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# Operation: Immortal Servitude

By

**Tony Ruggiero**

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Reviews of  
Tony Ruggiero's original: *Team of Darkness*  
Reviewer's Choice Award, 5 Stars!

"Believe in vampires? Creatures of the night? They can suck the life out of their victims and bring terror in the wake of their attacks. Once you've read Tony Ruggiero's newest horror thriller, *Team of Darkness*, you will. Ruggiero brings us on a hyper-coaster ride using his 23 years in the US Navy, to write a hypnotic plot about a nest of vampires used by a United States Navy general to fight the War on Drugs. So wait until dusk, and under the cover of night, *Team of Darkness* will mesmerize you with its realism and fluid writing style. And maybe, just maybe make you wish they come to your city."

~Michael L. Thal, *Scribes World Reviews*

"Tony Ruggiero delivers an entertaining and surprisingly compelling novel. I was especially impressed with his handling of military details. He gives the reader enough information without overdoing the technicalities. *Team of Darkness* has that cool Commando type feel (think *Wolf's Hour* on a smaller scale) to it. I found myself really wanting to find out what happens in the next chapter. Ruggiero writes with a skilled seamless style that makes *Team of Darkness* a real find."

~Paukla Sahraoul, *Horror World Review*

4 Stars!

"If you believe or even just like to read about vampires, this book may make you think about all the what ifs."

~Carol Castellanos, *SimeGen Book Reviews*

"Ruggiero wields his proven literary skills and personal military knowledge with the deftness of a seasoned piercing of the jugular. Realistic settings and life-filled characters, plus an in-depth and sympathetic view of the vampires, makes *Team of Darkness* required reading for all fans of horror."

~John Patrick Schmitz, *The Door to Worlds Imagined*

"Tony Ruggiero served 23 years in the US Navy, and he has made excellent use of his experiences in this book. The characters and organization in this novel are entertaining, believable and very consistent. Add to this a very easy to read writing style and there's a lot to recommend in this novel. I'm not the most frequent horror reader as I often find there can be too much of a reliance on gore to shock the reader, but that is not the case here. This is simply a well-constructed, tightly plotted, fun to read novel."

~Steve Mazey, *The Eternal Night Science Fiction,  
Fantasy and Horror Fiction Web Site*

"*Team of Darkness* is a thoroughly entertaining adventure novel that will appeal to both fans of that genre and readers of fantasy who like a bit of thought with their action. And, though it seems all the dilemmas the characters face are completely resolved, there seems to be an underlying hint that there is more to come. One can only hope."

~Elizabeth K Burton, *The Blue Iris Journal* 5/02

"Anne Rice never gave me nightmares but Tony Ruggiero does. *Team of Darkness*

is the first book I've had to read during the day! Thanks Tony, for a refreshingly new slant on the vampire culture."

~Vickie Littleton ~Reader

"Excellent Horror Read!—Very Highly Recommended. Tony Ruggiero blends spine-chilling descriptions and philosophical dialogue in a most horrific and entertaining way. Heart-pounding action starts from the beginning and never ceases till the end. If any book should be a horror movie, Ruggiero's should; for the story is one that will keep movie-goers glued to the screen. Hopefully, Ruggiero will pleasure his book-reading fans (like me) by writing a sequel to *Team of Darkness*."

~Patricia Spork, *Word Weaving Book Review*

"I am a fan of vampire stories and I really enjoyed this radically different approach to vampires and to vampire stories. Tony Ruggiero has managed to create chillingly inhuman vampires and yet despite of that you end up rooting for them as they battle against the cold inhumanity of the military. He raises some interesting questions of morality, both among the vampires and the military that would use them."

~Linda Suzane, [www.midnightblood.com](http://www.midnightblood.com)

"*Team of Darkness* is a subtle, gothic, and intelligent novel; and an interesting addition to the military horror genre."

~Mike Purfield, *B-independent.com Book Review*

**OPERATION:**  
Immortal Servitude  
From the Declassified Files of  
Team of Darkness  
Tony Ruggiero  
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## Dedication

This book is sincerely  
dedicated to those  
people that:  
had faith in me to  
write it,  
helped me complete  
it and will get  
enjoyment from it.



"There are always choices, Commander Reese. No one knows that better than I do.  
However, it's what we do with those choices that truly defines our existence."

~The Vampire Dimitri

"Death is better than defeat. Defeat you have to live with."

~Navy SEAL Compound-NAB Little Creek

"If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle  
us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die?  
And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?"

~William Shakespeare

## Author's Note

In 2002 I published *Team of Darkness* and since then if anyone sees me they say, “there he is ... the vampire guy.” No matter what else I write, I'm stuck with the vampire writer label. It'll probably end up on my tombstone.

Readers have asked, well more like demanded actually, that I continue the story of Navy Commander John Reese and the vampire Dimitri and add more “meat” to it. For those comments I am eternally grateful because it reaffirms that so many people enjoyed the original story to demand more. Well I am happy to say ... here you are!

*Operation Immortal Servitude* is *Team of Darkness* with more meat added to it. How much meat you ask-well about 80 pages or so. So if you have read *Team of Darkness* you will find that material within the pages of this book, but more importantly this “revamped” version sets the stage (how's that for a tease) for the series of books to follow.

Book II: *Operation: Save the Innocent*

Book III: *Operation: Face the Fear*

Book IV: *Operation: End Game*

I look forward to continuing the story of John Reese and the vampire Dimitri both because I enjoy it, and because you, the reader, wants it and that makes everything just right.

Happy reading and remember to keep the lights on.

Tony Ruggiero, 2007

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## Prologue

*Dear J:*

*It's late. We should be arriving soon at our destination. I have a feeling that I won't survive this night. The enemy (whoever that may be) will probably kill me. I know it sounds strange that I, a Navy officer with over twenty years of service, say whoever the enemy is as if I do not know, but that is the truth. I no longer know who I can trust and that includes the ... men I lead. I call them men but they aren't really men anymore. They are something else—they are creatures that—well I am not sure if they should be revered or despised? I know it sounds strange, but if I could answer that question I would have been smart enough to not be where I am today. But like my superiors, I was blinded by my personal desires. Now it may be the cause of my death.*

Personally, I think the General has been insane for quite a while. My only hope is to stay with the creatures and wait. But now I fear I may have waited too long. Still, there might be a chance if I survive this operation; some hope that I might be able to set things right. I say set things right because it was me who brought everything together so that all of this nightmare could happen. Nevertheless, if I am successful and I survive this mission, and all goes as planned, I still lose; it boils down to the question of how many will suffer. Will humanity pay for what I have done? I don't know. It seems humanity has been in the shits for quite a while and especially before I got there. Sorry about being so morbid, but morbidity has become a good friend of mine as of late. You could say we take a blood communion together on a regular basis.

Anyway, this piece of paper and the rest of the documents may be the only thing that I leave behind; the only record that will say what happened to me. If anyone knew I was writing this, they would destroy it in a heartbeat and declare me a traitor. It's funny; well, not really funny, it's pathetically sad really, how traitor becomes a relative term when one's country, or those in positions of authority, bend the rules to benefit a small group, or even one individual. But that's all in the past now. Hell, ask Benedict Arnold the same question. Washington didn't have a choice in that situation. It was either save a country or save a man who he admired. The choice was simple when we are faced with such large consequences of our actions. Like I said, it's all in the past. What a quaint and pat saying that is. All in the past. I have not really thought about it before, but now it seems so damn appropriate because of the past, or should I say the ignoring of it, every damn myth and legend about these creatures that has been mockingly joked away into some dark and musty corner or been epitomized on the big screen or in books galore, has now returned—and it is

my fault. That needs to be clear. I accept the responsibility ... every square millimeter of it. I shall not shirk away from what I have done.

I plan to drop this letter in the ship's mailbox; it's the simplest way to get it off the ship without anyone knowing. No one checks the outgoing mail, only the incoming. When you get this and the information in the envelope you will know what to do with it. You are what I would call the voice of reason, the champion of the righteous, and all that bullshit. Sorry for the bit of humor, J, but self-indulgence is one of the few pleasures that I have these days. But that's not actually true. I do have something else. One thing. It's so bizarre how things work out. I chastised Lieutenant Johnson for it, but the more I think about it, I think he was right. I wish he was alive so that I could tell him that. Hell, I wish for a lot of things right now...

I can feel the boat slowing. We must be near the station for departure. I have to go. The ... men will be restless and anxious to get started. They look to me because I am their keeper but you know what, J, I think it is the other way around. I think they are my keeper because they remind me of the morality I am supposed to possess and of what they have lost. Ironic, if somewhat true, but that is something for another discussion at another time.

I will admit that I am presumptuous in thinking that you will not let this affair go without notice if I should not return. You may end up hating me for getting you involved with the entire ordeal. Please accept my apology in advance if that is the case, but I have no choice. If you feel that you cannot do this justice, I will understand. I close with a Godspeed wish for your success when you decide what, if anything, to do with all of this. As for me, God has gone on hiatus for a while and left me to play with either the escapees he loosened from hell or creatures that he created to mock humanity. Either way, it's a rather cruel game, don't you think?

Fair wind and following seas...

Your friend

John Reese

*Commander, United States Navy*

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# Chapter One

## Kosovo-The Former Republic of Yugoslavia One Year Ago

The duty officer massaged his tired face and ran his hands through his close-cropped hair, then picked up his fifth cup of coffee of the night as he struggled to stay awake at 0300 in the morning. Captain Block, an Army veteran of five years, had been in Kosovo for more than ten months. He'd spent the past six months at Camp Bondsteel, along with four thousand other servicemen and women. The camp was situated on what had once been farm fields near the town of Urosevac, in the southern region of Kosovo, and was part of the international peacekeeping team, also known as Task Force Falcon by the Americans.

Task Force Falcon was responsible for the twenty-three thousand square kilometer American zone, maintaining peace and keeping the Albanians and Serbians from killing each other and themselves.. This equated to approximately three hundred and fifty squad-sized security operations every day.

Block was tired of the bloodshed and ethnic division. With only two months left to his tour, he looked forward to going home. His stint in the Army would be over and he was ready to work at his uncle's car dealership. He was soft-spoken, with facial features that made a guy either a minister or a car salesman; his fellow soldiers told him that he had the kind of disposition that would ensure him success in the car business.

Block firmly believed in Murphy's Law: If anything could go wrong with the short time left to his tour, it would. His time and experience in the military had proven he was not a professional soldier, nor did he have any desire to become one.

Tonight had been quiet, thankfully. With all assignments completed, he had busied himself by catching up on some reading and even managed to write a letter to his mom and dad back home in Seattle. As he licked the envelope's flap, he noticed his burly infantry sergeant, Sergeant Estefan, come into the central command area. He was not hard to miss. A big man, about six feet in height and 225 pounds, he always had a five o'clock shadow at about one o'clock in the afternoon. His face appeared to be made of solid granite—along with his muscles. Although ominous in appearance, Estefan was a calm person and rarely got upset.

Block noticed Estefan was not alone. An obviously agitated civilian accompanied the sergeant, demanding his attention. The civilian babbled wildly in a native Slavic tongue, making wild gestures with his arms. His body shook as if he was being

shocked with electricity. Block had seen many like this man come into the compound, usually to report a murder or rape by one of the native forces; it was almost a daily occurrence. But for some reason, Block found this man interesting enough to watch him closely.

Observing the agitated man, Block saw that the man's clothing was worn but clean. He was probably a farmer, like the majority of the people in the area, he thought absently. They took pride in their clothing that was sewn by hand to endure years of service. The man's face was weathered from spending time in the cold and hot temperatures; the wrinkled lines held permanent locations on his face and made him appear older than he probably was. But his eyes were brilliant and strong, and reflected strength, energy and determination.

Block watched as Estefan sat the civilian in a chair, and then motioned for him to stay there. Apparently the civilian didn't speak or understand English. The sergeant spoke to a corporal then pointed to the civilian. When Estefan moved away, the corporal remained, watching the civilian. Estefan headed toward the duty officer's office, stopped at the door and knocked. Block waved him in.

"Sir, we might have a problem," Estefan said.

"So I see," Block said, indicating the civilian. "What's going on?"

"All I know right now is that he's terrified about something. He ran up to the evening patrol, throwing himself in front of their vehicle, yelling and screaming at them to make them stop. The only thing we could understand was the town's name, Kacianik. He kept repeating it over and over again. I have an interpreter on the way to find out what he's going on about."

"All right. Let's take a look at him. Bring him in here."

The sergeant stepped out of the room and motioned for the corporal to bring the civilian into the captain's office. Block reminded himself that part of the responsibility of the peacekeeping forces was to maintain order such as a police force would do. Any incident was investigated if the situation warranted it. Unfortunately for him tonight, that was his job as duty officer. Either way, it would be recorded into the desk log and forwarded to the Base Commander for review, as well as to several agencies in the United States. Everyone wanted to be kept in the loop of what was happening.

As the sergeant, corporal and civilian entered the captain's office, the civilian surprised them all by lunging toward the captain. He grasped the collar of Block's uniform in his hard, weathered hands and spoke hurriedly, spraying spittle onto Block's face. Shocked, Block found himself unable to move. The civilian's hands were like steel, and were locked onto his clothing. He couldn't budge them. In those seconds, he saw that this man was scared out of his mind. His eyes twitched, revealing blood-lined white backgrounds that contrasted with darting pupils. As he continued to rant, the man's body pulsed with uncontrollable fear.

The sergeant and the corporal managed to pull him away from the captain and forcefully sat him into the chair. They kept their hands clamped over the man's wrists and forearms until he settled down. After a few seconds, the sergeant released his grip on the man, but not before giving him a stern look and finger wagging that promised retribution if he tried something like that again. Estefan looked at the corporal to be sure he had the man; when the corporal nodded, the sergeant turned toward the captain with a look of disgrace on his face.

"Sorry, sir. I never thought he would do that. He caught me off guard."

"It's okay. He caught me off guard, too," Block said, attempting to catch his breath. "Whatever it is, he's scared out of his mind." Then in a low voice that only the sergeant could hear, "I can almost smell the fear from him."

Estefan nodded his head in agreement with Block's assessment.

A knock at the door caused Block to look up. Another corporal entered; his boyish features making him appear eighteen or nineteen years of age. He was five foot six inches and weighed perhaps one hundred and fifty pounds soaking wet.

"Corporal Brosnev, reporting as ordered for interpreter duties, sir," he said in a voice that reflected a nervous untested youth.

"Come in, Corporal," Block said, as he waved him in. "I want you to find out what this civilian is ranting about. He's scared out of his mind about something."

"Yes, sir," the corporal responded and went to where the civilian was being held in the chair. Estefan dismissed the other corporal as Brosnev took the position of holding the man's forearms to the chair.

Block listened as the corporal addressed the civilian in the local Slavic dialect. The man's eyes lit up at the recognition of language. Another onslaught of words spilled from his lips. Brosnev raised his hands and spoke a few words repeatedly to the civilian that Block assumed was telling him to go slowly so that he could understand what he was trying to say. The only word that was recognizable to him was the repeated mention of the town Kacianik. Block continued to listen and watch as the interpreter questioned the civilian. For several minutes they spoke back and forth.

"What's wrong?" Block asked finally.

"We're trying to agree on a dialect," Brosnev said. "Between the provinces, dialects differ immensely."

After a few more exchanges of words, Brosnev raised his hand indicating for the civilian to stop. He turned to speak with the captain.

"His name is Idriz Laupki," Brosnev said. "He lives in a little village outside the city of Kacianik. He says that he has found people that have been murdered."

"Is it more ethnic cleansing?" Block asked, in a voice that reflected having seen too much of this already. They found mass graves of bodies from these atrocities almost every other day, and there was no getting use to the sight of civilians killed and piled into hastily dug holes. "Ask him to tell you about the killings."

Brosnev spoke again with Laupki, who reacted more strongly to the questions. But as Laupki responded, Brosnev appeared to not understand what the man was saying and the frustration on Laupki's face was evident as the lines in his skin pulled tighter. Brosnev released the hold on him, but Estefan tensed as if there might be another outburst.

"He says," Brosnev said, his voice sounding unsure, "he says it was not Serbs or Albanians that did the killing." Brosnev turned back to Laupki and spoke slowly as if clarifying each and every word that he had told him. "He says," Brosnev continued, "there are ... creatures that came from the ruins of an old church near his village last night. They came from the ruins and killed two people from his village."

"He can't be using the right word. Hostiles, renegade Serbs, looters ... who?" Block asked impatiently.

Brosnev asked Laupki the same questions again. "No, sir," Brosnev said. "None of them."

"What then?"

"He insists they were creatures. Like vampires. They sucked the blood out of the people," Brosnev said quickly, spitting the words out as if he had tasted something he did not like.

"What?" Block was incredulous. "What kind of fools does he think we are to believe that story? Tell him to get the hell out of here and stop wasting our time!"

Brosnev spoke harshly to Laupki, telling him what the captain's reaction was to his statement about the creatures. Block was about to return to his desk when Brosnev spoke again.

"He says he can show us where they are," Brosnev said, his face losing its color as if he had just received some form of shock.

"The vampires?" Block said mockingly.

"Both. The bodies of the victims and where the vampires live..." Brosnev said, ending his statement as if there was more to say.

"What?" Block asked, seeing Brosnev's hesitancy, "What else did he say?"

"The dead girls ... they are his two daughters."

Block looked at Brosnev and then glanced at Laupki and shook his head.



*Murphy strikes again.*

---

## Chapter Two

The vehicle bounced over the rutted road as Captain Block, Sergeant Estefan, Corporal Brosnev and Idriz Laupki headed for an area located outside of the city of Kacianik. The village, considered part of Kacianik, was less than fifty miles from Camp Bondsteel.

Block, seated up front with Estefan, was quiet after receiving a painful dissertation from the base commander of what should and should not go into the desk log report. Colonel Antol, the Camp Bondsteel commander, had tried to instill upon him that he should remember in the future to be more careful, and as a reminder, he could think about it during his trip in the cold and over the terrible roads to investigate the civilian's claim.

The report from the night before had generated some interest from somewhere up the chain of command. Secure computerized versions were immediately available for review by appropriate levels within the military organization. Block had simply categorized the report as unsubstantiated and refused to investigate the incident based upon the civilian's wild accusations of blood-sucking creatures. Now, less than twenty-four hours later, they were on the way to investigate the absurd claim.

Brosnev and Laupki conversed about directions, then Brosnev relayed them to Estefan. They had been on the road for two hours averaging a speed of twenty-five to thirty miles per hour because of the poor or non-existent road. Between the bumpy slow ride and the cold, everyone was ready to get out of the vehicle.

