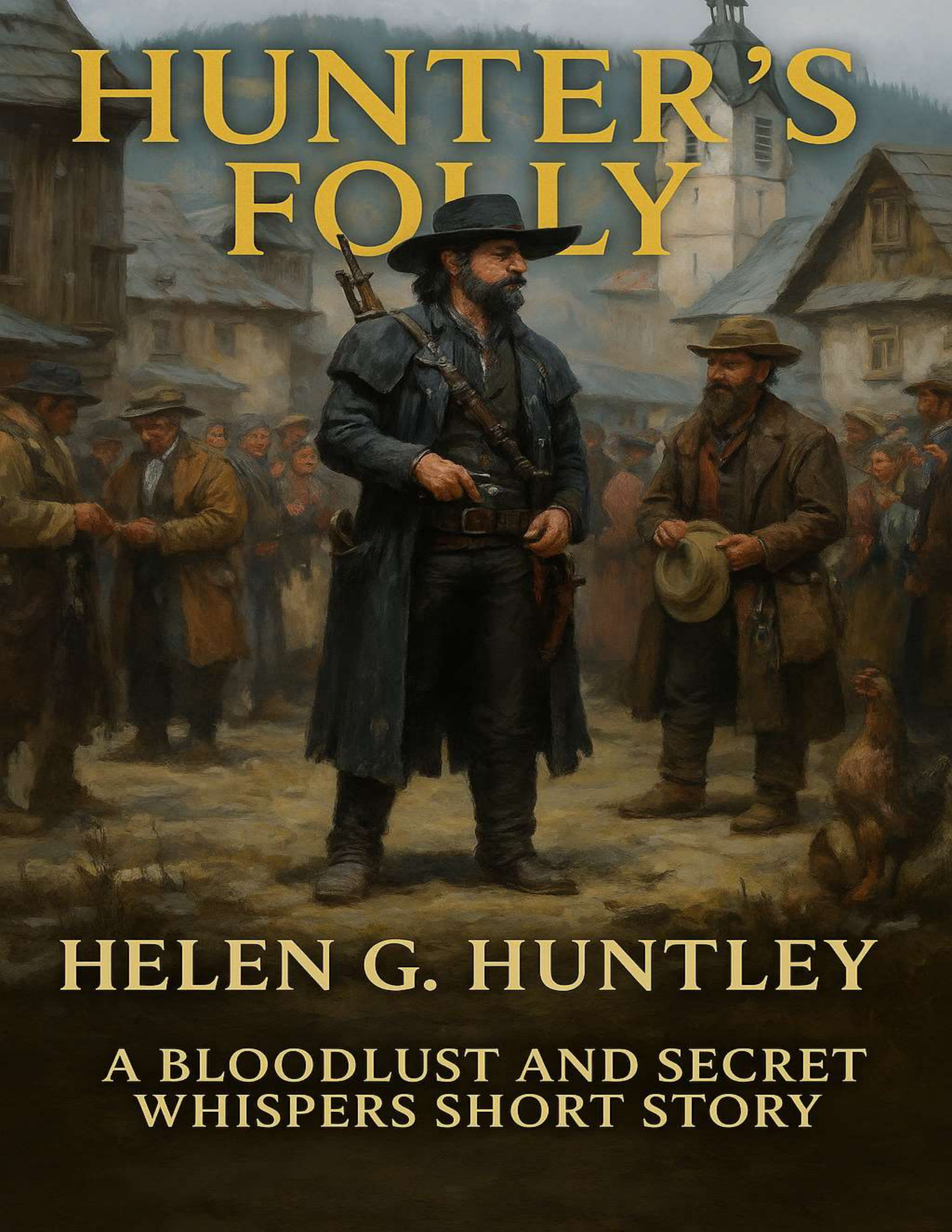


HUNTER'S FOLLY



HELEN G. HUNTLEY

A BLOODLUST AND SECRET
WHISPERS SHORT STORY

HUNTER'S FOLLY

A Bloodlust and Secret Whispers Short Story

Helen G. Huntley

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"ARE YOU STILL ALPHABETIZING the nails?" Ishtak asked with an affectionate grin. "You will not start naming them, I hope."

"I'm almost finished," Costea said. "I'm at S for shingle."

