a quarter of an hour to find Ivanushka. The giant lay amid a jumble of rocks, his spine twisted so badly it was clear his back was broken.

"Where is your master?" Khlit demanded. "Why did he leave the camp?"

"It... it was the song..." Ivanushka said between gasps. "When I followed I saw him... with beautiful woman... skin as pale as the Moon..."

"Where?" Khlit repeated, but the giant fell silent and his eyes glazed over.

We searched for Zaroff but found only his Tatar warbow and quiver of arrows abandoned on the steppe.

"We should take these back to the Sich," Ivan Sabalinka said. "He would want his son to have them when he comes of age."

"I will carry them," I said. For the life of me (or whatever passes for life in my case) I couldn't say why I did that.

The next day we made good progress, but I could see that the days of hard riding and nights of fitful sleep were making the men haggard. I could see that this pleased Liatoukine, but my unbeating heart felt a touch of something—not sympathy perhaps, but nostalgia. These were brave men and riding with them made me think of my former life. I took no joy in the fact that they would all soon be dead.

In the early afternoon, Khlit called a halt.

"The Magister tells me that we will find something there that will help us." He pointed to a low mound in the distance.

"The *kurgan*?" Ayub asked. "Do we look to magic and ghosts to help us?"

In response, the old wolf spurred his horse and the rest of us followed. We were a little apprehensive for, while these ancient burial mounds are common on the steppe, there is something ominous about them. I told myself that nothing the *kurgan* could hold should frighten a creature of the night, but even a vampire can be superstitious, I suppose.

Someone had dug into the side of the mound, forming a chink in the rocks that led within. Khlit had no interest in entering the mound, however. He was much more interested in the massive hive than a colony of bees.

"There is your magic," Cassave said, laughing. "The same magic that Odysseus used against the sirens."

The men gathered bundles of tall grass and set the ends asmolde to lull the bees to sleep. Despite this, all were stung as they gathered handfuls of wax. I alone managed to avoid this on the pretext of taking the horses a safe distance away, and this proved most fortunate.

Cassave tended to the men afterwards, using the tip of a dagger to pluck out the stingers. Ivan Sabalinka's face twitched, more with annoyance than pain, as the scholar performed his ministrations. Menelitzka took his turn with the exaggerated stoicism of a youth determined to prove his courage to his elders. Ayub's skin had turned bright red around the stings and his breathing was labored. Cassave showed concern over this, but the giant only laughed.

"All that I need is a healthy dose of corn brandy," he said.

Cassave took a small vial of some blue liquid from his robe and offered it to Ayub.

"It is not corn brandy, but I think you will like it."

Ayub sniffed the potion suspiciously, then drained it. He made a face as it went down, but that expression turned to one of wonder as the red blotches faded and his breathing returned to normal.

"By the Father and the Son," the big man said.

Cassave turned to Liatoukine only to be dismissed with a gesture of contempt.

"I am no weakling to fear the stings of insects," Liatoukine said.

"Bee venom is not to be scoffed at," the scholar said. "If I had not given Ayub my alchemic treatment, his throat would have closed and he could not have breathed."

The Cossack drew back his sleeve and held out an arm. I could see no less than half a dozen tiny stings embedded there, some still quivering.

"As you see, Boris Liatoukine is made of sterner stuff," he said.

"No redness... no swelling." Cassave said, half to himself. "I wonder..."

He brought the dagger to Liatoukine's arm as if to flick out the stings but instead plunged the tip deep into his flesh.

"Madman!" the Cossack shouted, leaping away and drawing his saber.

"Look!" Cassave held out the weapon for us to see. "There is no blood on the blade and none on Liatoukine's wound. I wondered why the beestings did not affect him and now I know. Boris Liatoukine is no living man!"

With a snarl of rage, Liatoukine stepped toward him but Khlit interposed himself with his own curved blade drawn.

"This man—this *foreigner*—lies!" Liatoukine shouted.

"He speaks truth." The Magister, silent until now, spoke in a calm voice. There was something unnaturally compelling about his words. I knew that I should leap to Liatoukine's defense but was so fascinated that I made no move.

"You should confess it," the Magister said. "It was a brilliant stroke... Who better than a Cossack to infiltrate a band of Cossacks? And you have none of the weaknesses that would betray so many of your kind. You walk in daylight... you bear the cross on your sword... you can even enter a church and receive the blessing of the *batkos*..."

"How do you know these things?" Liatoukine demanded. His outburst—and the truth it betrayed—startled me. I could see that Liatoukine also was shocked at his own words. How had this foreigner compelled him to say this?

"I remember now," Khlit said. "When I was a lad of sixteen, just come to the Sich, there was a Cossack who had murdered another. We gave him the traditional punishment by placing him under his victim's coffin and burying him alive in the same grave. I see that some men are too evil to remain in the ground."

"Fools!" Liatoukine snarled. "You simper on about good and evil, holy and unholy, but there are no such things. There are only the strong and the weak, and I am strong!"

He lunged at Khlit with a speed beyond human, yet the old wolf brought his blade up with such skill that he parried the blow. Menelitza sprang to his godfather's defense but Liatoukine leapt away with such speed that, to mortal eyes, he seemed to vanish.

I seized my sword hilt. I didn't want to help Liatoukine kill my brother Cossacks, but my duty was clear. Before I could draw, the Magister laid a hand on my wrist and I felt my resolve melt away.

Liatoukine slashed at Menelitza and the lad fell, badly wounded. Khlit sprang forward but even his skill was nothing to the vampire's speed. He disarmed the gray-haired warrior and sent him stumbling to the ground. But as Liatoukine raised his blade for the final blow, a shot rang out.

Boris Liatoukine staggered forward a pace, a look of astonishment on his face. Behind him I saw Ivan Sabalinka bolding a smoking pistol. Then Ayub leapt at him with a mighty roar, striking his head from his shoulders with a sweep of his saber.

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE BOOK