Spring was not anxious to arrive in this mountainous area and the winter was bitter. The roads had been bombed earlier in the vicious air campaign by the allied forces, and repair was slow and tedious, hampered by bad weather. Although the bombings had destroyed many areas, the countryside with scattered homes and farms was still beautiful and picturesque. Historical landmarks were plentiful in this area. Many soldiers spent what little free time they did have in exploring; Captain Block, however, was not one of them.

"How much further?" Block asked, irritated. He had just smacked his head for the third time on a side support strut of the vehicle.

"Just about there," Brosnev responded as they topped a rise that offered a view of the surrounding area.

Block saw some ruins in the valley below. "Is that it?"

"Yes, sir," Brosnev answered after Laupki confirmed the site by pointing at it. Laupki looked up at the sky, his expression tentative and his manner nervous. He spoke to Brosnev in a hurried manner. Brosnev questioned his statement for clarity before he translated it.

"Now what?" Block asked sarcastically. His mood worsened with each passing moment. He was cold, uncomfortable and still thinking about his dressing down by the Colonel.

"He says we can't stay long because it will be dark soon."

Block uttered a sound of disgust that reflected his frustration with Laupki and his story of vampires. "Go ahead and take a quick look-see and get back. We've wasted enough time," Block said as the vehicle stopped about thirty yards from the ruins. He was certain they wouldn't find anything; he saw no point in personally climbing over rocks and tramping around anymore than was necessary. Knowing Murphy's Law, he would probably fall and break an ankle.

As soon as the vehicle stopped, Laupki jumped out and ran toward the first outcropping of standing walls, screaming what sounded to be names. Estefan and Brosnev jumped out of the vehicle and raced after him. Block stepped out of the vehicle, but he did not move. His head throbbed from the rough ride and he had already had enough of this escapade.

"Let me know if there is anything," Block called to Estefan. He lit a cigarette as he resigned himself to being part of a wild goose chase.

\* \* \* \*

As Estefan and Brosnev turned the corner, they stopped. Laupki kneeled at two bodies on the dirt floor, moaning and crying out the names of his daughters.

"Damn," Brosnev whispered. "He was telling the truth..."

"Easy, Brosnev," Estefan said, as he clasped the younger man's shoulder. "Start taking notes about the scene."

"Shouldn't we get the Captain?"

"In a bit. Let's examine what we have first. Take some notes as I look at this."

Brosnev retrieved a notepad from his inner pocket with a shaky hand and started writing.

Estefan moved closer to examine the bodies. His previous assignment had been with the Mortuary Corps and he had assisted with autopsies during the Gulf War. Part of his training included being able to make fast and reliable reports of the body condition and characteristics for general classifications of casualties. Bodies were placed into categories by type: military/civilian, friendly/foe, sex, age, types of wounds and so forth.

"My guess for their ages is nine and sixteen," Estefan began. "You can confirm that with Laupki later. They appear to have been dead for maybe a day. But the low temperatures may have prevented any serious decomposition. I don't see any obvious wounds, or any blood on the ground around them; maybe they were killed somewhere else and dumped here."

Laupki screamed at Estefan as he hugged the stiff and pale body of the younger girl.

"He says look at their necks," Brosnev translated.

Estefan looked at the girl's neck and saw two punctures in the flesh about the diameter of a pencil that had been hidden by the girl's long dark hair.

"There are small punctures, maybe a quarter of an inch in diameter and spaced apart about two inches."

Laupki again called to Estefan, then showed him the wounds on the other girl. The marks looked identical. Laupki's voice was weak but he managed to mutter some words to Brosnev.

"That is where the creatures bit into them and sucked their blood," Brosnev said. Estefan stared at the girls then at their father.

"The girls look pale, much paler than the ones I saw in the Gulf, but I'm not the expert in these types of medical matters. For all I know, some snake could have bitten them or the cold turned them to their current color condition." Estefan turned away from the bodies and looked at Brosnev.

"Ask him if he would mind if we took them back to the Camp to have an autopsy performed."

Brosnev relayed the information. Laupki wiped the tears streaming down his face, then nodded his approval and added some other comments.

"He agrees, but he says we must leave quickly. It will be dark soon and this is not a safe place."

"Why not?" Estefan asked.

"He says the creatures live in the old catacombs underneath here." Brosnev pointed toward the ground. "They will be coming back soon ... to finish what they started."

"I don't know what to make of any of this. Dead children and stories of vampires. It's beginning to sound like a cheap horror movie. What I do know is that these bodies need to be examined by a doctor or other expert who can determine the cause of their deaths."

Estefan looked at the children, Laupki and then Brosnev.

"Come on," Estefan said. "Give me a hand covering up the bodies and putting them

in the vehicle."

Estefan and Brosnev removed folded emergency blankets from the pouches attached to their web belts. At about the same time, Laupki removed a bottle of dark liquid from inside his coat and began splashing its contents on all of them.

"What the hell is that? Oh man, it stinks!" Estefan said as he gestured to Laupki to stop. Brosnev wiped droplets from his face as he spoke to Laupki. Words were quickly exchanged.

"He says it will ward off the creatures. It is a poison he's made from a recipe passed down through his family over many generations."

"If that's the case, why didn't it save his daughters from these supposed creatures?" Estefan said.

Brosnev asked the question and then translated the man's response.

"He thought the creatures were dead. When he found his daughters, he made more and carries it with him. As long as we have it on, it will protect us. It is death to the creatures if it comes into contact with them."

"Let's get going," Estefan said, dismissing the story with a wave of a hand. "It's time to brief the Captain."

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## Chapter Three

Captain Block felt his stomach lurch when he saw Sergeant Estefan and Corporal Brosnev carrying a body covered in a blanket from the ruins.

"Son of a bitch," he cursed, immediate shame for not believing the civilian's story running through him. As soon as Estefan was close enough, he spoke. "Sergeant, tell me everything."

"There's one more body, sir."

"Damn! It was true then?"

"It appears so, sir."

"Have Brosnev and Laupki bring it while you brief me on what you saw."

"Yes, sir."

While Brosnev and Laupki retrieved the second body, Estefan told Block what they saw at the scene. When the second body was in the vehicle, Block called for Brosnev.

"Tell Laupki I'm sorry for his loss," Block said. Brosnev immediately translated Block's condolences; however, Laupki's gaze never left the ruined buildings.

"Shock probably," offered Estefan.

"When we get back, make sure he gets to medical," Block said.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you remember to photograph the site?"

"No, sir," Estefan replied. "I'll go back and do it now."

Block knew photographs would be required for the report. Any incident involving mysterious deaths was highly scrutinized. He had to examine the site personally so that his report would be accurate. The last thing he wanted to do was piss off the Colonel again.

"Stay here. Keep an eye on Laupki. I don't like the way he looks. Where were the bodies?"

"Right by the first standing wall you come to. They were lying directly in front of it."

"I'll be right back," Block said as he removed a camera from a case in the vehicle and headed toward the ruins. Laupki reached for his bottle, but Block was gone before he could use it. He spoke with urgency to Brosnev, grasping the lapel on his jacket.

"He says we need to get the Captain out of here right now! He's quite adamant about it. He doesn't have the elixir to protect him and—"

"He's just going to take a look, and be right back; it should only be a few minutes. Tell him to calm down or I'll put the cuffs on him."

Estefan reached for the captain's pack of cigarettes lying on the seat, took one out, and lit it with his own lighter.

\* \* \* \*

In the approaching dusk, Block hurried to the site. Murphy's Law once again reared its ugly head.

*I can't screw this up. I'm not an incompetent fool like the Colonel thinks. I'll do this one by the book and show him.*

He stopped in front of the wall that Estefan had indicated while also searching the surrounding area. He started taking pictures. There wasn't much natural light left so he used the flash. He was just about finished when he turned and saw a dark shape of someone standing not far from him.

"Who's there?"

No answer.

"I said, who's there?"

Still no answer. He thought he perceived a shifting in the shadows. The one figure appeared to have been joined by another, maybe more. He let the camera hang by its strap around his neck as his hand moved to his holster.

"I have a weapon. Identify yourself."

The dark figures said nothing as they slowly moved toward him.

He took his weapon out of his holster.

"Stop! I have a weapon!" He didn't want to shoot. He had one murder investigation already. If he killed a national, scrutiny would fall heavily upon him. If he called out for Brosnev to translate, it might be interpreted the wrong way and provoke them.

Flipping the safety off, he fired a shot into the air.

"Stay where you are," he said.

They stopped their approach.

*Good. They know I mean business.*

Block's hopes were dashed as he heard the laughter of the men as they moved toward him.

He started to backtrack as quickly as he could without falling, but they surrounded him. Seeing no other alternative, he stopped and began firing at them. The camera bounced wildly on its strap as Block fired. With one hand, he grabbed it, removing it from his neck and throwing it on the ground. When the camera struck the ground, the electronic flash went off continuously, casting a strobe light effect on the area. What he saw made him keep firing until the clip was empty. He slid out the empty clip and inserted another. He fired until that one was empty. At about the same time when he exhausted the second clip, the flash on the camera gave out. Still they kept coming.

Block's last thought was that he was glad for the darkness. What he had seen by the light of the flash he wanted to forget. He had seen their faces and the unholy red glow of their eyes and their fangs.

"Oh my God!" he screamed.



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## Chapter Four

The sound of gunfire rang out from the ruins. Sergeant Estefan automatically drew his weapon and looked in the direction of the sound. In the distance, he could barely make out Captain Block running backwards toward them, firing his gun repeatedly at someone chasing him.

"What the shit?" Estefan said.

Brosnev, his weapon drawn, also watched what was happening, and came to stand beside him.

"They can't be more than ten feet apart, point blank range. Whoever it is should be down hard!" Brosnev said. "Shouldn't we shoot?"

"No! They're too close together. Might hit the Captain. Look! The son of a bitch is still up and coming, gaining on him! The bullets have no effect!" Estefan added. "Look, there's two of them, no, three ... four altogether!"

In a matter of seconds, they watched as the mysterious attackers pounced on the captain. His screams lingered on the night air as they began to tear him limb from limb; the shreds of flesh and bone appearing like streamers in the early evening light.

Laupki took the bottle and handed it to Brosnev as he spoke. Brosnev handed it to Estefan and said, "He says to throw it at them! There is not enough to kill them, but it will slow them down long enough for us to get away!"

Estefan stared at the black-burgundy colored liquid in the bottle. His other hand clasped the butt of his gun. He'd seen the captain empty two magazines into ... whatever they were without any effect. He took a few steps away from the vehicle and hurled the bottle toward the attackers who now eyed them as the next target. The bottle struck the hard ground about five feet in front of them, causing a spray to splatter them. They recoiled with a screeching sound that Estefan had never heard before and would never forget for the rest of his life.

"Get in the vehicle—NOW!" Estefan screamed.

Everyone scrambled inside. Estefan jumped into the driver's seat and drove as fast as he could, much quicker than the roads allowed. They were tossed about the vehicle like rag dolls, Estefan constantly fighting to keep control of the vehicle from going off the road and into a ditch. The creatures did not pursue them, trapped by the mysterious liquid. He tried to erase the horrific images from his mind, but the sight of the captain being torn apart refused to subside from his thoughts.

\* \* \* \*

Corporal Brosnev sat quietly as Sergeant Estefan drove the vehicle to Camp Bondsteel without saying a word, despite the corporal's attempts to communicate with him. Brosnev wondered if Estefan was in some kind of shock. He hoped Estefan would be able to finish the trip to the base camp. Idriz Laupki sat silent in his seat, sporadically glancing at the bodies of his daughters and verifying that the creatures had not followed them.

The vehicle proceeded to the gate of Camp Bondsteel; the guard recognized Sergeant Estefan and waved them through. Estefan stopped the vehicle at the medical tent, just outside the main entrance door. He turned off the engine and became immobile, staring straight ahead.

Brosnev jumped out, shook him and yelled at him. There was no response. He told Laupki to stay put and went inside the tent for help. He returned with a doctor and an MP; they helped get Estefan out of the vehicle and into the examination room.

Taking a moment to rest, Brosnev realized that he was the senior soldier left from the ill-fated mission, and it was his duty to make a full report on what had happened as soon as possible. He located a telephone and called Colonel Antol. As he waited for the colonel to answer, he rehearsed in his mind how he was going to explain what had happened.

When he heard the colonel's rough "yes," Brosnev stuttered through a brief explanation of events. The colonel ordered him not to say anything to anyone until he arrived.

Brosnev went back out to the vehicle where Laupki waited with the corpses of his daughters. Grief-stricken, he stroked their hair and quietly spoke to the dead girls. Brosnev placed his hand on the man's shoulder, trying to offer comfort.

"When will the horrible beasts be killed?" Laupki asked in his native tongue. "I have tried so many times—I thought they were dead..."

"I don't know," Brosnev answered. "But something will be done. We have confirmed your story. I have seen them with my own eyes."

"These creatures are very old," Laupki said. "They are very wise to the habits of mankind and they are not easy to kill. It will take ... much. We have tormented each other through the generations. Even I have sought out revenge ... and thought I had achieved it. But look where that has gotten me. My poor girls are dead. First their mother to the Serbs and now my babies to these creatures. But I will—"

Colonel Antol's jeep pulled up to the medical tent, interrupting the words of Laupki. The base commander jumped out. "Inside, now!" he ordered.

A moment later a truckload of MPs arrived and encircled the area.

"Get those two bodies inside immediately," he barked to the medical personnel. "I

want them autopsied at once. All personnel here are not to leave this area unless I personally approve it." The medical personnel stared at the base commander for a few seconds in disbelief, wondering what had happened to warrant such protocol.

"I said now, damn it!"

The personnel lost their immobility immediately and did as they were ordered.

"Who is the duty medical officer?"

"I am, sir." A young man stepped forward. "Major Barkley."

"What is the Sergeant's condition?"

"He's stable, but appears to be in shock. He's unresponsive now, but he might come around with time. We have him under sedation for the moment."

"No one talks to him unless I say so." Then, as if remembering something he had forgotten, Antol added, "The autopsies—make them non-invasive until I tell you otherwise. Do you understand? For now I need to know what killed the girls."

"Yes, sir, I'll get started right away," Barkley said and left.

Antol turned toward Brosnev and Laupki.

"Corporal, I want you to find a quiet room and write down everything that happened since you left here, and finish with the moment you called me," he said. "This is an incredible story. You're sure you are not stretching it somewhat?"

"No, sir. What I explained to you was exactly what happened."

"We have a senior sergeant that is in shock, you say Captain Block was murdered, and you bring two dead bodies back with you. I'd say that gives some credibility to your story. In fact, there is significant interest from stateside in this matter, and when they hear about this development, God only knows what will happen next."

"Sir, what about the civilian?" Brosnev asked.

"He has to stay here," Antol said. "He'll need to answer a lot of questions as the investigation intensifies. Take him with you and have him write down his version. We'll have someone else translate it later."

Brosnev spoke to Laupki, telling him what they were going to do. Laupki nodded his head, said something in his native language and then gave a half-hearted laugh.

"What did he say?" Antol asked.

"He says he has no where else to go. The creatures want him dead."

Brosnev and Laupki started walking away to find a place to write their statements.

"Corporal," Antol called.

Brosnev stopped and looked back at the base commander.

"Yes, sir?"

"Captain Block ... did he suffer?"

"Horribly, sir," Brosnev said, as he turned away and tried not to remember the scene of the captain's death.

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## Chapter Five

### MacDill Air Force Base-Florida

"Did you read this?" General Stone asked Commander Scott as he showed him a folder labeled "Camp Bondsteel Situation Report."

Scott saw the folder's title and felt his stomach sink, while his body temperature rose by about ten degrees. He'd been afraid of this. He knew the general would react strongly to it.

The file contained a report from the base commander of Camp Bondsteel, part of the multinational peace effort in Kosovo. Scott had removed it from the general's reading pile because he knew if he read it, all hell would probably break loose. Seeing the report in Stone's hand, he found himself wishing he'd never seen the damned thing and that he didn't work for this madman.

General Stone, the Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida, looked like someone who had found the cure for cancer. He was a large man, in excellent shape for a man of fifty-plus years. His close-cropped gray hair was characteristic of a career soldier, the high and tight. He was always immaculate in uniform; it gave him an air of arrogance. His face: brown eyes, high cheekbones and square jaw, never gave away information about his position on issues. He controlled all the Special Forces of the military services, and certain projects kept at the highest secrecy levels. He was a man of great power and influence.

His aspirations were high and remained that way; he used his prowess for solving impossible problems as his stepladder to those aspirations. He had been accused on occasion for being too General Patton-like in his actions; at times exceeding his authority by committing acts not sanctioned by higher-ups. Yet his record of successes in these actions were too numerous to discount; thereby his removal was considered a far greater loss and a certain level of tolerance had been applied, staving off his retirement for sometime in the distant future. His outlook was that there was a need for a man of his forward thinking in an age of softies: that politicians who had never served in the military had taken over too many of the roles that controlled the military forces.

One of his biggest complaints was the lack of commitment of military assets to the drug war. Although illegal drugs were a world problem, this particular area hit closest to him; he'd lost his sixteen-year-old daughter, his only child, to an overdose of cocaine. His wife blamed him and his career that kept him away from home for long

periods of time, but he saw the greater problem: businessmen with political connections who controlled large portions of the illicit drug trade and reaped its blood-money profits.

Scott distinctly remembered the dissertation the general had given him on the subject. One thing about the general: when he went off on one of these little talks, you best give him your fullest attention.

"The administration only throws token money and effort against the drug problem," Stone had said disdainfully. He had a folder in his hand and Scott remembered the way in which his hand tightened around it as he spoke.

"Nobody wants to step too hard on the toes of our precious South American neighbors. The assholes!"

Stone had twisted the folder into a rolled-up stick which he now rapped against an open palm. *Whap. Whap.*

"Everyone knows the only way to succeed on the war on drugs is to pull the plug on the Colombian cartels, take them out, take them all out by any means possible. Kill the bastards ... every last one of them."

Scott remembered how he had looked away momentarily when the general used the words ... to kill. He was quickly awarded with a smack from the rolled-up folder and an iron stare from the general.

"You have issues with that, Commander?" the general had asked. "If you do, I need to know about that right now."

Scott had looked at the general and saw a stare that he would never forget. His eyes were like hard steel and intently focused on him. The folder remained in his hand but Scott surmised that it wouldn't be there for long if he answered incorrectly.

"No, sir, I do not have a problem with that."

"Good," the general had answered. "I want to make sure that all my people are team players. You are a team player, Commander, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

The general had looked at the rolled-up folder in his hands. His face had taken on a disgusted look and then he tossed the folder onto Scott's desk.

"Get rid of this trash," he had said and walked away.