Ishtak always told me no one in Bran cared what size nail they bought, but he still let me sort the bins by length and width. Twice a week, I came to the Prevalie to put his mess in order, bolts, thread, pitch, oil. He said my brain was like a ledger, and I didn't argue.

"You'll spoil me, Costea," Ishtak said from behind the counter, tallying some new shipments. "Once you're gone, I'll never find a thing again."

"I'm not going anywhere," I said, lining up a perfect row of copper nails. "I couldn't imagine what your shop would look like without me."

That was when the noise came. First a rumble of hooves, then shouts. Ishtak looked up, eyebrows knitting together.

"Market starts tomorrow," he muttered, putting down his pen. We both walked to the doorway and squinted toward the square.

The horse clopped into Bran's square just as the church bells tolled noon. It was a pitiful animal, ribs showing under patchy brown fur, dragging a cart that looked one wheel away from collapse. On top of the cart, swaying like a man who'd already had three drinks too many, stood a stranger in a long, black coat. His hat was too wide, his boots too tall, and he held a wooden cross like a knight's banner. His black cloak flared like wings when he leapt down, throwing his arms wide. Behind him, two rough men hopped off the cart, both looking like they'd stolen their clothes from drunk shepherds.

"People of Bran!" the man roared, his voice rolling off the mountains. "I am Vasil Karlofi, hunter of strigoi and destroyer of Pricolici! You are blessed, for I have arrived to rid you of your curse!"

The villagers emerged from doorways and shops, muttering to one another. Some crossed themselves.

Ishtak sighed. "Another fool looking to fill his purse. How many of these men do we have to endure?" Then he glanced at me with a knowing look.

I hovered at the edge of the gathering, notebook in hand. My pencil scratched as I sketched the tall man, the horse, the cart with its mismatched boards. I always drew the new arrivals. This was no different. By the time Vasil had raised his arms to heaven and started describing the horrors that lurked in our forests, I already had two pages drawn.

Vasil Karlofi's voice carried like a church bell, booming against the stone walls of the square. "You live under the shadow of the strigoi!" he cried, lifting a bottle of cloudy water like it was treasure. "Your children, your livestock, your very souls are in danger, and only I can protect you!"

The two men with him, one short and rat-faced, the other tall and shaped like a sack of potatoes, unloaded the cart, setting down crates and bundles. I noticed old rags wrapped half the bundles, and one leaked flour onto the ground.

I sat on the edge of the fountain with my notebook and pencil, sketching as fast as I could. I drew his wide mouth, his pointed beard, the flare of his cloak. But also his movements, the big gestures, and the swagger. I made notes: "voice like thunder, boots worn at the heels."

Some villagers whispered their doubts. Ion, the shepherd, spoke up. "We've no strigoi here in Bran. But we have a creature that comes out on the full moon and kills. You don't seem like someone who could face a monster."

Vasil's head snapped toward him, his eyes cold and sharp. "Then it will meet a hunter," he said, his voice low and dangerous. "And I promise you, shepherd, I'll leave no creature, wolf, man, or demon, alive if it dares touch my people."

"Your people?" Ion went on. "Since when are we your people? We don't even know you." There was agreement among some villagers, and I heard a couple of men yelling, "Yes, that's right!"

Vasil turned on them, his face dark with fury. "Then stay strangers," he snarled, "and see how long you live as strangers. That

beast out there doesn't care whose name you shout or what prayers you mumble—it only cares that your blood runs warm." He jabbed a finger toward the forest. "You think the monster waits for an invitation? When it comes for your children, your wives, your flocks, I hope your pride keeps you safe!"

The villagers fell silent, and he lowered his voice, cold as steel. "Give me the silver, and I'll be the wall between you and a shallow grave. Refuse, and by the next full moon, there'll be more corpses than coins."

As I sketched the frightened crowd, Ishtak leaned over. "Look at that. Five minutes ago he was guessing at strigoi, and now he's the eminent expert on monsters." A nervous murmur spread through the crowd, and someone muttered, "Better pay him..."

One man passed a hat through the crowd. "Silver for the holy hunter!" he called. "He cannot protect your homes on an empty stomach!"

I saw coins drop in. A few copper coins, a couple of silver.