Scott's thoughts returned to the present. Although the general had many subordinates who looked through the multitude of media that flowed through the information center on a daily basis, he still made it a point to scan through some of it himself. Most of the reports were for information purposes only, such as this report. But Stone had made it known that he wanted to see anything that sounded the least

bit strange; the more bizarre the information or story—the better. Nothing was dismissed, no matter how weird. To not adhere to this order would invoke the general's wrath, which had been known to end many a career.

Lately though, with all that was going on in the Balkan region, his thoughts remained focused on these areas. He found the history of the region fascinating because of the campaigns that changed the political and military landscape of this region over the past several hundred years, along with the interesting topics about the myths and legends of the Balkans. He was a pragmatic man and gave little thought to unsubstantiated rumors or myths that held no credence. However, he knew that solving problems which were extremely difficult required a unique approach. So he kept everything inside his head in the event that it became useful at some point. The Balkans were full of ancient ideas: from legends to battles fought across the land for centuries. He knew that there was something to be learned from all of this which could possibly be helpful in his other endeavors as well.

Commander Scott stared at the report General Stone had in his upraised hand. The report concluded that the deaths of the girls and Captain Block were possibly the result of Serbians, but Scott knew the unusual comments from the civilian who had reported the incident had kindled the general's interest. The words “vampires” and “creatures” keyed his attention, although the base commander had dismissed the use of the terms to translation problems and possible hysteria brought on by war fatigue.

"Yes, sir, I have seen it," Scott replied, trying to keep his voice even. His heart beat rapidly as the general's gaze bore through him. Sweat began to ooze from his pores.

"And?" the general said, throwing the word out like a grenade that Scott thought he might as well fall on now and get it over with.

"Hysteria and war fatigue," Scott responded.

"So you think someone is fabricating all of this?"

"Yes, sir," he answered. "Those people have been through a lot. Hysteria from deaths of loved ones can lead to fabrication of stories as a kind of repression of guilt. We've seen this before in Bosnia."

"Very rational thinking, Commander," Stone said, closing the folder.

Scott breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that the storm had passed. He returned to the work on his desk.

"But I disagree," Stone's voice boomed back, causing him to jump in his seat. "I think there are some interesting facts here that need to be looked at."

"But sir..." Scott began. "There can't possibly be any truth—"

"Listen to me." Stone cut him off. "I want you to do the following."

Scott scrambled to get a pen and paper.

"One, send a communication to the base commander telling him to check out the story. Two, put the Special Forces unit in the area on alert and three, get me someone with a background in historical aspects, specifically in myths and legends of this area."

"Does that include vampires, sir?" Scott asked without thinking and immediately wished he could retract the question. A bead of sweat scurried down his back.

"It does," Stone said and smiled as he stepped up to within a few inches of his face. "And if you keep something like this from me again, I'll put you in the biggest shit-hole I can find, do you understand?"

"Yes ... yes, sir, I understand."

Stone stared at him for what was only seconds, but to Scott, it felt like a much longer time. Finally, the general left his office. He exhaled strongly and wished he'd never taken this assignment. He pitied whomever he would find for the job.



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## Chapter Six

Norfolk, Virginia

Navy Commander John Reese was right at an intriguing point in the book he was reading when the telephone rang. He thought about ignoring it, but the interruption had already destroyed his concentration. He tried to consolidate the mass of paper that surrounded him so it wouldn't get mixed up when he got up. The papers were his notes that would comprise his book he'd been working on for a few years. Tentatively titled *Myths and Legends*, he hoped it would become a textbook for classes of the same subject.

Many of the classes he'd taken while earning his Masters Degree in Ancient Civilizations and Mythology did not have good textbooks; reliable information was scarce. His textbook would go further than any book currently published by basing the entire premise on the effect of legends and myths in the current day environment. As soon as he could afford the time and the cost, he planned a research trip to Europe to gather hard data. His deepest hope and desire was to prove just one of his theories correct.

He finally reached the ringing phone. "Hello," he said, unable to keep the aggravation out of his voice.

"Commander Reese?"

"Yes." The use of his military rank indicated this was a formal call.

"This is Captain Bleth. I'm the duty officer for Commander Mid-Atlantic Region in Norfolk."

"Yes, sir, how can I help you?" Reese asked, civilizing his tone as he was speaking with a senior officer.

"We've received immediate orders for you from Washington. You are to proceed immediately to U.S. Special Operations Command at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida."

"What?" Reese knew they must have the wrong guy. "There must be some mistake. I'm the logistics officer for Naval Special Warfare Group Two at Little Creek. Sir, are you sure you're not looking for another Commander Reese?"

"Is your social security number 198-65-8465?"

"Yes, sir."

"There is no mistake," Captain Bleth said.

"I'll have to notify my chain of command," Reese said, for lack of anything else to say. He was completely baffled about what was happening.

"Your chain of command has been notified about your departure. The orders are not a permanent change of station, just temporary assignment for an undetermined time."

After twenty years of service, he thought there would be no more shock when unexpected notification came, but there always was, as was the quick acceptance that followed. "When do I depart?"

"There is a flight out of Norfolk Air Station in three hours. You are to be on that plane."

"Is there any explanation of the assignment?" He looked at his watch. It would only take him thirty minutes to be on the Naval Air Station from his home in Ocean View.

"All it says is temporary assignment to an advisory position of some type. I'll have a duty driver meet you at the air terminal with copies of your orders."

"Thank you, sir," Reese said, as his mind raced with the possibilities.

"Have a good time," the captain said, and then hung up.

Reese was slow in returning the phone to the cradle. He sat in his chair and organized his thoughts. It was quite strange that there had been no prior warning new orders were coming. Not even a call from his immediate superior in his change of command, Captain Clark.

"John," a female voice called from the bedroom. "I thought I heard the phone ringing?"

"Work," Reese said, almost forgetting that Lisa had been in the bedroom from the night before. He had woken early as was his custom, consumed copious amounts of coffee and had gotten absorbed in his work—as usual. He was a creature of habit and there could be no denying that.

Lisa had come over with a bottle of wine to celebrate something, but he couldn't remember what it was at the moment. One thing led to another and they ended up in bed together. Their relationship had been one of what he would describe as on-again, off-again. With his schedule at work and his diehard attention to his book, he would go for weeks without calling or even thinking about her. She would get angry and eventually show up at his doorstep. They would make up; Reese was not sure half of the time what it was he was apologizing for, and then they would go on.

A few seconds later, a tall blonde, well-tanned and wearing a long T-shirt, emerged from the bedroom.

"Who was it?" she asked.

"Apparently my services are requested elsewhere, and in a hurry. I have to get ready to go," he said. "Duty calls."

She came and tried to sit alongside of him, but his mountain of books and notes covered the entire area. She began to move things to make a spot to sit.

"No, don't move anything," he said, probably a little more forcefully than he had intended. "I have everything exactly where I know it is. If you move it, I'll have to start all over."

"You and your work," she said. The tone of her voice was a good indication of the storm on the way. "If it isn't the Navy calling, you're wrapped up with these old musty books."

"It's what I do," he said simply.

"No, John, it's not just what you do. It's an obsession. The only way I can get your attention is to get you tipsy so you forget about all this stuff for a while," she said, waving her arms around the room. "I have to force you to notice me, for God's sake."

"Come on, Lisa," he said. "Stop exaggerating."

"Okay, John, here is a little test for you. What were we celebrating last night?"

Reese winced. His expression gave his answer away without him even having to say a word.

"I thought so," she said. "You can't remember last night with me, but you can remember what happened centuries ago in some little backwater country in Europe."

"Lisa, that's not fair—"

"Fair? You know what a fair is, John? It's a place for cotton candy and rides. Speaking of which, I feel like I've been on a merry-go-round with you—going in circles. I've been with you for six months now, hoping you'd notice me and what do you do? You treat me like that chair," she said, pointing to the corner. "It's there when you need it, but the rest of the time, it just occupies space. I can't be a chair any longer, John."

She stormed back into the bedroom, but quickly reappeared in her jeans and tucking her t-shirt in her pants with one hand. In her other hand, she carried her sneakers.

"Look, Lisa, I have to make a call and get ready to go. Can't we talk about this later?"

"There won't be a later, John," she said simply.

"Lisa, wait..."

The door made a resounding thud as it closed.

"Off again," he said, remembering how he had classified their relationship. This time, he didn't think it would ever get back to the on stage.

He exhaled strongly and couldn't help looking at the chair that Lisa had mentioned earlier. She had been right. The only exception was she thought he didn't realize the way he was acting or treating her, but he did. He wasn't in love with her; she was a distraction that he used to unblock his own mind and that was all he wanted at this period in his life. At times they had a lot of fun together and the sex was good; however, he was not looking for anything beyond that at this point. Was he using her? He probably was. He had developed an analogy from his work in dealing with women and relationships: given enough time, the myth either becomes reality, or it fades away. Apparently this current affair had just faded away.

Reese then remembered he was about to call Captain Clark. He opened his recall folder and looked for the telephone number. This assignment to the Special Warfare Group had introduced him to some new and interesting operations that were different than the regular Navy side of the house, but they did not compare to the strange orders he'd just received. He was in charge of the group logistics, purchasing supplies and services required for use by the Special Operation Units on the East Coast. His work dealt mainly with the SEAL units and similar forces. After a year, he had developed a unique respect for the elite of the Special Warfare Community.

He found the number and dialed it.

"Hello," an alert voice answered.

"Captain Clark?" Reese asked.

"Reese?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry to bother you at home but—"

"The duty officer called you already?" he said, cutting Reese off mid-sentence.

"Yes, sir. Did they explain to you what this is all about?"

"Afraid not," Clark said. "I tried to call you a few minutes ago to give you a heads up. Your line was busy. All I know is that I got a call from Captain Sorbert, Commander Naval Special Warfare Group Two, telling me not to look for you on Monday morning. When I asked him why, I was told to not worry about it; that you would be on special assignment to SOCOM for an undetermined period of time. I pressed him for more information but he was closed-mouth about it. Sorry, Reese."

"Do you have any idea what this might mean?" Reese felt that there was some underlying current here and it bothered him. Clark was usually straightforward and upfront with him.

"I hate to speculate," Clark began, "but usually when orders are cut this fast, it's done high up in the chain of command. Whoever wants you there has to have a lot of pull to do this. Must be important."

"But it doesn't make any sense, sir." Reese's intuition was beginning to twitch. Was he being paranoid or did he hear the emphasis that Clark had placed on the word important?

"Maybe not to you, but it obviously does to someone else. All you can do is *go along* for now and when you get there, you'll find out for sure."

Reese was sure he had heard the tonal change in the words this time. He wondered if Clark was trying to hint at something that he couldn't say directly.

"Yes, sir. Thanks for your time, Captain Clark."

"Have a good trip. Give me a call if you can and be careful."

"Thank you, sir." Reese hung up the phone.

*What was this about?* He had to admit that his interest was now piqued as to why he'd been chosen. He mentally ticked off his qualifications: degrees in economics for his business side and ancient history for his personal interest. He was a logistics officer with a diverse background but nothing spectacular that would guarantee promotion, which was why he'd retire in another eighteen months. He possessed a top-secret clearance that was required for the current assignment and his current superior respected him. Logic dictated then that this had to be something to do with logistics in the Special Operations community. Maybe some research and development contractual issues or something had come up on some project and they were looking for some fresh thoughts.

*That's probably it, nothing too exciting, it was just the community way to issue orders and move personnel around unexpectedly, keeps us on our toes.*

He looked at the clock and decided he better get moving and pack some clothes, even though he was not even sure how long he would be staying in Florida.

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## Chapter Seven

Reese made it on time to the airport and was met by the duty driver. What surprised him—no—what shocked him was that the plane was for him, and only him: a small passenger plane normally reserved for VIPs. Extremely odd that a plane that cost serious bucks to operate would ferry him to Florida; normal procedure would have placed him on a contracted passenger plane. Whatever awaited him in Florida must be urgent enough to warrant the expenditure.

Greeted by one of the pilots, a lieutenant, he was seated only seconds before the plane rolled down the runway. He took a book from his brief case titled *Creatures in Our Lives*, opened it to the page he had marked, and began reading.

"Excuse me, sir, but a book with a title like that must be strange."

Reese looked up and saw another lieutenant. By the insignia on his uniform, he was also a pilot.

"Yeah, it is kind of strange." He offered his hand. "Commander John Reese."

"Lieutenant Sam Kramer. I'm the co-pilot."

"You wouldn't have any idea why I'm being flown to MacDill, would you?"

"No, sir. They just hand us the paper that says who and when."

"I guess I'll have to wait until I get there then."

"So what's the book about?"

"A lot of different things concerning folklore and myth."

"Really? I had this professor once ... I was taking a theology course in college. You know, one of those have-to-take courses. Anyway, he went off on some tangent about folklore and stuff like that," Kramer said.

"Well," Reese began, "you would be surprised how closely theology and myths are related. Obviously the professor you had felt that way. You see, there is a school of thought that to study something based upon myth, legends or folklore, it was considered similar to the study of theology. There is no hardcore evidence that could either prove or disprove the stories in either case. Lacking hard proof, it becomes more of a study of philosophy, whereby one's faith or belief was the deciding factor. On a more personal level, if it was evident that the individual lacked the courage or determination to become involved in an area that could solidly be

disproved such as hard science, it was likely to be determined that the person was a slacker one way or another."

"Interesting comparison, it's a ... unique area to get into. How did you get interested in something like that?" Kramer asked.

Reese slouched back in his seat and got comfortable. "I think I developed this passion for monsters at an early age after seeing the early Dracula and werewolf movies. I was astounded to learn that these creatures were based upon myths that had been documented in some form. My interest grew from there, although when I attended college, I studied in the business field out of practicality, leaving my passion for the unknown and unexplained as a hobby."

"Yeah," Kramer agreed. "It's a shame how we ignore our true passion while we do things just to earn a buck. The whole concept sounds fascinating. I bet you have wooed many a lady with your stories of these creatures."

Reese grinned. "Most women who learned about my favorite pastime assumed I was an immature jerk. I have to admit I spend a lot of time consumed in research. Women tend to maintain their distance—guess that's why I'm still single."

Kramer smiled and said, "Personally, Commander, I don't think there is a whole lot of difference between strange creatures and wives. Take it from someone with experience; I'm on number three."

"Can I quote you on that?" Reese asked.

"Hell no, sir. I can't afford another ex."

Both men laughed.

"Well, I better get back to the flight deck," Kramer said. "Nice talking to you, Commander."

"Same here. Hope I didn't ramble on too much."

"No, sir. Sit back and enjoy the flight," Kramer said as he left Reese to himself.

Reese would have loved to do nothing more than sit back and relax. However, until he got to MacDill and found out what this was all about, he didn't think there would be much relaxing on his part.

\* \* \* \*

MacDill Air Force Base was located about eight miles south of Tampa, Florida, on the tip of the Interbay Peninsula in Hillsborough County. After landing, the plane taxied to the receiving end of the runway. Reese noticed a car waiting there. He figured that if someone sent a special plane to retrieve him, then the car was probably there to pick him up. More mystery to dwell on.

"Commander Reese," a Marine corporal said as he saluted.

"I'm your man," Reese said, trying to be humorous.

"Yes, sir," the Marine said in a monotone voice, obviously bypassing Reese's attempt at humor. "Please get into the vehicle and I will drive you to headquarters."

"Let's go then," Reese said and got in.

In a matter of minutes, they arrived at a two-story building. The corporal indicated for Reese to enter the center doors. Reese thanked him and headed into the building.

The reception area was plain and carried the usual adornments of most military installations. On the walls were the colorful depiction of the individual service logos that fell together under one umbrella of command. They consisted of the Navy SEALs, the Army Airborne and the Air Force Special Operations Forces, all circling a larger emblem of the United States Special Operation Command. The main centerpiece was the tip of a lance, sometimes referred to as the ace of spades.

"Can I help you, sir?" asked the young soldier sitting at the reception desk.

"Yes," Reese said as he handed his orders to him. The soldier glanced at the orders and then immediately placed a call.

"Someone will be right here to escort you."

"Thanks."

Reese occupied his time by looking at the standard chain of command picture board that resided on the wall of every military command. He didn't have long to wait. Within a few minutes, a Navy commander appeared.

"John Reese," he said as he extended his hand. "I'm Sam Scott."

"Pleased to meet you." Reese struggled with pleasantries while restraining himself from asking Scott what the hell was going on. However, given all they had gone through to get him here, he probably wouldn't discuss it on the quarterdeck.

Scott was not a logistics officer; he was a line officer. Reese recognized the two rank insignia on the other's collars versus the one that he had. Staff corps officers only wore one rank while the other depicted specialty.

Scott was tall and thin and looked like someone who had been run ragged most of his time in the service. Reese knew the signs of a person trying to achieve promotion and position at an accelerated pace, right down to the darkness under his eyes and a slight nervousness in his demeanor.

"I know you have questions," Scott said. "And I apologize for the short notice. If you follow me, we can go somewhere where we can talk."

"Sounds good."



Reese followed Scott through the first set of doors that took them off the quarterdeck. Reese noticed Scott used a magnetic card to access the doors they went through. He was also surprised at the maze orientation of the facility and imagined he'd get lost in here without someone escorting him.

As they proceeded, Reese noticed the doors took on a new look; the verbiage on signs became more authoritative. He noticed not only was the card required, but there were Marine guards who verified Scott and his credentials.

After a few minutes, they entered a small windowless conference room that contained one large circular table with eight chairs around it. Scott gestured for him to have a seat.

"Coffee?" Scott asked.

"Sure," Reese said, as he sat in a chair. He tried to control his anxiousness to hear about his new assignment.

Scott placed a cup of coffee in front of him, then sat.

"Why am I here?" Reese asked. "Why the rush?"

Scott exhaled. "Your background may be of use to us."

"My logistics. That's what I thought," Reese said, feeling relieved. "You want me to work in the acquisition and logistics center?"

"No, it's your other non-Navy interest—ancient histories and civilizations. Your interest in myths and legends."

"What? You have to be kidding, right? I don't understand what that has to do with the Navy or the military for that matter. It's more like a hobby for me."

"It does have relevance in this particular case, or at least we believe it does. We have come across some ... well ... before I explain any of that, you must understand about General Stone. He is an extraordinary leader and tactician. He is known for his unusual approaches in solving the unsolvable, he's almost a legend."

Reese was surprised at Scott's tone. It was almost as if he was apologizing for the general. *How odd*, he thought.

"I have heard of him and his accomplishments," Reese said. "General Stone is well-known throughout the services."

"Yes. Then you know that he likes to look into the unusual or bizarre events we sometimes come across. Most of them don't pan out and can be explained by rational means, but every once in a while something unexplainable is found."

"Interesting approach, but I still don't see where I come in," Reese said. He sipped his coffee.

"Your background appears to be extensive in the European theater and especially the Balkans."

"Yes," Reese agreed. "Many scholars consider those areas the center of many myth creations, so my interests lie there as well."

"With all the happenings in Kosovo," Scott said, "there have been some unusual developments. The general felt that someone with your background might be useful on his staff."

"That's it?" Reese asked, amazed at the simplicity of it. "You flew me out here on a private jet—with a few hours notice—to be an advisor on what I do for a hobby?"

"That's it," Scott agreed.

*This is bullshit, Reese thought. This guy is trying to blow smoke up my ass. He's nervous about something. Something he doesn't want me to know.*

"Then why all the mystery, the cloak-and-dagger orders and stuff?" he asked.

"Politics. The general doesn't like others to know that he is looking into any of these ... different areas. Rumors can ruin a career faster than anything else in the military."

"True," Reese said. "A good many personnel have been forced—"

The door opened and General Stone entered like a thoroughbred racehorse that had just shot through the opening gate in a race. Reese almost knocked over his cup of coffee as he stood to greet the general.

"As you were," Stone said, not even the least bit winded from his entry. "You must be Commander Reese." Reese took the extended hand and shook it, noticing in the general's other hand he had a folder marked TOP SECRET.

"Yes, sir, pleased to meet you," Reese said, feeling a little apprehensive about what he was stepping into.

"Thought you might find this interesting reading on the flight," the general said, as he handed the folder to Reese.

"Flight ... sir?" Reese asked. "What flight?"

"Your flight to Kosovo leaves within the hour. There is something there that I want you to check out for me."

Confused, Reese turned to Scott, but Scott had looked away from him and busied himself by getting something from his desk. Reese thought he saw a look of relief on Scott's face, as if the general springing the bad news had got him out of having to do it. Reese knew then he wasn't going to get along with Scott.

Reese turned his attention back to the general. The man glowered over him, his eyes

so large and intense that Reese thought they might explode at any minute. The uncomfortable silence was intolerable, and Reese felt they were waiting for him to say something. He said the most logical thing he could think of.

"Yes, sir."

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## Chapter Eight

As the plane departed MacDill AFB, Reese sat in awe at the way he was being shuffled around the globe. Seven hours ago, he had been comfortably at home reading a book. A mere hour ago, he had been in a conference room with Commander Scott and General Stone. Now he was on another plane heading to Kosovo, which was in the midst of civil unrest being controlled by NATO peacekeepers. Scott had briefed him that the plane was bound for Skopie, Macedonia via Rota, Spain. From Skopie, he would be driven to Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo. Specific information about his assignment was in the folder that the general had given him, and everything else would become clear upon his arrival at the base camp. Or so he had been told.

The only difference from his earlier flight was he was not alone on this plane; he had lots of company. This flight was what they called in the military a regular run. Personnel from all branches of the services filled most seats. Their conversations were excited and busied as new acquaintances were made and stories exchanged. Reese had been assigned a seat by himself; the flight captain told him he would understand why when he read the information he had been given.

At this point, nothing had been explained to him yet and Reese still had a hard time wondering why his knowledge of ancient history and folklore would be of use to the Navy. *What would warrant this?* It puzzled him. Puzzlement in this case was outweighed by the fact that the more he thought about it, the better this trip was looking. After all, he had always wanted to go to this particular region to study and to look for information for his own work. And now here it was, handed to him; a free trip to his own Disneyworld.

As the plane bounced through a small air pocket, Reese felt the hardness of the sealed envelope that Stone had given him. It was still unopened due to the haste required to board the plane prior to departure. As the plane settled into a cruising altitude, he unsealed the envelope and removed a folder. As he opened it, he saw immediately on top of the contents page a warning that the information was classified and by the flight's conclusion, the plane commander had orders to destroy the folder and contents before touching down on foreign soil. Reese felt his earlier euphoria about his trip quickly evaporate as his stomach took a sudden lurch. *What the hell did this file contain?*

He began reading. First there were situational reports from the Camp Bondsteel Base Commander about an incident with an encounter with a civilian named Idriz Laupki and his story about his daughters' deaths by some form of creature. This was not

surprising to Reese; histories from that part of ancient Europe were filled with similar claims about deaths caused by creatures. The majority of these stories had been attributed to imagination and exceptional tale-wielding by local inhabitants, but a few defied logic and reasoning and left room for speculation.

Next was an order issued to the Base Commander, Colonel Antol, by General Stone, its verbiage couched as another possible ethnic cleansing incident that required immediate follow-up. Another report followed, filed twenty-four hours ago from the Base Commander, claiming that a Captain Block sent to investigate the incident was now missing and possibly murdered by party or parties unknown at the site of the previous murders. The murders of two girls were confirmed by the retrieval of two bodies from the site.

The captain failed to return from the site, and another member of the investigating team, a Sergeant Estefan, was under medical custody and appeared to be in shock from what he had witnessed. Another soldier, a Corporal Brosnev, and the civilian, Idriz Laupki, submitted statements as to what had occurred, but their comments had not been verified with another on-site visit pending the request from SOCOM to not take action until their specialist arrived. Specialist? Reese assumed that was him.

He flipped to the reports of Brosnev and Laupki and read what sounded like something directly out of a horror movie. But they were also like many accounts he had read before. But unlike those studies, this time there seemed to be an additional point of credibility by the military being involved. There would be no point for military personnel to lie about such events.

Still, it could be just a cover-up to confuse the ethnic cleansing issue. If another party could be blamed in having taken part in the killing, it could benefit the Serbians.

He turned over a few more pages to the medical reports on the noninvasive autopsy of the two civilian casualties. Reese didn't understand most of the annotations on the standard Department of Defense form. He turned it over and his eyes focused on a general comment block at the bottom. He read the comments once, twice, then put down the report and stared out the window.

"Canine teeth or fang punctures at the throat," and under the cause of death, the words "loss of all blood" were underlined followed by, "no blood or traces of blood left in body, as if drained."

Reese tasted bile from his soured stomach and tried to bring it back under his control. Here was exactly what he hoped to find, verified on paper: the classic signs of a vampire attack. He had never in his wildest dreams imagined that he would ever encounter a creature from the myths and legends he had studied over the years. And now it was staring him right in his face.

He calmed himself. The odds were against the story being true, a perpetrated hoax by the locals to scare people from the region. But there was a chance.

"But why the interest from General Stone?" he muttered.

One page remained in the folder. The last page was a personal note from General Stone.

*Commander Reese, you know what these mysterious factors may indicate. I want you to find out if there is any truth to what's been reported. All of SOCOM assets in the theater of operations are available at your disposal. Do not talk to anyone about this except those that are cleared by Commander Scott or myself. Report only to me or to Commander Scott.*

Reese's gaze settled on the last paragraph.

*Although the probability of this report being true is small, for a moment consider the possibility that it is a fact. Your personal interests lie in this area, as do mine. We can satisfy both our needs if we proceed carefully but quickly—if these claims turn out to be real.*

Reese closed the folder and looked out of the window. He couldn't decide if he should feel excited about such a prospect, or if he should be scared.

He chose scared.

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## Chapter Nine

### MacDill AFB

"I don't know why he wants it," Scott said into the telephone. "Just get me the damn information so he gets off my back!" He slammed the receiver back into the base on his desk and rested his head on the palms of his hands. The migraine headache throbbed unmercifully, even though he thought it should be getting better after he had so adeptly gotten rid of Reese. With Reese heading to Kosovo, the general would focus on his actions there rather than on what he was doing here. It would be a slight reprieve but a reprieve nonetheless.

"Problem?" a familiar voice said from behind him.

Scott slowly raised his head, hoping that Stone had not been standing there for very long.

"I asked if there was a problem?" the general said.

"No, sir. I'm just trying to get hold of the information you wanted. I have someone running over to the University Library to get—"

"That's the problem today," Stone said calmly. "Nobody understands the importance of information."

He moved up to Scott's desk and sat on the corner. In his hands he had a stack of papers which he rolled into a tube. Scott felt himself move further back into his chair as if trying to increase the distance between them.

"Let me give you an example," Stone began. "This whole operation going on in Kosovo. You know why it has failed so miserably?"

"No, sir."

"History."

"Sir?"

"Nobody understands the history of the area, so they don't understand the problem. If you don't understand the problem, how the hell can you expect to fix it?"

"Yes, sir," Scott agreed, even though he didn't have a clue what the general was talking about.

"This area has been in constant turmoil from way back. The first hunters arrived in

the area starting back in 7000BC. Did you know that?"

"No, sir," Scott answered. *Great. A fucking history lesson now. I don't have time for his babbling; I have so much shit to do.*

Stone continued, "Then in 1200BC, the Illyrian..."

Scott tried to organize his thoughts on how he was going to get the information, arrange the military assets to be at Reese's disposal, get clearances for shipments of equipment and God knew what else.

Stone continued, "...with migrations of Southern Slavs, Slovenes, Croatians, Serbians and Bulgarians entering the Balkans from the North."

Stone paused as if waiting for something to continue. He began to twist the rolled-up paper in his hands.

After a few seconds, Scott realized he had paused and said, "That's interesting."

"That's only the beginning," Stone said and continued on. "In the 800's, the Croatians fell under the control of..."

Scott returned to his thoughts. He needed to develop a reason to maneuver the SEAL team from their previous assignment without raising any questions.

"...religion is one of the most powerful tools ... next to a loaded nine millimeter Glock pistol that's resting up to the side of your forehead. You get my drift?"

"Yes, sir," Scott answered automatically. He didn't have a clue what the hell a pistol had to do with religion.

Stone went on, "In 1345, the Turks entered the Balkans as mercenaries for the Byzantine Empire's..."

Scott knew that if he moved the team, it would have to go into the situational report at some point. The reports went through the chain of command and questions might be raised as to the reason why.

"Hallowed ground is another important factor to remember," Stone emphasized. "You want to keep that in mind."

"Ah ... yes, sir," Scott answered, but he had lost track on what the hell the general was saying. Trivial shit that didn't matter to him right now anyway.

"By 1453, the Turks capture Constantinople, and the Byzantine Empire fell to Ottoman rule..."

Scott thought if he could manufacture some form of crisis worthy of the SEAL team to follow up on, that would probably be enough and not cause undue attention by anyone.



"You must understand that in order to understand your enemy."

"Understand the enemy, yes, sir." Scott said as he saw that as Stone continued, the paper in his hands was collapsing and tightening in an almost rhythmical manner. Even with all of the man's brilliance in tactics, he still possessed his quirks. *I wish he would just get out of here so I can do my work.*

"In 1690, a failed Serbian revolt..."

*Won't he just give up already—I don't care about the history! I hate when he does this shit and then gives me hell when shit doesn't get done. He knows that what I have to do is important and if I screw it up, the damn CIA or other spooks will question what is happening.*

"...hence a large part of our problem with the peacekeeping operations."

"Yes, sir."

"The Serbian population..."

Scott knew that whatever story he fabricated to justify the additional use of assets would have to be supported by reports from the field. He would have to review past reports to select something. The death of the civilians was a good start but not strong enough by itself to justify the use of the SEAL team rather than just a regular reconnaissance mission.

"...and hold onto it until 1918. Are you following this?" Stone asked.

"Yes, sir, it's ... very enlightening and fascinating." *Bullshit!*

Stone continued twisting the paper in his hand as he went on.

"Then there was the Pig War of 1906 and then World War I..."

Scott decided he was going to have to pull some strings based on the authority that his position carried—or in other words, he was going to have to bully others into doing what he needed to have done. He would use the usual promise that the general would very much appreciate it and undoubtedly put in a good word on their next promotion.

"...many people forget that economics can sometimes be as good as a reason as any to start a war. And why not? Things get so bad that you can't feed your family or yourself—you have nothing to lose."

Stone again fell silent and drew Scott's attention. Stone continued his motion of twisting and untwisting the paper in his hands. The paper appeared to be getting discolored from the sweat that was exuding from the general's passionate rendition. For the umpteenth time, Scott wished he would just finish and leave him alone.

"Thank you, sir, for—"

"However, in 1921," Stone continued.

Yes, Scott thought, he would have to grease many wheels to make this all work. It would be difficult but not impossible. And he could always manipulate Reese in theater to request the assets and modify the existing role of the units being used.

"...very important during any occupation this factor of resentment. It festers inside people until it spouts its slimy puss on everyone. And it does in this area; Nazi Germany invades Yugoslavia in 1941."

"World War II," Scott said, picking up on a buzz word to make it look like he was following the conversation.

"Don't rush the damn story," Stone said fiercely. "If you skip stuff, you won't understand."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, the Nazis were welcomed by the Croatians..."

Scott hoped that the information from the library section would get here. The general would lock himself away with it as if it were a gorgeous woman.

"...leaving the Communist party in charge but without backing from Russia and managed to survive for more than 40 years."

The phone on Scott's desk beeped with the sound of an incoming call. Scott instinctively reached for it.

SMACK!

Scott winced as he was struck on the head by the rolled-up paper that Stone had in his hands.

"I'm not done yet," the general said. His eyes were wide and livid with energy.

Scott was dazed; between being surprised and shocked at the blow, he wondered if the man was on something, maybe drugs. But remembering the history of Stone's family, he quickly eliminated drugs. *The man is insane.*

"Where was I?" Stone asked, as if nothing had happened.

"The Communist party and forty years," Scott offered.

"Oh yes—thank you," Stone said. "Forty years of Communism and Serbian domination..."

Scott tried to regain his previous line of thinking about his tasking for the mission, but the throbbing of his head and the audacity of the attack only made him angry. He regretted the day he took this damn job. He tried to focus on what Stone was saying so that maybe he would just get it over with.

"...the same thing that began in this country hundreds of years ago—eliminate the troublemakers, the undesirables."

"Ethnic cleansing," Scott said.

"Very good," Stone said as he smiled. "Now as the Communist regimes crumble in 1989, Milosevic turns the Communist party into the Nationalist party..."

Scott thought that the smile that Stone gave him was one of contempt and loathing, as if he was not capable of understanding the point that he was trying to make. Yet the foolishness that ALL of this was important to the current situation was a crock of shit.

"Why? Because as I have explained all along, these people only understand war and fighting as a way to achieve their mutual ends."

"What would you have suggested?" Scott asked. His head throbbed from the migraine which had been aggravated by the blow to his head. His stomach was actually becoming nauseous from the acid that was churning with violence. He wanted to grab the pills but they were in his desk drawer and he dare not move. He didn't want another strike from the rolled-up paper.

"Let them finally fight it out," Stone said adamantly, "winner take all and be done with it. But the diplomats couldn't let that happen. So in March 1992..."

*Thank God—1992, almost done with this crap!*

"...peace talks convene in Geneva while fighting continues on the ground."

"More of the same," Scott offered, hoping this would all end soon. His eyes kept going back to the rolled-up paper that Stone held firmly.

"Yes. Both sides feign peace but keep fighting. Finally NATO is forced to begin air strikes and that leads up to the current NATO peacekeeping forces being deployed into Kosovo."

"And here we are," Stone said. "Hundreds of years and we haven't learned a damn thing. The hypocrites always say that if we don't learn from our mistakes, we are doomed to repeat them. Yet they ignore the history of a country that has known nothing but war and death. They miss the key point!"

Scott didn't know what that point was. If Stone expected him to know it—and he probably did expect it, he was fucked. But if he didn't take a stab at it, he would feel the wrath for sure—so what the hell.

"The people," Scott offered.

"What?" Stone asked. "Speak up."

"I said, the people."

"They are the common factor that keeps being ignored. They have been victimized and brutalized for so long—that's all they know. And the result?" Stone asked.

"Probably a hardened national, very patriotic and hard to defeat."

"Very good," Stone exclaimed. "Now take it a step further. This thing we have Reese looking into. Imagine if they existed? How much have they seen of all of this—how much they would have learned. They would be experts on evading capture and subversive techniques of killing."

The general stared off for several seconds. Scott imagined he was thinking about what he could do if he had men like that. What he could accomplish.

"Do you see it now—why history is so God-damned important? It's the key to understanding both your enemy and your ally."

"Yes, sir—perfectly."

"Well then, I'm glad we had this little chat. Now, don't you have any work to do?" Stone asked, surprising him.

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Then get to it," the general said, as he got up and turned away.

Scott exhaled a long sigh of relief. He was finally—

**SMACK!**

Scott felt the pain surge through his head. When he was able to look up, he saw Stone was standing over him again.

"I forgot to mention something. Don't you ever talk shit about me to anyone. I heard your fucking phone call earlier. Do it again and I'll ... well, just don't do it again."

"Yes, sir," Scott said. His voice was weak and thin.

"Now, get me that information ... please."

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## Chapter Ten

### The Former Republic of Macedonia-Balkan Region

Commander John Reese's plane arrived at the airport of Skopje in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. He found it interesting how it had been several years since he had been outside the United States on travel, and in the past twenty-four hours, he had gone from Norfolk to Florida, then stopped in Spain to refuel and now he found himself in the Balkan region of Europe. He was going to have a serious case of jet-lag as soon as his body caught up to the rest of him.

After clearing the check-in process, he retrieved his one piece of luggage and was ushered to an arrival area where he hoped he would find transportation as promised to the Base Camp. An army private approached and saluted him.

"Commander Reese, I'm Private White. I've been assigned to escort you to Base Camp Bondsteel. Colonel Antol sends his regards and regrets he could not meet you personally," he said in an obviously memorized greeting.

"Nice to meet you, Private White," Reese said as he returned the man's salute. "Shall we get started? I'm sure we have a bit of a ride ahead of us."

"Yes, sir, about two hours," he said as he grabbed the commander's bag. "This way, sir."

Outside of the airport the sun shone, but the air was cool. It felt refreshing to Reese after sitting on the airplane for almost twelve hours. The private placed his bag in the back of the military vehicle and they were quickly on their way.

"First time in this area?" Private White asked.

"Yes," Reese answered. "How long have you been here?"

"About seven months," replied the private. "Are you here to be an observer?"

Reese remembered that this whole affair was supposed to be kept quiet. His driver had been dispatched from Camp Bondsteel to pick him up and bring him to the base camp—that was probably the full extent of what the driver knew. The question offered an extremely plausible reason for him to be there, and Reese decided to go with it.

"Yes," he answered. "I'm an observer for SOCOM. They are conducting a test of new logistical procedures in the field. They want me to check their effectiveness."

"Oh. I thought you might ... well ... be here for something else."

"Like what?" Reese asked. He got the sense that the private was not just making small talk. He thought the young man was fishing for some information. Apparently he had something on his mind. "Is there anything *interesting* going on?"

"I just heard that there are some rumors going around the camp about some weird murders."