Ishtak groaned under his breath beside me. "Idiots. All of them."

I sketched the hat, the greedy hands waiting, the frail hands of the villagers as they dropped their few precious coins. By the time Vasil finished roaring about dark spirits and cursed soil, the hat was full, and a few women wrung their aprons. He bowed low, black cloak sweeping the dirt, and promised to begin his "sacred work" that very night.

I closed my notebook and walked with Ishtak toward the Prevalie. The village was quiet, yet I kept hearing the soft clinking of coins hitting the hunter's hat. Frail hands, empty now, trembled in my

mind as if they couldn't let go. Even when we reached the store, I still felt their touch on my sketches, and a chill I couldn't shake settled in my bones.

But that night, by lamplight, I opened my notebook again. And that's when I saw it. I'd drawn more than I realized. Vasil's wide grin stretched too far, his teeth sharp, his hands hooked like claws. Behind him, in the scribbled shadows, I'd drawn shapes, faces I didn't remember seeing. Their eyes were nothing but hollow smudges, yet when I looked too long, I swore they glimmered red in the paper's gray.

I froze, my stomach twisting, and the pencil slid from my fingers without me even feeling it fall.

THAT NIGHT I DIDN'T sleep. Not a minute. Not a second.

Every time I closed my eyes, Vasil's grin split the darkness like a wound, those red eyes behind him burning holes through my eyelids, and the claws. God, those claws I hadn't meant to draw, they scraped against the inside of my skull, desperate to claw their way out.

By first light, I was already half-running along the rain-slicked path to Maria's cottage, my knuckles white around the notebook pressed against my thundering heart.

Her chimney belched smoke like a dragon's breath against the bloodless sky.

When I knocked, Lila, Maria's granddaughter, opened the door. Lila isn't much younger than I am. She was barefoot, her hair like a

raven's wing, and as always smelling of wild mint. She blinked at me, then smiled the way she does when she catches me staring too long at the ground.

"Costea," she said softly. "Come in. Grandmother's busy."

Inside, the cottage was warm and smelled of pine needles and something sweet boiling. Maria stood at the table, mashing herbs with the stone pestle. She didn't look up when I entered.

"What's wrong?" she asked, as if she already knew.

I hesitated, then opened my notebook to the page of Vasil Karlofi. As I opened the notebook, the ink seemed to shift on the page, jagged lines curled into fangs, loops stretched into talons, and smudged graphite formed hunched silhouettes that made the paper rustle with what sounded like whispers.

Maria finally turned, wiping her hands on her apron. She bent so near to the page that her breath stirred the corner. Her finger hovered above the line where I'd captured the slight downward pull at the edge of his mouth.

She straightened, and I felt the weight of her gaze before I met it.

"You saw him," she said, her voice dropping to nearly a whisper. "Not just his face. His truth."

Lila crept closer, peering over her shoulder. "Oh," Lila said, barely audible. "Those are the things that hold his soul."

My shoulders tensed, and a chill ran up my spine, making the pencil tremble between my fingers. I stared at the page, at the lines that had formed there without my permission. "I didn't—" My voice caught. I swallowed hard. "I didn't mean to draw that."

"You didn't have to mean it," Maria said. "It's in you. Your hand knows what your mouth won't say."

Lila reached for my notebook, almost reverent, and I let her turn the pages. She stopped at the one where the hollow eyes lurked in the tree line, far behind Vasil's departing figure. Her fingers hovered over the page, and she whispered, "I feel them."

Maria took the book back, closed it gently, and pressed it into my hands. "Listen to me, Costea. You have a gift. A dangerous one. You see what others can't." She leaned closer, so close I could smell the pine smoke in her hair. "Never stop. Draw what you see, even if it frightens you. One day, it may be the only thing that saves us."

I swallowed hard and nodded.

Lila lingered behind me, staring like she might say something, then thought better of it. Maria turned back to the herbs, her hands moving automatically, muttering under her breath, not a prayer, not words I could catch, just something to fill the silence we didn't know how to break.

There was a knock on the door, loud, hurried.

Maria raised an eyebrow at me. "Expecting anyone?"

I shook my head. "This is your cottage, Maria. No one comes looking for me."

Lila glanced between us, then crossed the room to open the door.