"Weird?" Reese asked, trying to hide his interest. *News travels fast.*

"Some of the guys have heard talk about people being killed by some kind of creatures. I actually heard the term vampires being thrown around. Sounds crazy, doesn't it?"

"Creatures? Vampires?" Reese asked, trying his best to sound amusing.

"Yes, sir. I don't believe it though. This whole country is so old ... the locals have all kinds of stories about strange beings."

"What kind of stories?"

"Werewolves, vampires ... you know, like the kind from the movies. Anything that can't be explained is allocated to the monsters."

"Really?" Reese asked. He was surprised at the private's assertion about the unexplained—he was quite correct in his observation. "Has anyone actually seen one of these creatures?"

"I don't think so. I think the rumor got started when some civilian bodies were brought in to the hospital. They say the bodies were drained of all their blood."

"Did anyone see these bodies?" Reese asked. There would probably not be any better way to determine how much was known about what was happening than the traditional military rumor mill. Reese decided to milk it while the opportunity presented itself.

"They wouldn't let anyone near the hospital," the private said, the disappointment evident in his voice.

"What else?" Reese probed.

"That's about it, sir. It seems as soon as the rumor got out, it fizzled."

Reese thought that whether or not there was any truth to this scenario he had been sent to investigate, the small leak of information that had occurred was not cause for major alarm. However, the rumors needed to be stopped.

"Maybe they were concerned about the bodies possibly having some sort of infectious disease," Reese offered. "They do have a problem here with tuberculosis."

It was probably an imposed quarantine to just make sure everyone would be safe in the event the bodies had TB. Doesn't that sound more reasonable?"

"Yes, sir, I suppose."

"I'm glad to hear that you are a reasonable person, Private White," Reese said, thinking about how he could use this opportunity to stop the story from spreading any further. He had seen what could happen. A few soldiers write letters home to their parents or spouses and before long, letters and phone calls assail congressmen and women asking for information, or worse, investigations. If relatives don't get satisfactory answers, they almost always go to the press and claim the military is hiding something. Then journalists start crawling out of the woodwork, looking for confirmation of the stories.

"You might want to be careful who you tell about these so-called creatures. I would hate to think that you would spread rumors about such ridiculous things. You might want to let some of the other guys know that telling stories like that can get them into trouble."

"Trouble?"

"Spreading rumors and scaring everyone. It's bad for morale. People get upset and they can't work. That's dangerous here. You don't want your buddy looking for creatures when he or she is supposed to be watching your back, do you?"

"No, sir. I guess I never thought about it that way."

Reese thought that the private's voice reflected the change he wanted; a more concerned attitude that he might get into trouble.

"You might want to let your friends know."

"Yes, sir. I definitely will."

Reese smiled and let the issue rest.

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## Chapter Eleven

Reese decided to use the rest of the time of his trip to base camp to familiarize himself with the area. The private had maps in the vehicle and Reese used them to plot where the incidents had occurred as mentioned in the reports. He asked several questions about the surrounding area and in that respect, the young private was quite useful. Before being assigned as the daily run driver to the airport, he had made several patrols in the outlying areas. He described the ruins in fair detail and Reese marked the map as he tried to formulate what the region looked like.

Reese was still unable to relinquish the words that General Stone had used in his note, *use of such creatures as a military assets*. Did he actually believe they existed? Even he had a hard time believing it could be true. But was the general actually considering the possibilities of controlling them and using them in the military?

Reese had formulated his own opinions that history was full of myths that were nothing more than just fabricated stories or exaggerations. But he also believed that some of them held some parts of truth. If some form of creatures existed during those earlier periods, and if they lived then, why couldn't they live today? But if they did, why had they not been discovered?

Further, if creatures existed as those that had been chronicled through history, how would one even go about trying to control them? No one else had been able to. Why or how could they be controlled now? Supposedly, these creatures were fast, strong, intelligent and virtually indestructible. They had survived for hundreds of years, undetectable and unnoticed...

Realization smacked Reese with the force of a baseball bat to the face.

"That's it!" he shouted.

"Sir?" The private asked. "I don't understand? What's it?"

"Oh ... nothing. Sorry," Reese said. "I ... just drifted off for a moment and thought I was somewhere else. Jet lag, I guess."

The private looked at him strangely for a second or two, then returned his gaze to the road ahead of him.

Reese smiled. It was so damn obvious that it scared him; the perfect soldier was what the general wanted. A stealth team of these creatures could penetrate any stronghold undetected. Accomplish any mission imaginable. Become the ultimate remorseless killing machine. And all Stone would have to do is point them in the



right direction and let them at it.

Reese didn't like this line of thinking. He may have been handed the dream of a lifetime if these creatures actually existed, and here he was wondering about the moralistic implications of using creatures as killing machine to do the military's covert work. If they existed, weren't they killers already? Reese imagined the creatures sucking the blood out of their victims, and then killing them unmercifully—was there really a difference?

"Sir, are you all right? You look kind of pale?" the private asked.

"Yes," Reese answered, glancing at the young private as he struggled to control his stomach. "It's just a combination of the jet lag and this bumpy road."

"Yes, sir, it was probably something you ate," the private said. "The food on those Air Force planes will kill you. I remember one time when I was flying home for leave around the holidays and..."

Reese didn't hear the private finish his sentence as he leaned out the window and vomited.

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## Chapter Twelve

Reese arrived at Camp Bondsteel, which was situated near the city of Urosevic, as darkness captured the entire region. Massive floodlights lit the camp and its perimeter.

Private White drove Reese to the base commander's office. As Reese entered the building, he was met by a staff sergeant who led him to a conference room. Stepping into the room, he saw three people were already there and apparently having some kind of meeting. There was an army colonel who Reese immediately assumed was Colonel Antol, the base commander. The other two he didn't know.

"Commander, glad to see you made it," Colonel Antol said as he rose from his chair and offered Reese his hand.

"Thank you, sir." Reese said.

Colonel Antol was a fit-looking black man. He smiled warmly, but appeared haggard, as if sleep had eluded him for quite some time. His shaved head glistened with sweat in the bright fluorescent light even though the temperature in the room was cool. Reese knew the colonel was under a lot of stress just running the base camp under normal circumstances, but now with this added strain, it showed in his physical appearance.

"Let me make introductions," the colonel said, as he led Reese toward the other people in the conference room.

The first person was a fellow Naval officer who wore the trident emblem above his left pocket indicating he was a Navy SEAL. He was about six feet tall and a solid two hundred pounds. His blond hair was the traditional short length and a scar ran along his left cheek.

"Commander John Reese, this is Lieutenant Mark Johnson, SEAL Team Two commander."

"Sir," Johnson said.

Reese felt the iron grip of the man as they shook hands. SEAL Team Two was one of the teams that he provided logistical support for back on the base in Little Creek. He recognized the man's name, but had never met him before.

"Pleased to meet you," Reese said. "Long way from home."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant said.

They moved to the next man. He was a sharp contrast to the physically fit Lieutenant Johnson. His body was short and stocky in size, his hair completely gray, but his face had that favorite uncle look to it.

"This is Major Sam Barkley, the medical officer," Antol said.

"Commander," the major said as he offered Reese his hand. "Welcome to Kosovo."

"Thanks ... I think," Reese said as he smiled at the man. Reese thought instantly that he would get along with this man because of his warm disposition.

"There are three other people that are involved. Two are in this building," said the colonel. "But I thought it would be better to talk among ourselves first. The others are a Sergeant Estefan, who was a witness to the event, who is still in an incoherent state in the hospital. The second is a Corporal Brosnev, who you'll soon meet. He is the interpreter for the third person, the civilian, Idriz Laupki."

Colonel Antol sat down, indicating for the rest of them to do the same.

"Gentlemen, nothing said here tonight will be discussed outside the confines of this room. Is that understood?"

Everyone nodded.

"Commander Reese, General Stone has asked that *you* lead the investigation and that myself and staff provide any assistance that you may require."

Reese heard a tone he did not like from the colonel, who had been congenial up to this point. He knew it would be an awkward arrangement to work in if he was in charge instead of the colonel. It would quickly become counterproductive and precious time could be lost.

"Sir," Reese interrupted, "forgive me for correcting your statement, but I was told that I would be top advisor, not in charge of the operation. I am to provide recommendations on how to conduct the investigation and recommend action to be taken. You will have the ultimate say on what goes."

Reese knew it wouldn't matter either way; he would explain it all to Commander Scott at SOCOM and have him smooth it over so that everyone would be happy and cooperate.

"Must have been some miscommunication on my people's part," the colonel said, as his tone became less defensive. "How do you recommend we proceed?"

"So far I've just studied the reports. Is there any information to add at this point?"

"No. There hasn't been any change in the condition of the sergeant. We were not authorized to run a reconnaissance mission until you arrived."

"I understand your concern about scouting the site, but I would suggest to not do so until I have researched some things and gone over some ... special tactics that might be required with Lieutenant Johnson. I would like to interview the civilian first. I have questions I need answered before I can recommend the next course of action."

"Okay, Commander, talk to the civilian," Antol said. "We'll meet later when you're ready to discuss your next move."

Reese thought they had finished for now, but noticed Antol still appeared to have one more question for him. He hesitated on getting up from the table.

After a few moments of awkward silence, he spoke.

"Commander, we're all intelligent people here," Antol said as he swept the room with his hand. "What does the General think is going on here? I know what it looks like but ... come on now, creatures that kill people and suck their blood? *Vampires*, for God sakes—does he really believe they exist?"

Silence settled as they waited for Reese's response. But he said nothing, suspecting the colonel wasn't finished speaking. It was better to let him air out all his grievances now.

"It's just local folklore," Antol continued. "This country's history is loaded with stories such as these. You know that probably better than anyone in this room does. It was just some damn rebels that killed the civilian's children, then Captain Block got involved and he was killed. Lieutenant Johnson and his SEAL team can go in there and route the bastards out in an hour. But I can't send them because General Stone wants *you* to look at it first."

"Colonel, I don't know what we're dealing with here. I hope you're right and you can send in the SEALs to take care of it," Reese paused, "because the other possibility scares the living hell out of me."

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## Chapter Thirteen

Idriz Laupki

Idriz Laupki tossed and turned on the military cot. He dreamt, remembering when he was seven years old, the youngest son of Alexi and Lipska...

He watched the commotion in his home's kitchen as his parents and grandparents added ingredients into a large pot on the stove. The chaotic frenzy in which they worked scared the little boy as he watched them move with an intense nervous purpose. He was worried that something had happened, but he had not been told anything, nor had he asked.

Children in the village learned to accept responsibility at an early age. They were not to chase after their mother or father asking what they were doing or what has happened. They were taught to keep their mouth shut and to stay out of the way. Idriz knew something bad had happened. He could see that the people were scared. As farmers, they were always concerned about weather, crops and their livestock. But he had never seen them as frightened as they were now.

He had heard that several cattle had been found dead with mysterious puncture wounds on their necks. His grandparents were summoned by the village elder. When they arrived, Idriz saw that they had brought an old book. It looked very old because the binding appeared to be crumbling at the touch. The pages were very yellow, almost brown. The condition of the book reminded him of his grandparents; in many ways, they were alike. Their skin was old and rough and looked as if it were ready to crumble and fall off their bones. The book was consulted by the village elder and his grandparents. Soon after they spoke, they began to start cooking something in his home.

They cooked a dark liquid in a large pot. Its smell reminded Idriz of a dead animal that lay rotting in the fields. But the smell was not the worst of it. He'd seen some of the ingredients that went into the strange brew. The cattle owner brought the clear large jug. The liquid inside was a scarlet red. Idriz knew that it had to contain blood. When it was poured out of the bottle, its terrible odor had a coppery scent.

His family said prayers he had never heard before as they added the ingredients into the pot and stirred. At some point of agreement between the group, they decided that whatever it was they were making was complete, and poured the mysterious liquid into several jugs. The bottles were loaded onto a wagon and driven off.

With an apparent relief that their task was completed, the four people sat down in exhaustion and drank a combination of whiskey and coffee. Their words were few

and soon they went off to rest. During this time, Idriz's father came outside of their small home to smoke a cigarette before going to sleep.

"There you are, Idriz," his father said. "I was beginning to wonder where you went."

"I have been here the whole time. I saw what you were doing," he said, watching his father as he exhaled a large plume of smoke.

"You have questions, my son?"

"What was it and why was it made? I saw the bottle of blood. It scared me like an awful secret, like something evil."

"What we have done is not evil," he said, as he patted Idriz's head, then ruffled his hair in a playful and loving gesture. "We planned to tell you in a few years about the stories that have been passed down from generation to generation. But I guess now is the proper time since you have seen what we had to do to protect us and our friends."

"Protect?" Idriz asked.

"Yes, my son. We've made what we call an elixir; it's a liquid used to ward off the evil and to protect the villagers and our animals."

"Is there an animal attacking the cattle?" Idriz asked.

"In a way, it is an animal, but then it is so much more," his father said, obviously struggling to find the right words to use. "It is evil in the shape of a man. It comes in the night to steal the blood from the animals. Sometimes it steals from the people, too."

"Is it a werewolf?" Idriz asked, his eyes wide as he remembered the story he had heard told around the fire on evening.

"No, Idriz, it is not a werewolf. This beast is called the vampire and it is very real."

"Why has it come?"

"I don't know, my son. Perhaps the fighting in the mountains has forced it out of its lair."

"Can it be killed, the terrible beast?" Idriz asked.

"Yes, there are ways. We made a special elixir that will keep it away. It's a poison to the creature; if it gets on their body or inside the body, it will kill it. If you splash it on them, it will burn."

"What do you call this magic potion?"

"It's not really a potion. But we just call it elixir. Its ancient name means 'death to those that are already dead.'"

"And it works, you are sure?"

"Yes, it works, my son."

"This vampire, it drinks the blood? All of it?"

"It depends. If it plans to feed on the animal or human for a long time, it will drain the blood slowly, like saving food for a cold hard winter. If it does not care about saving, it can drain the body dry."

"Where is this creature? Is it here in the village?"

"Not in the village, but somewhere in the mountains. You know the place they call Devil's Grip?"

"Yes."

"We think it is there, but we are not sure."

"We should kill it and all that are like them. Shall we do that, Father?"

"It is not easy. It only comes out at night, and is extremely powerful and quick. The key to destroying it is to find out where it sleeps during the day. It hides from the sunlight; the light will kill it."

"It hides from sunlight?"

"Yes, the light is deadly to their kind. Some say it is because it is God's light."

"But," the boy began, sounding unsure, "is not the moonlight from God also?"

"I think so. It is very confusing at times, even to someone like myself. The old book also tells us something else that we should remember that I do not understand."

"What is that, father?"

"That we should not kill them, for they serve a purpose."

"What purpose do they serve that is possibly good? They steal blood from us or from our animals—there is no good in that."

"Some believe everything that is written in these old books, but I do not. When you get older and if you should choose to read them, you may also not agree with them. But there are those who agree with the idea that creatures are necessary as long as their numbers are kept small."

"If all they do is kill animals and people, why should they live?"

"Some people, in the eyes of others, do not deserve to live and if the creatures take them, the rest of us will be better off in the end."

"Who deserves to die in that manner?"

"You know how sometimes we judge people by the way they act or by the way they look? We see people who do evil but cannot prove it so that they can be punished. Instead they banish these people from town and send them to the mountains."

"Yes, father."

"The creatures will judge them and decide their fate. If they are to die, then they will be killed."

"To kill is all right?"

"Some believe that by letting the creatures kill, they themselves have not committed any crimes against God."

The boy thought about that for a few seconds as he looked at the sky. Then he turned toward his father. "But is not keeping evil the same as being evil?"

"Yes, my son. I think so. But you must decide within yourself."

"Then I think these creatures should all be destroyed. Every last one of them," Idriz said.

His father chuckled at the determination of his young son and patted his head again, then threw away his cigarette.

"I'm going to go to sleep now. You come in a little while, okay?"

"Yes, Father." Idriz kissed his father good night.

As he sat on the stone wall, Idriz's gaze turned toward the mountain in the direction toward Devil's Grip.

"You better stay up there," he said and spit in that direction. "Or I will kill you all."

\* \* \* \*

Idriz briefly awoke on the military cot in a small room. His head throbbed and he felt sweaty, even though the temperature was quite cool. He went to the sink, turned on the cold water and splashed some on his face. As he gazed upward into the mirror, he looked at a face which reflected his torment. He looked much older than his fifty years; his eyes red from anger and tears, encircled by the wrinkles in his flesh from spending too much time under the rays of the sun and facing the harsh winters in the mountains.

This country was unforgiving. If the constant fighting or weakening economy didn't claim him or his people, the lack of proper medical care and food did. But it was still his home that he had fought to keep, and would continue to do so until the land claimed him as it had his wife.

His wife, his Anna, had been a frail woman who had died during the birth of their last daughter six years ago. He carried on with his life, grieving the loss of his wife and



devoting himself to the raising of his two daughters. But now, they were all gone.

He found himself tired, extremely tired, and returned to the cot. The past few days had worn him past the point of exhaustion, but he could not sleep without the dreams now serving as a constant reminder of what had happened. The return of the creatures and the murders of his children now occupied his every waking and sleeping thought. His two precious girls were dead by the hands of the creatures that had killed his parents more than thirty years ago.

Unable to fight the fatigue that his thoughts brought, he returned to the cot and drifted off to sleep again.

\* \* \* \*

A fifteen-year-old Idriz returned home from his trip to the mountains. He whistled as he walked because he was in a good mood. It had been a successful hunting trip; he had gotten several deer and was bringing home a lot of meat tied on the backs of his packhorses. His father would be especially proud of this accomplishment; the fresh meat would feed them throughout the winter.

As he approached his home in the fading sunlight, he saw many people near his house and heard women wailing. He dropped the lead ropes on the packhorses and ran the remaining distance. Someone from the crowd stepped forward to meet him; it was the mayor, Lexi Aristhmiski.

"What's happened?" Idriz cried. "Where are my mother and father?"

"Idriz, something terrible has happened," the mayor began, his low voice characteristic with his short and pudgy shape. Idriz had always despised the man, for he was lazy and used his position to get out of work.

"What? Tell me!" Idriz screamed.

"Your mother and father. They're ... dead. God rest their souls." He made the sign of the cross.

"No! No!" Idriz felt his body's strength leave him. The mayor grabbed him by the arm and supported him, but Idriz brushed him away in contempt.

"Tell me what happened!" Idriz demanded, as he struggled with his emotions.

"They were mauled by an animal, perhaps a pack of wolves," the mayor said, avoiding Idriz's eyes.

"Wolves? Here in the village?"

"No, not here. They were at Devil's Grip when it happened."

"Devil's Grip? What were they doing there?"