Ishtak filled the doorway, cheeks flushed from the cold and his fur cap crooked on his head. "Costea! I knew you'd come here." He stepped inside, brushing snow from his sleeves. "I couldn't stop thinking about that hunter all night. I swear I dreamed he was prowling through my storeroom."

Maria motioned for him to sit, and he did, eyeing the bubbling pot on the hearth with suspicion. "I swear he's worse than a thief," Ishtak said, shaking his head. "He's a liar who smells like one. He's come to take our silver and leave us spooked like frightened hens."

I swallowed and opened my notebook again. Maria nodded to me, and I slid it across the table toward him.

Ishtak leaned close, his big hands flat on the wood. When he saw Vasil Karlofi's face in my drawing, stretched too wide, teeth sharp, eyes hungry. Ishtak's jaw tightened.

He muttered something in that language he always speaks when he thinks no one is listening. He told me once it was Hebrew, the language of his people. "That's him. That's what I felt in my bones."

Maria's eyes glittered. "Costea sees true. He always has."

Ishtak gave me a brief nod, as if I'd just earned some extra measure of respect. Then he turned to Maria. "So," he said, lowering his voice, "what do we do about this hunter?"

Maria's gaze went thoughtful. "If we confront him, he'll roar and frighten the fools even more. He needs to be driven out... but first, he must be unmasked."

"Unmasked?" Ishtak said. "Make him look like the fool he is?"

"Exactly."

He leaned closer. "You're the only one in Bran who can do that. If there's some... spell, some potion...something to make him trip over his lies..."

Maria smiled then, slow and foxlike. "Yes," she said. "There is such a thing."

I watched as she turned to the shelves and began plucking jars filled with dried nettles, hawthorn berries, a black feather, and something in a small vial that shimmered like frost. She set them on the table one by one, and Lila moved to help, her hands steady but her eyes wide with excitement.

"Costea," Maria said without looking up, "keep your pencil ready. You'll want to remember this."

Maria swept the herbs and vials toward the cauldron in the hearth while Lila stoked the fire. The sweet, sharp smell of crushed nettles mingled with smoke and pine resin.

Ishtak muttered something under his breath in Hebrew, soft and quick, like a prayer he didn't want anyone to hear, and pulled his chair back a little farther from the hearth. "I never know if I should watch or close my eyes when you do this," he said.

Maria chuckled low. "Then watch. Fear comes from ignorance, Ishtak."

She handed Lila a bundle of dried hawthorn and instructed her to break the twigs into three. The girl's small hands snapped them with a crack like bones. Maria took the pieces and dropped them into the simmering pot, one by one. Each time, the water hissed and turned a deeper shade of green.

Then came the black feather. Maria held it over the pot and whispered words I didn't recognize. The feather twitched in her hand as though trying to escape. When she finally let it fall, the feather melted like ice the moment it touched the water.

I sketched furiously, though my hand trembled a little.

"Costea," Maria said, without looking at me, "write what you smell."

I paused, sniffing the air. "It's... sharp, like onions. And sweet like honey. And... like wet stone after rain."

"Good," she said. "Remember that."

Next, she lifted the vial that shimmered like frost. She held it up to the light, and the liquid swirled with tiny sparks. "Moon water," she said, "from the first snowmelt of spring."

Lila's eyes shone with wonder as Maria poured three drops into the cauldron. The liquid hissed and spat sparks, filling the room with a faint silver glow.

"What will it do?" I asked before I could stop myself.

Maria's smile was sly. "It will make him trip over his lies. His tongue will twist, his feet will stumble, and his hands will betray him. By nightfall tomorrow, Bran will see Vasil Karlofi for what he truly is."

Ishtak let out a low whistle, then caught himself and mumbled another line in Hebrew, shaking his head. "You always scare me," he said. "But I like it."

Maria stirred the potion clockwise three times, then counterclockwise once. The liquid darkened to a murky purple. She dipped a sprig of pine into the brew and stepped out of the cottage, the frosty morning air biting her cheeks. Lifting the branch, she traced a strange symbol in the air, and smoke followed her motions like a living ribbon, curling out over the village.

I watched from the doorway as the smoke drifted steadily toward the tavern. I wondered if that was where Vasil and his men had gone.

"Tomorrow," Maria muttered, "we'll see if the great Vasil can survive a good laugh from those he called his people."

LATER, I FOLLOWED THE sound of voices to the tavern. There were not many people there. Only a handful of men huddled close to the fire, shoulders brushing, the air thick with smoke and the sour bite of plum brandy. Claudiu stood behind the bar, arms crossed, watching them with the weary look of a man who'd rather bar the door than pour another drink.

Vasil Karlofi and his two men had claimed the corner table, spreading their elbows wide as if they owned the place. A jug of wine, already half-empty, sat in front of them. The rat-faced one was gnawing on a bone, and the sack-shaped one had a smear of grease down his shirt.

I sat in the corner, sipping my ale. The sun hadn't gone down yet, and the tavern felt half-asleep, smoke curling lazily in the firelight. I hadn't touched my notebook—I was almost afraid to draw anything after what I'd sketched yesterday.

The door creaked open, and a draft of cold air swept in. Caliban Drakovar stepped inside, tall and broad-shouldered, his fur-lined cloak dusted with snow. "Claudiu," he said, voice smooth and deep, "bring me a pint."

He crossed to the table he always chose, the one near the wall where he could watch the entire room. He saw Vasil and his men at their table, drinking wine and laughing loud enough to rattle the glasses.

When Claudiu brought his ale, Caliban leaned back in his chair and nodded toward them. "Those men?"

Claudiu snorted. "Strigoi hunters. They think they're going to deal with the creature that comes with the full moon." He shook his head and went back to the bar.

Caliban's gaze lingered on the hunters. A slow smile curved his lips, and he called across the room. "So... brave men who've come to Bran," he said, his voice rich with amusement, "I hear you plan to rid our village of its... trouble."

Vasil puffed out his chest. "Aye. We'll make quick work of it."

Caliban's smile deepened. "I believe you. Only the boldest men chase a beast they've never seen, one that leaves nothing but torn flesh behind. It takes courage... or a taste for death."

A ripple of laughter rose from the table, but I saw one man shift in his seat.

Caliban raised his mug in a toast. "Then may the night honor your bravery... and remember your names."

"Thank you, friend," Vasil said and lifted his glass to him. Caliban returned the gesture, looking as if he were trying not to smirk.

After a while, Claudiu started snuffing the lamps, the tavern sinking into shadows. "Enough," he grumbled. "Go home, all of you. Lock your doors, bolt your shutters. You too, Caliban, get back to your castle and hope the creature doesn't find you."

Caliban lifted his pint in a mock salute. "Thank you, Claudiu. I very well may hope that."

He rose slowly, his chair scraping against the floorboards. The hunters fell quiet as he stood; the firelight glinting in his dark eyes. "Gentlemen," he said softly, "if the creature comes for you tonight... don't run. It only excites the hunt."

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Vasil barked a laugh, and the others followed, slapping the table and calling for one more drink.

"No more drinks," Claudiu hollered from across the room. "Now go on and get out of here!"

Caliban only smiled, thin and sharp, before striding out into the cold.

WHEN I STEPPED OUTSIDE, the frosty air hit me like a slap, and the village had already begun its ritual. Doors were slamming shut, shutters bolting. I saw people scurrying to get inside with garlands of garlic swinging from their necks, clutching silver candlesticks like holy weapons. It was like this every month. Everyone knew what the night might bring.

I should go home, lock my door, and wait for morning.

Down by the square, I spotted Vasil and his two men emptying their wagon, tossing out crossbows, stakes, and jugs of wine. I hesitated, wanting to warn them, but what good would it do? They wouldn't listen to me. They'd probably laugh, or worse, accuse me of cowardice.

So, I went back into the tavern and found Claudiu wiping the counter. "Someone needs to tell that hunter and his men to lock themselves inside," I said. "Tonight is the full moon."

Claudiu snorted. "He's a monster hunter. Let him hunt the monster."

"I know Vasil's a fraud," I said quietly, "but I don't want him to die."

Claudiu sighed, setting down the rag. "All right. I'll warn them. But whether they have the sense to get inside..." He shrugged. "...that's up to them."