"They went there because there were more cattle mutilations," the mayor said, his

voice nervous. "The trail led them to that area. They found nothing but thought it best to spread some of the elixir in the area as a warning. After that, we can only assume that the animals attacked them, maybe something to do with the smell of the elixir. You know its main ingredient?"

"Blood, from a dead animal," Idriz answered. "Their bodies ... they weren't drained of blood?"

"We don't think so. There was a lot of blood in the area where they were attacked—that is why we do not believe it was the creature, but wolves."

Idriz looked at the mayor cautiously, unsure if the inflection in his voice indicated lies or grief.

"But it might have been made to look that way," Idriz said, more to himself than to the mayor. "Where is my grandmother?"

"She is inside."

Idriz moved through the crowd as the people he'd grown up with touched him and spoke their condolences. He ignored them and entered the house. He found his grandmother in her little room, sitting in her rocking chair and staring toward the mountains.

"Grandmother," he said. She looked to him, her eyes and face looked even older now in the dying light of the day.

"Idriz," she said as she raised her arms to him. He went to her and they embraced.

"It's horrible, what has happened," he said. "I will go after the animals that did this."

"They are not animals, Idriz," she said in a low but firm voice.

"But the mayor ... Lexi said that there were animals."

"The mayor says what he must to stem a panic. He is a coward," she said and emulated spitting.

"So it was the vampires?" Idriz asked.

"Yes," she said. "Your father and mother were out too late and must have been surrounded by them. I told them to stay away from that area, it was too close to their ... home."

"Why were they there? Why did they go if they knew it was dangerous?"

"There were more cattle killings, so your father said it was enough and set off to wipe them out. 'To kill them all,' he said. Your mother was scared he would get him into trouble by doing something foolish. She wouldn't let him go by himself—so she went with him."

Idriz remembered the conversation he'd had with his father eight years ago. The words sounded remarkably like the words that he himself had used. Had he not said the same thing? To kill them all?

"You didn't try and stop them?" Idriz asked.

"I tried to dissuade them but they wouldn't listen. Nobody listens to the old people anymore. Your father said he didn't care what was in the old books about keeping a balance. He said he was tired of condoning the evil that walked in the night."

Idriz became silent with his grief as his grandmother stroked his hair with her old hands.

"I will go and finish the job," he said.

"No! I will not lose you to this foolishness," she screamed.

"I'm going. Nothing will stop me."

"You must not go, Idriz—I beg of you."

"You do not want revenge against these creatures?" he asked.

"Of course I do," she said adamantly. "But if you were to fail, the consequences would be deadly. They can wipe out the entire village if you make a mistake. We are not even sure if it is one or many. And if one should escape, we would be doomed to live in fear the rest of our lives. Do you want that on your conscience? There is a delicate balance here. Until we know exactly how many there are and where they are located, your actions will cause harm to everyone."

Idriz thought for a few seconds.

"Very well," he said. "I will do nothing yet, but only if you promise to help me."

"What?"

"Show me how to make the elixir," he said.

"The elixir? But it—"

"Don't worry," he said, placing his hand on hers, "I will not risk the village in revenge. I promise you that. But if the time should come, I want to be ready. That is my duty, is it not?"

His grandmother nodded and wept for her daughter and her son-in-law who were dead.

Idriz did not cry. He just stared out the window toward the mountains.

Six months later, Idriz led the cow down the narrow mountain path that he'd traveled countless times. He had selected this area upon his discovery of dead animals that

had been discarded, which he ascertained had not been killed by animal predators. They were virtually untouched with the exception of puncture wounds on their body.

As he reached the clearing that he had chosen, he tied the cow to a tree where it could be seen easily from the area known as Devil's Grip just as the sun was getting low in the horizon.

The cow looked at Idriz's familiar face, its large eyes searching for the usual carrot that Idriz had used to win its friendship. As he stroked the animal's stocky neck, he felt a twinge of regret for the beast, knowing that he had used it to achieve his goal.

"Tonight we get even," he said to the cow. "I know you aren't feeling well, but that's because of the elixir I have been giving you. It will all be over soon and then I will not give you anymore ... I promise."

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## Chapter Fourteen

Six months had passed since his father and mother had been buried, more than enough time to come up with a plan to get the creature that had killed his parents. His grandmother had showed him how to make the elixir and he had been feeding it to the cow so that it would build up in the animal's blood system. He took extra care to insure that only he milked the cow so he could dispose of the milk and not risk harm to anyone.

It was getting darker now; it wouldn't be much longer, he thought. He found a place to hide amidst the brush and began to wait. He kept a bottle of the elixir with him in case things went wrong and he had to use it.

Without a sound, a man appeared from the woods and walked toward the tied-up cow. Idriz studied the man as best he could as the last strands of daylight now gave way to the moon that bathed the area with an aura of golden hue. Idriz thought it strange that there was only one. He assumed that these creatures would be like wolves and hunt in a pack. But if only one existed, that made his revenge easier.

The creature walked effortlessly, almost as if floating toward the cow, approaching the animal without any hesitation. Idriz assumed this was because it was not uncommon for stray cattle to make their way here, up from the pastures. The man caressed the cow with his hands that appeared a ghostly white in the moonlight, and then Idriz saw a flash of movement, and the man lowered his head and bit into the neck. The cow jumped briefly, but quickly settled down as if this creature soothed it in some way as it drank the poisoned blood.

Idriz recoiled with revulsion at the sight of the creature drinking the blood from the cow, but he forced himself to watch. He waited impatiently but soon the moment that Idriz had waited for came.

The creature recoiled from the cow, its lower face covered with blood as it writhed in pain, tiny bits of flames erupting over its skin. It turned and disappeared from sight with a wail of pain the likes of which Idriz had never heard before. He knew it meant death for the creature and he smiled.

Idriz did not pursue, for he did not see the point in it. His grandmother assured him that if the elixir was in the body, death would come and there would be no trace of the body except for a pile of ashes. The flames he had seen were evident the process had begun. He felt overwhelming delight in seeing the creature suffer and he knew that if there were more, the delight would get stronger each time he killed one.

He would wait to see if any more cattle disappeared from the village or the farmer's fields to determine if more creatures existed. Then he'd decide on another course of action; he was committed to kill them all and he would, he swore it on his father's grave.

Idriz moved to retrieve the cow, but saw that either due to the shock, or from the amount of blood the creature drank from it, the cow now lay dead on the ground. He stroked the cow's neck, avoiding the area that had been torn open, and said a quick prayer for the creature that had helped him kill the evil being.

"Go to heaven, my beast friend. Your life has been lost but we have rid the world of a creature this night, making it a better place for us all. God welcomes all good creatures, great and small and this day, you will surely be welcomed. The one that killed you will surely burn in hell."

Idriz began his trek home; his steps much lighter as the burden of revenge had now been lifted from it.

\* \* \* \*

Idriz rose back to a level of semi-consciousness. His thoughts were a jumble of the past and present. The creatures—had there been more than one? He had been wrong when, as a young man of fifteen, he thought that he had removed the dark cloud that lingered over these mountains and killed the beast. Or had he? Perhaps these creatures were not the same? But why after all these years had his children been slain—if not for retribution for what he had done so long ago.

He had assumed that the creature he had killed was the only one. After its death, there were no more mysterious deaths of people or of animals. But maybe more than one existed, and they had moved somewhere else for a while and finally returned. He rubbed his temples. Had he taken part in the deaths of his beloved children by exacting revenge for his parents?

His daughters said that they wanted to go out and pick some berries before the first frost settled in. He had been busy tending the cattle and told them it was all right. He had not even thought to ask where they would pick berries. If he had known, he would have told them to not go near the old ruins. When they hadn't returned home at sunset, he went looking for them. He talked with other villagers and pieced together where Ishma and Crema had gone. The next day as the sun rose, death greeted him.

Word had been brought that their bodies had been found at the ruins. He went to them and after seeing his daughters in death, knowing how they had been killed; he went crazy with grief, wandering for several hours in the countryside oblivious to everything.

At first he had thought that going to the Americans for help was the right thing to do. He could not fight the creatures on his own. But now ... he wondered if he had made the right choice, because another man had died from his actions. He tried to warn the

American captain, but the fool did not listen to him. The Westerners did not know the stories. They discounted them as myths from a backwards people. They would think differently now that one of their own had been killed.

Now he found himself entombed inside the wooden structure they called the hospital. He called it a prison because he was unable to leave this place. They were going to conduct some kind of investigation into what happened and were waiting for another American to arrive. The interpreter assured him that they would go and kill the creatures soon. But Idriz did not care about the American that was coming or their promise to kill the creatures, for he was going to kill them no matter what happened, no matter what the cost he had to pay. It didn't matter what happened to him. He had no desire to live except to kill the creature that had killed his little girls. He would do whatever it took to see that done before he took his last breath. His last breath would be meaningful, he thought, as he started to drift back off.

There was a knock on the door and then the door opened. Idriz quickly sat up on the edge of the cot.

The young man he knew as Brosnev, the interpreter, entered. He spoke to Idriz in his native tongue.

"You look unwell," Brosnev said. "Do you need to see a doctor?"

"No."

"Then we must go," Brosnev said.

"Where now?" Idriz asked. "Is there more paper we must write on?"

"No more writing for now," Brosnev said. "The specialist, the American, has arrived and wishes to talk with you."

"So many people wish to talk to me now," Idriz muttered. "Before this, I was lucky to get the time of day from any Americans."

"We shouldn't keep the commander waiting," Brosnev said, ignoring the comment.

"Well we should go then," Idriz said as he rose. "We do not want to keep the commander waiting. It might—how do you say—ruin his day."

Brosnev said nothing as Idriz stood face to face with him.

"Has anyone told him anything?" Idriz asked.

"I don't know. I assume he has read the reports."

"I just wonder if he knows what he is getting himself involved in. Is this really necessary?"

"I only follow orders," Brosnev said. "These decisions are made by the people in

charge."

"Yes, I know—you only follow orders. Let me talk to the man in charge. I don't need any outsiders' help. I can do this myself. I can kill these creatures. All I need is some men to help me carry it out."

"We've already been through this, Mr. Laupki," Brosnev said. "Colonel Antol is in charge and will decide what we shall do."

"You are all fools," Idriz said and walked past Brosnev and out into the hall. He spoke again but this time softly, so he would not be overheard. "You know nothing about revenge."



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## Chapter Fifteen

Reese stepped into the small conference room where Brosnev and Idriz waited for him. The corporal stood and greeted Reese.

"Sir, Corporal Brosnev reporting as ordered."

Reese noticed the gaze of Idriz followed the action of the young corporal. At first, Reese thought it was a look of disdain for the corporal. But the longer Reese studied the civilian, the more he saw what attracted his attention to Idriz. It was the look in Idriz's eyes: there seemed to be so much ... *life* in them. Or was it burning anger or hatred for the loss of his two children? Reese felt a sense of unease toward this man that he had not even met yet.

"At ease, Corporal," Reese said as he offered his hand. "It's nice to meet you. I understand you will be my interpreter?"

"Yes, sir," Brosnev said, as he shook Reese's hand.

"And you have been involved in this ... situation since the beginning?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now please introduce me to our guest."

Brosnev spoke a few words and Idriz rose and offered his hand to the commander. As they shook hands, Reese noticed the man's hands were like sandpaper, but his grip was strong.

"Please offer my condolences for the loss of his daughters," Reese said, before the handshake was finished. Brosnev spoke and Reese immediately felt a tightening of the handshake and an understanding in the man's face for just a second.

"Thank ... you," Idriz said in broken English, which surprised the interpreter and Reese.

"You're welcome," Reese said, acknowledging his thanks. He indicated for them to be seated. He took papers out of his case and some maps that had been folded and refolded a dozen times. Reese saw Idriz's gaze followed his movements closely, studying him with an intense curiosity. He could feel the man's gaze upon him as if he were reflecting his anger toward Reese.

"Corporal, please explain to him that I know it will be painful to talk about some of the events, but it is necessary in order to clear up this matter as soon as we can."

Brosnev quickly translated and Idriz nodded his understanding.

"First, I want to know about the liquid that was thrown at these creatures. The liquid that he made."

Brosnev was surprised at the question and hesitated.

"Corporal, you must do it exactly as I say it and when I say it," Reese said, firmly but in a calm tone. "It is important to get honest answers. Do you understand?"

The corporal nodded as he translated the question. Idriz also appeared surprised at the question, but responded to the corporal, while not taking his gaze from Reese.

"He says it is something that has been passed down through his family from the ancient books. It is meant to ward off the creatures and even kill them if they consume it."

"Does he have a name for the substance?" Reese asked.

Brosnev asked the question.

"He calls it—elixir."

"What are these creatures?" Reese immediately asked. The interpreter asked the question. Idriz stared at Reese as he answered.

"He says," Brosnev paused, "he says ... you know what they are."

"Tell him I want him to tell me what they are."

The interpreter translated the question.

"Vampyres," Idriz said in his heavy Slavic accent. "Vampyres."

Reese told Brosnev, "Tell him to start at the beginning, as far back as he can remember."

The interpreter relayed the request and Idriz began the story. As Reese listened intently, he made notes on the paper in front of him. He'd written:

*The liquid—need more.*

*Special equipment—get with Johnson.*

*Delivery method—get with Barkley.*

Reese had read the history of this country and knew it was full of turmoil. He also knew it would be a perfect location for creatures to inhabit; with constant fighting within the country, death was nothing new. It was a way of life and some people wouldn't be missed. Many regions of the country were not inhabited by villagers and offered perfect places to hide for those who did not want to be found.

When he finished talking, Idriz appeared drained from retelling the horrible events that had happened to him during his life.

"Where did he get the elixir?" Reese asked as he scanned his notes.

"He says he made it," Brosnev responded.

"Good. Please tell him I want him to make some more. And I want you to watch him and write down everything involved in the process."

Brosnev relayed the request to Idriz, who nodded, then spoke rapidly to the interpreter.

"Sir, he wants to know what you are going to do and if you believe what he has told you? Also ... if you are going to kill the creatures, he wants to help."

"First, I'm going to arrange surveillance of the area to make sure they are still there before we ... before we do whatever it is we are going to do. As to his other question," Reese carefully chose his words. "I believe the substantiated events that have happened up to this point. As to the story he has relayed, many aspects are corroborated with some of the information I have seen and read. As far as the creatures are concerned, we are going to find out."

Reese ignored Idriz's comment about killing the creatures, as well as making eye contact with the man. He did so because he was worried that this man might see that Reese avoided answering his question for several reasons, but most especially that if these creatures actually did exist, killing them was the last thing Reese had in mind.

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## Chapter Sixteen

### Dimitri and the Vampires

Deep underground beneath the ruins, Dimitri Bicannoff dreamt back to a time when he was a mortal human being, reliving the event as if it was occurring again...

He was in the winter of 1915, sitting next to the fire and listening to the runner's story. Mikel had come from the main Serbian force at the border. He was relaying the account of the battles between the invading Germans and the Serbian army, in between taking bites of stale bread and washing it down with cold water flavored with whiskey.

"They are advancing quickly across the border. We had achieved a stalemate between our army and Austria-Hungary's national forces. Things weren't going well but at least we were holding them. But now the German bastards!" He spat vehemently. "They bring their tanks and armored forces. We are no match for them on the open battleground."

As the downfall of their country was foretold, Dimitri, Josip, Franjo, Andre and Iliga listened with interest in the cold frigid air. They were all in their mid-twenties and full of patriotic pride and spirit. All had lived in their village on the outskirts of Kacianik since they were born, farming the lands with their families, or what remained of them, both lands and families, after the constant wars. All but Josip had lost their fathers in the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913, leaving them with a greater role in supporting their families, which also tied them to this little town.

Most families had five to eight children who were destined to die either on the battlefield or from toiling in the fields from sunrise to sunset. The women, bound to the endless task of trying to keep their men alive as long as possible, were kept busy as well: trying to cook meals with not enough food, mend clothes that had been mended too many times already, while living in constant fear of losing their husbands to another war. The worsening economy, the harsh conditions of farming and the ceaseless battles for independence of the small but proud country stole their men with the vengeance of a desperate thief in an unlocked store.

At twenty-three years of age, Dimitri looked like his father. Hawk-like features upon a face weathered with lines of hard work and too many hours in a field behind the plow. Shaped by a difficult life, he looked like a man ten years older. He was large, slightly more than six feet in height and broad at the shoulders. His hair was jet black, peppered with gray. His best characteristic was not his physical looks, but rather his demeanor, which was always outgoing and positive. He was a born leader

and his friends sensed that and followed his lead in whatever he chose to do.

The rest of his friends looked similar, with dark hair and brown eyes. They were all the same age, and possessed varying degrees of haggard appearances. They knew their way of living destined them for short lives. But now, they stood around the fire, their clothes stitched and mended to the point of non-recognition of what they must have looked like when they had been first made, listening to the story that Mikel told them about what was happening in their country. These events made them feel proud of the men that fought for their freedom. For a little while, they were no longer mere farmers as the story took them away from their toils in the field.

The cold seemed to no longer affect the young men as they listened to Mikel speak of the battles and fighting. The five of them were enthralled by the stories of how the Serbs fought bravely against the tanks of the Germans, throwing themselves at the mountains of steel in attempts to slow them down or, if they were lucky enough, to destroy them.

"But now," Mikel continued, "our leaders think it wise to retreat and regroup at Corfu so that we can better organize for an offensive that would remove the German invaders from our homeland. Death to them all!" he said and spat again.

Dimitri and the rest stared at each other, their chests swelling with anticipation and pride for their country's soldiers.

"Death to them all!" Mikel repeated and again spat on the cold ground.

"Death to them all!" Dimitri said and then spat.

"Death to them all!" the rest said and spat as well.

Dimitri stepped closer to the soldier, offering him more food and drink. The other four arranged the dwindling fire and fueled it with sparse sticks, their thoughts turning to the soldiers. Most of these soldiers had been farmers until they received the call to defend their homeland. Off the men had gone, many from this very village, while Dimitri and his friends had stayed and farmed the lands. The quota system of men to continue food production was treated as importantly as those that went off to fight. Large armies required large amounts of food and a starving army was worthless to any commander. In addition, the fathers of these young men were dutifully bound to go in place of their sons until they became too old. So the younger men and women stayed put, farmed the lands and waited to hear any news of what was happening.

This lack of fathers caused the younger men to become independent at a very early age. That was one of the reasons that made Dimitri and his friends draw upon one another for support and guidance. Their small group was unique. Andre and Iliga were quiet men who needed someone to follow. Franjo was the reckless one of the bunch; always taking risks or dares. Josip was not as wild as Franjo, but Josip had his moments when his temper got the best of him. Still, he was strong in demeanor

like Dimitri. Men would follow him, so he was second in command of their group.