Later that night, I sat in my cottage with the fire crackling low in the hearth; the warmth chasing off the Carpathian chill. Pages littered my little table, along with the sketches I couldn't stop drawing: The look on Caliban's face when he spoke to the hunters in the tavern, and the grin he wore as he left. The fear in the eyes of one man as he spoke to them. Then another, Vasil, being torn apart by invisible hands. *When had I drawn that?*

Outside, the moon was high over Bran, flooding the snow-covered roofs with silver. Through the shutters, I heard Vasil and his men stomping about the square, making a racket only fools would make on a night like this. The clatter of weapons echoed, crossbows cocked, swords drawn, a clinking of bottles like they were drinking for courage. One of them howled, a pitiful imitation of a wolf, followed by laughter.

"Monster hunters," I said to myself grimly. "Is this what strigoi and pricolici hunters do? Drink, shout, and scare off the shadows with noise and bravado."

I took up my pencil and wrote it all down, the way I'd seen it, the way I felt it. The fire popped, and the cottage creaked around me, and I tried not to imagine the dark streets outside... or the things that hunted them.

It was too late to warn them now.

Sometime after midnight, I fell asleep at my table, my head pillowed on my arms, the pencil still in my hand.

When I stirred, the fire had burned low, little more than embers winking in the dark. The room had gotten cold, the type of cold that crept into your bones. My back ached as I rose and stoked the coals until a soft orange glow returned. The room felt warmer now. I shuffled to my bed, blew out the lamp, and lay back with a sigh.

That's when I heard it.

A low, guttural growl, so deep it vibrated in my chest. Rising from just beyond the wall where my bed sat. My heart stopped, then hammered hard enough to make me dizzy. I didn't move, didn't breathe. The sound lingered, rumbling as if the earth itself was alive and angry.

For a single frozen moment, I was sure the monster had come for me.

Then the growl slowly faded, sliding away into the night. Heavy footsteps crunched over the snow, moving farther from my cottage, back toward the village square.

I clutched the blanket in my fists, every muscle tight. "Please, God, let Vasil and his men be inside somewhere by now. Let them be warm and drunk in the tavern, sleeping in borrowed rooms with doors bolted and windows shuttered." Because if they were still out there in the moonlight, they would not live to see morning.

At some point, I must have drifted into sleep, though it was the uneasy kind where every creak of the cottage seeps into your dreams.

I dreamed of the village square under the full moon. The snow glowed silver, and Vasil stood in the center, sword raised high, his cloak snapping like wings. His men were shouting, but their words

were wrong, garbled, slurred, echoing in my head like they were underwater.

Then, a shadow slid across the snow. A wolf... no, a large man. No, a mix of both, larger than any wolf or man could be. Its eyes glowed like coals.

Vasil swung his sword, but it was as if the blade passed through smoke. His men stumbled backward, tripping over the wagon, and the thing leapt. Claws, teeth, screaming, horrible wet tearing sounds. The dream dissolved into crimson and snow, and still the beast came toward me, as if I were his next victim.

I jolted awake, heart pounding, my nightshirt damp with sweat. For a moment, I thought I could still hear the growl under my window, but sunlight was streaming through the shutters.

A dream. Only a dream.

I sat up and wiped my face with a trembling hand, then forced myself to breathe. The fire was nothing but ashes. I stoked it, boiled water, and made a large cup of coffee. The familiar smell filled the cottage, grounding me.

I fried some bread and cheese for breakfast, chewing slowly while the sun climbed higher, pushing the shadows back into their corners. Afterward, I pulled out one of my books on plants, *Medicinal Herbs of the Carpathians*. I let myself get lost in the clean lines of leaves and roots, anything to scrub the memory of the dream from my mind.

For a while, it almost worked. But I needed to see Maria. I had to show her the drawing I'd somehow made while everyone was locked up for the night.

WHEN I STEPPED OUTSIDE, the cold slapped me. A light snowfall had dusted the village, softening the rooftops and weighing down the garlands of garlic. I crunched through the snow toward Maria's cottage, tucking the sketch under my coat.

That's when I saw it.

A dark smear in the snow, blood.

I froze. It wasn't much, just a spatter trailing between the cottages, but something inside me whispered, *Follow it*. My feet wouldn't move. I could still feel the echo of last night's dream in my chest. Instead of following, I turned and ran, boots slipping in the snow, my breath coming fast.

By the time I reached Maria's cottage, my heart was pounding. I hammered on the door harder than I meant to.

Lila opened it, her eyes wide. "Costea? What's wrong?"

"Maria," I gasped. "I need to see Maria."

Maria appeared behind her, already frowning. "Come in, quickly."

I stepped into the warm, herb-scented cottage, shaking snow from my coat. "I... I saw blood in the snow," I said, pulling the sketch from my coat. "And—this. I drew it last night."

Maria took the page, her lips pressing into a tight line as she studied the image of Vasil in my rough pencil strokes, torn apart by claws.

"Few villagers will be out this morning because of the snow," she said. "But the beast probably killed someone last night. We'll have to find them."

"Can the men do it?" I asked, though I already knew I didn't want to see it. Not after that dream.

Maria sank into a chair, the sketch trembling in her hand. "I believe I've done a terrible thing. When I brewed the spell, I didn't think the hunter and his men would stay out during the full moon. I didn't think they'd be that foolish. If the creature killed them, it's because they couldn't defend themselves, because of me."

I crouched in front of her. "From everything I know about the creature... it wouldn't have mattered. If they had been out last night, they couldn't have defended themselves either way. The creature is too strong. Too fast. Too powerful."

Maria reached out and took my hand, her eyes shining with worry. "Yes... I suppose you're right."

A knock rattled the cottage door, sharp and urgent.

Maria rose, and Florin the carpenter stood there, his face pale under his wool cap. Snow clung to his boots and the hem of his coat.

"Maria," he said, his voice tight, "there are three bodies. Ripped apart. Just inside the forest."

I felt my stomach turn even before he went on.

"Andrei and Tudor are already there," he said. "They always go out after the full moon... to find the bodies before the animals do."

Maria nodded grimly and reached for her cloak. Lila wrapped herself in hers without a word. I followed, though part of me wanted to bolt the door and stay in the warm cottage forever.

Whenever someone discovered a body, the villagers always summoned Maria and Lila, the village healers, mainly to assist and

comfort the family, but I sensed this situation was unique.

The snow was brighter now; the sun glinting cruelly off its surface as we followed Florin into the trees.

And then I saw them. My boots sank into the snow, and for a heartbeat I couldn't move. Vasil Karlofi and his men, or what remained of them, lay strewn across the white drifts like broken dolls. Silver arrows glittered uselessly under a thin coat of frost, some half-buried, some snapped. A crossbow leaned against a tree, its limbs cracked, the string frayed, like a child's toy left out in the cold. My stomach knotted as the wind hissed through the pines, carrying the faint copper scent of blood. All that silver, all those weapons... the monster hadn't even hesitated.

Lila clutched her grandmother's arm, her voice barely a whisper. "It's always so horrible, isn't it, Grandmother?"

"Yes, my dear," Maria said softly. "Death is horrible, no matter who it is."

Ishtak was there, and when he saw Maria, he approached her and put his arms around her. "You might as well go home, Maria. There's nothing you can do here."

Andrei and Tudor worked in silence, their faces grim, lifting what they could of the bodies onto rough sledges to bring them to the pyre. No one in Bran ever buried victims of the beast.

As we turned back toward the village, Lila's voice trembled. "I wonder if any of them had families. A wife, children..."

Maria kept her eyes on the snow. "I don't know. But if they did, the family will know something happened when these men don't return." She sighed. "It is sad. All of it is sad."

I pulled out my notebook, my hands stiff with cold, and wrote. Words poured out of me about the blood in the snow, the broken weapons, the grief in Lila's voice.

I lingered at the edge of the trees, my boots sinking into the snow, and watched Maria and Lila walk ahead of me, their cloaks brushing together, arms wrapped around one another. Grandmother and granddaughter, women who had seen more than anyone should bear in a lifetime.

With numb fingers, letting the pencil move where it would, first words, then a sketch of them against the white hills. I looked down at the page and saw that I had drawn the sun as it came up over the village, breaking from behind a cloud, its light spilling over Maria and Lila. It was a stark contrast as behind them, the trail of blood disappeared into the forest, already being swallowed by the drifting snow.

The End