There was a special bond that Dimitri and Josip shared. They were closer with each other than the others. They had shared an incident as teenagers that had made them the best of friends.

"Death to them all!" Franjo said as he sat next to Mikel. Andre, Illiga and Josip joined them. They sat around the fire speaking of death and killing the German invaders.

Something struck Dimitri oddly about all this talk about death. Killing was not something they had done before, but death was something that he had faced. He and Josip had faced certain death once—and Dimitri remembered that day very well. He remembered the way he felt afterwards and the lesson it had taught him. He knew that he would do whatever he had to do to stay alive. He drifted into the ten-year-old memory which remained vivid in his thoughts...

\* \* \* \*

"The cow is dead," the town elder said to the small crowd that had assembled at his home. "It was mauled by a bear."

The crowd consisted of women, children and old men who murmured their fear and hatred of the beast and what the loss of food would mean this winter if more cattle were killed.

"We will have to wait until some of the men return to kill it. In the meantime, keep all your livestock nearby."

When the crowd left, thirteen-year-old Dimitri and Josip stood together.

"We have to help the village," Dimitri said.

"This is a mean and vile creature," Josip began. "You heard what the elder said. We should wait."

"We don't know when our fathers will return from fighting. If we wait, more cattle may be killed."

"You know where the bear is?" Josip asked.

"I think so. Will you help me?"

Josip looked toward the elder's house, thought for a few seconds, then turned back to Dimitri. "Of course."

"Can you get your father's gun?"

"Yes."

"Good. I will bring my father's older gun he left for me to use, too. Meet me outside

of the ravine to the south of the village."

Before long, they stood at the entrance to the ravine, the sides opening into a large mouth, but then disappearing into the darkness of the forests.

"We shall each take a side and meet at the other end in two hours," Dimitri said.

"The elder warns about getting separated in these woods along the ravine. He says they are very treacherous and—"

"You see the tip of that peak?" Dimitri said as he pointed north. "Keep it in view at all times. It will allow you to keep your progress in the right direction."

Josip remained silent. Dimitri waited for him to say something. He sensed the hesitation within his friend.

"We have scouted here before. Why do you hesitate?"

"Hesitate? I do not hesitate. You are the one doing all the talking."

Dimitri slapped him on the back and smiled. Josip returned the gesture.

"We will be fine. If you see the bear, fire a shot, and I'll do the same. Meet you at the end."

Three hours later, Dimitri was waiting for Josip at their appointed meeting place. His failure to show had Dimitri worried. But no shot had been fired. Where could he be?

He started to walk in the direction that Josip would have taken. After almost an hour of walking, the chaotic cackling of frightened birds off to his right startled him. Something had caused them to leave in a hurry.

He moved in that direction, noticing the change of landscape as the rock walls grew taller and thicker, surely leading to a dead end. In his earlier explorations, he discovered there was only one way that led out, and this was not it. It would be the perfect spot for a hunter to lead its prey and then trap it. His fear that Josip may have been lured into the area made him quicken his pace.

In a few minutes, his suspicions were confirmed as he heard the sounds of the bear snarling in anger.

"Bastard!" Dimitri swore. He had been right. He only hoped that it was not too late.

Moving as quietly as he could in order to preserve the element of surprise, Dimitri moved further inward until he could see the beast and Josip. Josip was perched precariously on a thin ledge. From what Dimitri could see, it was taking Josip every bit of strength and balance to maintain his position. This also explained why he had not fired the gun. If he tried to get it off of his shoulder, he might lose his grip and plummet. The huge bear was standing on its hind legs and swinging its razor sharp claws within inches of Josip's feet.

Dimitri removed his father's gun from his shoulder; its discolored stock and rusted gun barrel giving him a disquieted moment. What if it didn't fire this time? He had fired the gun before with his father at targets; it had worked—most of the time.

He aimed squarely at the back of the bear. If he could hit the beast in the heart, a second shot wouldn't be necessary. Taking a deep breath and holding it, he fired.

Josip, exhausted from keeping his awkward position, was on the verge of falling off the ledge as Dimitri's shot struck the bear in the shoulder, clearly missing its heart. The crazed animal turned toward Dimitri.

Dimitri ejected the round and loaded another. As he threw the bolt forward, it got stuck halfway.

"Damn! It's jammed," he said as fear slammed into him, numbing his body. He tried to turn to run, but couldn't move. Everything around him slowed down to a horrific crawl. He became aware of his own breathing and the beating of his heart. With a surprising but calm matter-of-fact manner, he knew his life would soon be over.

Looking toward the bear, he saw it was watching him curiously. As a wind blew by Dimitri, the bear raised its head and sniffed. As if the beast could smell his fear, it uttered an ear-shattering growl, lowered its head and charged.

Dimitri shut his eyes.

Josip fell to the ground, and even though badly cramped from his holding position on the ledge, he un-shouldered his rifle, aimed and fired as the bear surged toward Dimitri.

The bear fell within inches of Dimitri's feet.

Dimitri opened his eyes and looked at the animal. He watched as its blood began to soak the ground around it and he finally realized that the creature was dead. Dimitri staggered over to Josip and collapsed next to him. They sat silently and stared at the eight hundred-pound carcass. They hugged each other as their feelings of having escaped death surfaced.

"We have looked at death," Dimitri said.

"Yes," Josip replied.

"I've never realized how precious life is to me until faced with death. That moment when I thought I would die, I would have given anything to continue to live. Anything for another chance..."

\* \* \* \*

*Anything for another chance ...* the words drove Dimitri from his troubled sleep and he arose from his crypt. His anger from the previous night came back, the result of the significance of the dream and the foolish action of Josip: the killing of the young



girls and now the soldier. The other three vampires of the group were also waking, but it was Josip that he wanted. He spied him along one of the walls preparing to exit the cavern. Dimitri was next to Josip with lightning speed.

"How could you have been so foolish, Josip?" Dimitri demanded. He pressed Josip against the stone wall, his anger evident from his extended nail and fangs as well as the intensified red glare from his eyes. "First it was the two little girls instead of the father, and now—"

"It was for Franjo that I did it!" Josip shouted and pushed away Dimitri's arms. Andre and Iliga watched in the background with their usual indifference. "The fool human suffers more this way by seeing the deaths of his daughters. Franjo has been avenged."

*Franjo has been avenged ...* the phrase drove Dimitri into the remembrance of his friend's death.

\* \* \* \*

Dimitri sensed that something was wrong. Franjo had left their cavern about thirty minutes ago to scout the area. This had become their custom of late upon rising because of the pair of humans that had been discovered carrying the deathly substance. He should have returned by now.

The thought of the deadly fluid brought a fleeting remembrance about the conversations he had with his mentor, Alexander, about the old books that held the secrets of their deaths.

*Books that we cannot look upon, written in God's light of day...*

He summoned the rest of the group and they headed out in search of Franjo. The last thing Dimitri needed right now was more problems. Things had gradually taken a turn for the worse the past several months. Since the time that they were made, they had been content to stay in their mountains, reading the books in the extensive library, and exploring the other ruins in the vicinity.

However, a gradual restlessness had begun among their group, a restlessness which could no longer be denied because Dimitri felt it himself. But what had happened six months ago had jeopardized the entire group and reflected the troubled times that had settled upon them.

Their appetites had gotten out of hand, causing them to raid some of the villager's cattle in the valley below. Dimitri knew this was wrong, but his reasoning had been clouded, as had the others', by hunger. Then Franjo had gone after the two humans with such viciousness that he destroyed them both instead of scaring them off. Their custom was to avoid all contact. They had, on occasion, frightened away curious on-lookers by appearing as ghosts, but that was about the extent of their dealings with the humans.

Alexander had mentioned that this restlessness could happen and the best thing to do was take a long sleep and hope that the troubled time would pass and the humans would forget. There was a method by which they could impose a self-trance that would allow them to sleep for years. Dimitri had given this a lot of thought during the past several weeks and the likelihood of them doing it seemed even greater now.

As they emerged from their underground lair, they spotted Franjo coming toward them, screaming wildly as he clawed at the erupting bursts of flame that consumed him. They struggled with him and wrestled him to the ground as he fought and screamed. As they looked upon him, they saw his skin dissolve around his bones as the flames increased in intensity.

"A cow in the clearing ... bad blood!" He screamed as he continued to writhe in horrific pain. "Don't drink! Aaahhhhhh!"

"Franjo ... Franjo!" Dimitri shouted. But it was too late. The body burst into flames, then crumbled and fell into a heap of ash that was swirled away by the evening breeze. They stared at what had been their comrade, shocked at what they had just witnessed. The fear that this might someday happen to them, to die such a horrible death, gave them a fresh look at their mortality.

"He's gone," Dimitri said quietly. "This madness is done."

"Done?" Josip asked. "What do you mean done? We must ... we *will* avenge his death! Kill them all ... the entire village!"

"No," Dimitri said firmly. "We have entered a time that is dangerous and filled with a madness on both sides, the villagers and us. It is time to sleep and let the madness pass."

"We must kill the one that has done this!" Josip exclaimed. "Franjo was our friend—your friend!"

Andre and Illiga stood next to Josip in a show of support.

"Again, I say, no," Dimitri said. "What has been done is done. Yes, Franjo was my friend, also." He looked upon the ash-strewn ground. "Who do you think has done this? Clear the craziness from your minds and think. Do you not remember the words that the dying man said to us? Did he not beg for mercy for their son, Idriz?"

"The son," Josip said, shaking his head in acknowledgement. "Yes, it was he. He found some way to put the elixir into the animal." Then with an air of disdain he continued, "But what do we care about the words of these humans?"

The way Josip used the word *human* struck Dimitri strangely.

*Had we not been human not so long ago?*

"You easily forget that you were once just like these people," Dimitri said. "Just like

this farmer's son. Would you not have done the same thing to avenge your father?"

"Yes. But that—"

"You seek to make this worse? Franjo is gone. Who will be next? You? Andre? Maybe Illiga or even myself? Maybe all of us. You go and kill the son, then his friend will come for you. The cycle goes on until everyone is killed. Even if we destroy the entire village—do you think the other villages will not do anything? They know about us. Everyone knows about our kind. We have been a part of this country's history since anyone can remember. Do you understand?"

Andre and Illiga took a step away from Josip.

"He is right." Andre said. "It has turned into another war. That is all this country and its people know how to do."

"Yes," Illiga agreed. "We should mourn Franjo's loss. He was a good friend."

"They don't know how many of us there are," Dimitri continued. "If we sleep for some years, they will believe that they have killed the one creature that has spawned the myths of this place."

"And when we wake?" Josip asked.

"We can start new again. If things haven't gotten any better and the people are still wary of us, we can change our location, find a new place. Maybe even search out others of our kind."

"A fresh start, eh," Josip said. The tone of his voice was not convincing, but fraught with sarcasm. "That will cure all our worries in your mind?"

Dimitri didn't like what he was hearing from Josip. Alexander had said sometimes the change affects the disposition of the person, highlighting their strengths or weaknesses. Andre and Illiga had remained the same, quiet and nonassertive, whereas Josip seemed to be more excitable than he had been in his human life. But then again, he and Franjo had been close—perhaps that led to this abrasive and contradictory attitude.

"We must agree as a group—a family," Andre said.

"I agree," Dimitri said. "If you cannot agree to what we plan, then you must leave us."

Josip stared at Dimitri with a look of shock.

"You would oust me? Cast me out?" Josip asked.

"If it means the safety of the rest of us, yes," Dimitri responded coolly. It hurt him to even suggest; they had been friends since childhood, but if Josip would not back down, Dimitri saw no other choice.

"Then I have no choice but to submit to the will of the group," Josip said, without any emotion in his voice.

"Then we shall return to our sanctuary and commence the sleep," Dimitri said. He wanted to believe Josip more than anything at the moment. His loss as a friend would be a tragic result and he didn't want it. "Let us go."

The group began their return to their underground sanctuary where they would entomb themselves. They returned to their crypts and began the process of slowing their bodies and their minds to a hibernated state where they would consume none of their bodily resources. Dimitri sensed all but Josip and himself had already begun the process.

Josip was not relaxing his thoughts for sleep just yet. Dimitri knew he was bound to follow him and what he had suggested, for it was for the good of the group. But Dimitri felt the hatred of Josip already plotting the revenge of Franjo for when he awoke; he sensed that Josip engraved the name Idriz on his mind so he wouldn't forget it and that he vowed to hunt the man down and not just kill him, but to torture him. Josip also hoped that when they awoke, Idriz would have a family, a large family, so that he could kill each and every one of them.

Dimitri knew that one of the most dangerous thing that one like him could do was sleep with the thought of revenge fixed upon one's mind. It would only mean more trouble when they awoke that if not careful would surely get them all killed. He would have to watch Josip closely.

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## Chapter Seventeen

Dimitri returned his thoughts to the present and his failure of controlling Josip and his revenge. Josip stood defiantly before him.

"And the other soldier who was snooping around?" Dimitri countered. "The American is dead—did he deserve to die for something he was not involved in? Now they will come as well to investigate the death. And the man that you hate so much ... this Idriz ... do you think he will stop now? He has nothing to lose because you have taken it all from him. His daughters were all that mattered to him!"

"He will die eventually as well," Josip said. "But I want him to suffer. He will agonize over the death of his daughters tonight as well as later."

Dimitri released his hold on Josip and turned away.

"Have you forgotten he knows how to make the poison? The poison that killed Franjo and that almost burned us all tonight? You fool! You have jeopardized all of us by doing this." Dimitri rubbed his forehead as he tried to regain his composure. "We cannot expose ourselves if we are to survive. We agreed. We all agreed to stay away from the humans." Dimitri looked at Andre and Iliga then back at Josip. "We have gone to the village every couple of months to buy the cattle we need. No one suspects anything. We can go on with our lives. But now they have seen us, and there are the Westerners involved now, the Americans."

"Our lives? You call this way of life living? Hiding like animals?" Josip asked. "I am tired of the blood from the cattle. The human blood raises my awareness as it burns its way through my veins. We should feed on them, make them fear us and respect our bidding. We can control them."

"Control them?" Dimitri said, incredulous. "You are a fool! If you think you are superior and indestructible, you will become careless and surely die. We must stay together now more than ever. Remember what Alexander told us: Beware the false power of the human blood. You see how it makes you think—wild and reckless! You forget all that we agreed upon—all that we were taught. Is this the way we repay the chance at life? We should all be dead!"

Josip looked embarrassed by Dimitri's comments about the blood and the humans. The words of Alexander floated in his mind with the lessons he had taught them through the many centuries of life he had possessed. Slowly his disposition softened and he nodded.

"We have entered a dangerous period in time because others have seen us," Dimitri added, glad to leave the topic of human blood.

"No one will believe the crazed fool Idriz," Josip said, his voice not as rambunctious as earlier. "He will spin the stories and they will think that he has gone mad by the loss of his two daughters."

"That may be true, but we should still leave this place," Dimitri said.

"And return to the mountains? There is nothing there but wilderness and emptiness. We do not want to go," Josip said. "Here there are people and they interest us with their doings. There are new books and things to amuse us."

"Is this true?" Dimitri asked, as he looked at Andre and Iliga. They both nodded.

"But we are not as well protected here—"

"You worry too much," Josip said. "What has been done, has been done. I may have been wrong but there is no changing what happened. The Americans will no longer bother us; we are myths and will soon be forgotten amidst all the fighting that is going on. We can make it look like the wolves tore the American apart, a freak accident. They will come and look at the body and think the same thing."

They gathered around Dimitri: Josip, Andre and Iliga, placing their hands on him in a reassuring manner. They were a family and he was their leader. He still thought it wrong to stay, but he would acquiesce to their wishes.

"It is dark now," Dimitri said. "There are cattle in the pen. Let us drink ourselves full of life. Then we will take care of the remains of the American. They will be back soon to investigate."

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## Chapter Eighteen

Lieutenant Mark Johnson sat at a table in his quarters caught in the memories that continued to haunt him. He was a skinny young boy cornered by three large boys on the playground of the high school.

*"We're going to kick your ass," one of the large boys said.*

*"Why? What have I done to you?" Mark didn't know why he had been singled out. He'd transferred into the school only a week ago. His alcoholic father had moved to this area after losing his job, again. His mother had died years ago from cancer.*

"You don't look right," one of them said. "We don't know you and you've been walking around all week with this high and mighty attitude. We think it's time you got your welcoming so you know who is in charge around here."

"No, wait ... please," Mark begged.

But they refused to listen to his pleas and beat him ferociously. After a while, when he could no longer stand, one of them took out a knife and cut him along the side of his face.

*"There, you're labeled now," one of them said and they all laughed. With a final kick, they left him lying in the blood-soaked dirt.*

His father refused to listen to his "petty" problems. Mark withdrew from all school activities. When not in school, he lifted weights in his basement and went out to places that he knew the other school kids didn't hang out at. He studied martial arts at the local YMCA.

By his senior year, Mark was in terrific physical shape. Not only had his muscles hardened, so had his personality. He had no friends and associated with other students only for school projects and class work. After graduation, unsure of what to do with his life, he saw a recruitment ad on the television for the Special Forces of the United States Navy. They were called SEALs, which stood for by the Sea, Air and Land; the manner by which they were introduced into hostile environments. He was fascinated by the organization of men that were the pride of the Special Forces for their discipline and perseverance.

The next day, he was at the recruiting office and the following week he was off to boot camp. Physically unchallenged by the basic training, he applied and passed the entry test for Navy SEAL training. Once in the environment that challenged both the

mind and body, he excelled and received accolades from the instructors and classmates. He even surprised himself by making friends with men who were just like him.

But he still had the dreams sometimes. He felt the knife cutting through the flesh on his face. He would awake in the middle of the night breathing hard, bathed in sweat, his hand and fingers tracing the scar. He learned to deal with this emotional hitchhiker from his past and forced himself to banish the thoughts from his mind and leave those specters behind; it worked most of the time.

His first assignment was to SEAL Team Two in Virginia. After a year and a half and having done extremely well on the assigned missions, he was selected to attend a special program whereby he could attend college and apply for a commission to become an officer. Again, he excelled and attained excellent grades, graduating at the top of the class. One day in casual conversation with a fellow classmate, he was asked about his family back home.

"Family? The Navy is my family," he said. "They are the only ones that have ever cared for me and given me what I have needed. That is the family that I will die for."

\* \* \* \*

"Excuse me, Lieutenant?" Commander Reese said, interrupting Johnson's thoughts.

"Oh ... sorry, sir," Johnson said as he stood. Unlike some of his SEAL brethren, Johnson responded with the utmost courtesy to all senior officers, regardless if they were Special Forces or not.

"Must have been a good thought you were having," Reese said.

"Can I help you, sir?" Johnson asked, not willing to discuss what his thoughts had been about.

"I need your expertise," Reese began. "I'm a planner, not an operator. You're the expert in conducting covert operations, so if I should suggest something that you do not feel is correct, I want you to tell me okay?"

"Yes, sir," Johnson said. "What did you have in mind?"

"For starters, I want satellite reconnaissance of the area where the captain was killed ASAP. Any chance of rigging that for tonight?"

"Shouldn't be any problem as long as the satellite is within range. I'll have to check that out." He checked the time on his watch; there was approximately eight hours until darkness. "We have unlimited use during the Kosovo ops. It can be viewed in the command center here in the camp."

"Good. Now can you augment it to pick out signatures that would not be as warm as the human body? Make its reception more sensitive?"



"I should be able to get something done along those lines," Johnson answered as he looked at Reese. "But why ... wait, you think there is something there, don't you? That there is some truth to all these stories."

"The facts dictate that something is there. The question is what?"

"And if there is something there that is not ... normal? Then what?"

"One step at a time, Lieutenant," Reese said. "You arrange for the satellite observation. I'll meet you in the command center at dusk. I have one other thing to look into. We have engineers here that can manufacture things?"

"Sure. Great bunch, tell them what you want and they make it."

"Thanks, I'll see you later."

\* \* \* \*

Reese found Major Barkley watching Idriz in one of the operating rooms. Idriz was mixing the elixir.

"Major." Reese said to get his attention.

"Commander," Barkley began, his eyes never leaving the man he watched. "Do you know what he is using to make whatever it is he is making? He's using blood and..."

"We can discuss the ingredients later," Reese interjected. "I need you to create something for me and I need it by first light tomorrow."

Major Barkley seemed perturbed that he was being pulled away from watching Idriz.

"Don't worry," Reese said. "The corporal is keeping track of everything he uses in the preparation."

"I think the civilian knows it, too. He's been misleading the corporal. He picks up something and acts like he's putting it in and he isn't. I can't even tell you at this point what is or isn't in it. He's a sneaky guy. What bothers me is why?"

"They are a unique people, yet very suspicious and not trustful with outsiders." Reese let the issue drop for now; he had other things to attend to. He imagined that if they had to, they could analyze the solution to figure out its content.

"What is it that you need?" Barkley asked.

Reese tried to figure out how to describe the device he envisioned. "I don't know how exactly to explain what I want, so bear with me."

"Okay, shoot," Barkley said, looking perplexed.

"Imagine a device that can be controlled remotely, like from a hand-held device. Perhaps like a television remote or something. Its function would be to inject a quantity of liquid into a body quickly."

"We have automatically controlled injectors here that dispense painkillers. They're sensitive devices and extremely precise. It would just be a matter of reconfiguring the controls to work from a hand-controlled remote. What about distance?"

"As much as I can get."

"That might be a problem. I can probably get you fifty feet or so."

"That will have to do for now anyway," Reese said. "Now here is the rest of what I'm thinking about. What I want you to do is imagine the injector and its contents attached to a ... collar-like device."

"What? A collar? You mean like the size of a dog collar?"

"Not a dog collar. Bigger. I want it to be the size to go around a human neck."

Barkley didn't say anything. He just stared at Reese with a bewildered look, as if afraid to ask for more information.

"And make it of the hardest metal we can get our hands on here. It needs a locking device, too."

"I don't know..." Barkley said. "I'll see what I can whip up."

"Take what you need and go see Captain Souer in the machine shop. I've already talked to him and he knows you're coming. I have instructed him that he is to do exactly what you ask and to complete it by first light. Do not tell him anything beyond what is absolutely necessary to manufacture the collars. Make at least four of them and remember—these things must be tamper-proof. If the wearer tries to remove the collar, or if it's activated by the remote, the injector must immediately inject the substance."

"And the substance?" Barkley asked.

Reese glanced at Idriz, who was still mixing and stirring the elixir.



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## Chapter Nineteen

Reese entered the operations center about an hour after the sun had gone down. Computer monitors lined the tables, their screens casting different shades of colored light, giving the room a surreal feel to it. Most of the computers were not in use during the later hours.

Reese scanned the room until he found Lieutenant Johnson. He spotted him off in a corner working alone. For some reason, Reese felt that was the way Johnson liked it, working alone. He felt he was a very inward person unless you were a member of the SEALs or associated with special operations. One of the things Reese had learned during his time with the SEALs in his regular job in acquisition was that you may be part of the team, but unless you're an operator, you're on the outside of the unique club that they belonged to. In a way Reese could understand that, there were cliques in everything, whether school, the workforce or the military; however, when you were associated with a group of people that did things like the SEALs did, the divide between them and others just seemed to be greater.

Reese walked to where Johnson sat, but did not say anything. Johnson intently stared into a computer monitor as he typed on the keyboard. Reese stood behind him watching and waiting, but not wanting to interrupt him for the moment.

Finally, when Johnson had completed what he had been working on, he looked up and saw Reese watching his actions.

"Commander," Johnson began. "We're just about ready. I have been honing the system to the requirements you asked for. There will be approximately a minute delay in between setting adjustments. It shouldn't be much longer."

"Good," Reese said. "I don't think we will have to wait long."

"Wait for what?"

Reese didn't answer. Johnson returned his attention to the display and continued to adjust the display requirements as he had requested.

After a few moments of silence, Reese spoke. "Have you ever searched for something your entire life, then when you think you have found it, you have ... second thoughts?"

"I think so," Johnson answered. "In my career I have been trained to do some unique missions. It's one thing to train for an operation, but quite another to do it. They're a world apart."

"You may be in for new surprises that I am sure you have never trained for," Reese said, as he rubbed his eyes. He had not slept yet and the change in time had totally thrown his body off. "Is there any coffee?"

"There's always coffee in the military," Johnson said and smiled. "But you look like some sleep will do you better."

"Later," Reese said as he went to get some coffee. "You want any?"

"Sure."

Reese returned with two cups of coffee, handed one to Johnson, then drew up a chair and rolled it alongside where Johnson sat. Reese looked at the display on the large monitor. He could see the structural outlay of the ruins which glowed a low luminous green color. Other nearby areas reflected different shades and hues of the color green depending upon their degree of warmth.

"You should see some additional heat sources in the area," Reese said. "I had some cattle driven in that direction."

"Cattle?"

"Food source, Lieutenant," Reese said. "Try and keep them in the field of the display, especially the ones closest to the ruins. If there is any truth to our tale, the cattle will appear as if dinner just arrived."

"Got them," Johnson said. He showed the outline of the animals to Reese, using his finger to trace the images on the computer screen. Reese was amazed how the cattle were easily visible—all due to a satellite that circled the Earth miles above. It was an interesting clash of time and history ... the new being used to track down the old.

"We'll have the images for about two hours. Everyone wants to use the satellite," Johnson said. "I had to pull some strings to get it for this long."

"If anything is going to happen, it will be soon. If the creatures do exist, they will rise and feed shortly after sunset."

"Feed?" Johnson asked, as he looked at Reese with skepticism. Reese returned his gaze but didn't say anything as he sipped his coffee and watched the images on the monitor. Johnson was about to ask him again as he saw a very faint heat source register next to the cow, in the lower right corner of the display.

"Where did that come from?" Johnson asked. "It wasn't there a couple of seconds ago." He pointed to the screen. "Maybe there's a problem with the sensitivity?"

"It's no problem," Reese said. "I think we have company."

Just as Reese finished his statement, another faint spot emerged followed by two more, all of them appearing next to the cow.

"If we were not tuned to the extra sensitivity that you wanted, you wouldn't see these. Whatever they are, they're not giving off much heat."

"Not yet," Reese said.

"Commander?"

"I'll explain later."

As seconds passed, the four spots grew and began to take shape. The cow seemed to disappear from the screen as its warmth dissipated.

"What the hell is it?" Johnson asked, as he turned toward Reese. "How can they just appear and grow warmer?"

Reese did not say anything; his gaze remained transfixed on the screen and the intensifying green images.

"Commander?" Johnson said. "What is it?"

But as Johnson returned his gaze to the display, he clearly saw the outlines of four shapes that were distinctly human in form. "That's impossible. They were not there before."

"But they were," Reese said calmly. "You see, they did not appear on the screen in the human shape at first because there was very little heat from their bodies as they emerged from their hidden crypt. Their blood is cold and void of life. As they drank the blood from the animal, their bodies became warm and they could be detected. As time goes by, their heat will fade away as the coldness of their bodies overcomes the warmth of the newly acquired blood."

\* \* \* \*

Johnson did not say anything, but his thoughts resurrected images of Lestat and Louis from *Interview with a Vampire*. But he had never believed such creatures could ever exist. And now, here they were, as he watched the images move off and their green heat signatures fade away.

"Lieutenant Johnson?"

Johnson left his thoughts of vampires and returned to the present.

"Yes, sir ... I'm okay," he said. "It just caught me off guard." He returned his gaze to the screen. The satellite had moved beyond range, and the screen blanked. "There has to be another explanation."

"Do you have any ideas?" Reese asked. "Is there anyway that what you have just seen could have been faked?"

"They could have..." Johnson searched for an explanation. "Maybe they were wearing heat blockers when they emerged, then removed them later."

"And the cow, did it suddenly put one of these blockers on?" Reese asked. "And for what purpose?"

Johnson looked at Reese, but did not say anything.

"We're done here," Reese said. "I think we've seen all we need to, right?"

"Yes, sir ... I think so."

"We need to discuss some tactics on how to proceed. You're the operator, but I can share what I know about the creatures' dwelling, their habits and weaknesses. I want to be ready by 0600 for a mission briefing with the staff."

"Then what?" Johnson asked.

"We go below the ruins to where they live and find out what we are dealing with. Most importantly, we must ensure we have enough hours of daylight left, otherwise we may become the hunted."

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## Chapter Twenty

At 0550 local time, Commander Reese entered the conference room at the task force main headquarters building. Major Barkley and Lieutenant Johnson were there as he requested to confirm that they were ready for the operation; Colonel Antol would arrive in a few minutes.

Although it was difficult to actually believe what he had seen last night, Reese felt it was confirmation that something lived below the ruins. In accordance with his orders, it was time to move to the next phase. Johnson and he had discussed tactics in a general sort of way, but Reese did not want to let him know the full extent of what he had planned, even though he suspected that Johnson had his own ideas for a search-and-destroy mission.

Reese had received confirmation from Commander Scott at SOCOM that General Stone concurred with his analysis and his recommended course of action. The course of action would be dangerous, yet he felt exhilarated at the possible wealth of information he would learn. Between considering military maneuvers and his own personal desires, his thoughts thwarted any chance he'd had for sleep.

"Okay, before the colonel gets here," Reese started. "I want to make sure we are ready to..." He paused as he looked at the faces of the two men. He could see they were still bewildered by this whole concept of what they were undertaking, and decided to change his direction for the moment. "I know this all sounds weird as hell and something straight out of some nightmare from your childhood. But believe me, all indications are that we are dealing with an unknown species—some would call them vampires. I'm not sure what they are—but I want to find out. What we are about to do has never been attempted."

"And what exactly are we attempting to do?" Barkley asked. Reese prepared to answer but stopped as Colonel Antol entered the room.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said in a rather gruff manner. He looked toward Reese. "Commander, I received a call from General Stone telling me that *you* have a plan you wish to implement."

"Yes, sir," he said sensing the irritation from the colonel. Reese felt pretty confident that General Stone didn't *ask* Colonel Antol anything, but rather told him what he was going to do. Further, knowing Stone and how strongly he felt about this mission, he probably told Antol that Reese would be in charge of the operation, even though Reese had asked that it be couched in a way to help maintain an air of cooperation with the colonel. Either way, the damage was done. Reese took a deep



breath and spoke.

"The plan is simple, as long as we keep certain facts in the front of our minds. These ... creatures are extremely dangerous. We know they have killed and appear to be impervious to bullets. Extreme caution must be emphasized."

"Commander," Antol said. "We have plenty of ordnance here to wipe them out regardless if they are ... these vampires or whatever. It seems a straight-forward issue about how to deal with them. We just blow the hell out of the area—"

"Sir, we are not going to destroy them. We are going to capture them," Reese said in a casual tone.

"Capture?" Johnson asked, in almost perfect synchronization with Antol. Barkley looked much less surprised about the statement: probably because he had surmised as much from the instructions Reese had given him in the design of the collars.

"Yes, sir, that's correct, capture" he repeated. "Our orders are to capture the creatures ... alive." Reese let the silence settle upon the room before continuing. "We are to subdue them for transport back to the United States under the tightest security."

"And I assume you are going to tell us how we are going to do this?" Antol asked in an abrupt tone, indicating his obvious disagreement with the plan. "It's not like we aren't busy enough around here with all the peacekeeping operations we have going on already. Now we are chasing ... whatever the hell they are and sending them back to the States. Christ..."

"Sir," Reese said. "I think that we can do this with minimum interference to your operations. I understand your position and how bizarre all of this may seem. When we go down under the ruins, we might not find what the general thinks is there."

"How will you proceed, Commander?" Antol asked, his anger and irritation apparently somewhat soothed by Reese's response.

"We have quantities of the elixir made by Idriz. We also have a confirmed report from Corporal Brosnev that the liquid did have a detrimental effect on the creatures when it was thrown at them. So we assume that the mixture can be used as a weapon against them."

"Now, if any of this nightmare *is* true, you are gambling, Commander. What if something goes wrong? How will you control these creatures?" Antol asked.

"There is a backup plan that I shall also explain, sir."

"Continue then."

"First, as to the backup plan. If this all goes wrong and we are inundated by the creatures, we will blow the ruins up completely, entombing whatever it is that is

there. Second, as to maintaining control, Major Barkley has developed a device that will be placed around the neck of each creature. The device contains the solution with an automated release mechanism that will inject the elixir into the creature if needed and kill it. The mechanism is controlled by a remote device which shall be held by a protected guard in the event that the creatures attack."

"I don't think that these creatures will place these devices on freely," Johnson said.

"No. If they are aware of what we are trying to do, they will destroy us. That is why we must do this today, in the daylight. We would have no chance in the hours of darkness when they are awake. They sleep during the day and are susceptible to attack."

"So," Johnson said. "The plan is to sneak in on them today, slap the collars on them and move them out in darkness? It's that simple?"

"That's the plan," Reese answered. "But I wouldn't call it simple. One mistake and the whole team can be wiped out. No conventional weapons, with few exceptions, will harm the creatures. If anyone starts going crazy, the whole operation will be over in seconds."

"How do we kill them if the collars don't work?" Barkley asked.

"The men will be armed with backpack sprayers filled with the elixir. If for some reason the elixir fails and doesn't work, we will fall back on the traditional methods of severing their heads from the bodies, wooden stakes through their hearts, or exposing them to direct sunlight."

"This is absurd," Antol said.

"I know it sounds that way, Colonel, but the evidence supports the possibility of the creatures being real. We have our orders. This is the plan that I have developed. If anyone has any better idea ... now is the time to tell me."

No one spoke.

"To summarize the plan," Reese said. "At 1200 today, the first team of six SEALs goes in and attempts to place the collars on the creatures. A second team of the same complement follows but remains in a purely defensive posture prepared to spray the elixir, or hack off the heads. A third team is prepared to blow the place as a last resort. If all goes well, we will hold the creatures temporarily in their present location until transport is arranged." Reese looked at Johnson. "It is imperative you choose men that are trustworthy. This is an operation that can never be acknowledged, no matter what happens."

"All my men understand that any operation is classified and never to be discussed." Johnson said matter-of-factly.

"Good," Reese said. "I will be going with you on Team One. Major Barkley will

remain with Team Three outside the ruins and control the remote devices. If anything goes wrong after the collars are on, we will communicate to him to inject the mixture. I think that about covers it. Any questions?"

"Commander, humor me a little," Antol said. "Suppose that all of this comes true: the creatures exist and you capture them."

"Yes, sir." Reese said, noticing Antol's tone of voice had changed. It was no longer sarcastic or questioning, unlike earlier, when he was quite blunt about not believing any of this. It was as if he was allowing himself to put away his disbelief and imagine what if all of this was in fact true.

"So you get your creatures and all that you think about them is true. Then what? What happens to them?"

"I don't know, sir. I'm just following orders," Reese said, but his voice did not even sound convincing to himself. He also did not offer anything else.

Antol rose. "Gentlemen, I wish you luck. I also hope, for all of our sakes, that all of this is just a mistake. I learned a long time ago that one atrocity can sometimes lead to another. I hope that it does not happen here."

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## Chapter Twenty-one

The sun was directly overhead. Reese surveyed the teams of men as they made their final preparations for the mission. They were situated about 300 yards from the ruins on a hill that overlooked the area. He saw some looks of bewilderment in the men's faces; not from the mission that they were undertaking, but with the unfamiliar actions of conducting an operation in broad daylight rather than under the cover of night. He imagined they felt naked in the sunlight. Once they were underground, and in the darkness, he hoped they would relax and be ready for whatever they encountered there.

But was it just the men he was worried about? Or was it he was concerned that maybe he didn't have a clue in what he was really dealing with? He tried to narrow it down to pros and cons. In a way, one team of men was going against another team of ... creatures. The military men were highly trained in the use of weapons and hand-to-hand combat. The creatures, on the other hand, had years of experience of avoiding traps and detection. They would not leave their sanctuary unprotected. Who would prevail? Had he made enough contingency plans? What contingency plans did the creatures have?

He was unsure if they were making the right decision, even though he felt the importance of the mission and the authority he had been given was a vote of confidence. But what was he going on? Myths he had read and studied from old books, old wives' tales he had heard from local residents. The only solid evidence that supported his theories was the satellite surveillance, and the medical information of the two dead girls. What of his own personal plans for the chance to study the creatures? How far would he go to achieve that end? What would he do to ensure success?

What if these creatures were stronger than he imagined? If they had to enact the fatal last measure, he and the rest of these men would be buried under the rock as the old ruins were blown up. Or these creatures might escape and seek vengeance on the local populace.

*Shut the hell up, John. It's too late now; you're committed and you need to concentrate on the next move.*

He watched the SEALs as they prepared to go, admiring their calmness and focus. They wore their standard camouflage uniforms, but instead of standard issue military boots, they wore their mountain-climbing shoes because of the uncertainty of the terrain. Each member was wearing a lightweight voice-activated communications

headset. At their waists, along with their 9mm pistols, they had been given razor-sharp machetes. Reese was surprised that they were able to get hold of them with such short notice; then again, from his experience at the teams, he knew SEALs were capable of obtaining whatever weapons were necessary.

Under normal circumstances, they would all wear night goggles. But this time, it would hinder their work once they reached the bodies. The creatures would not give off very much heat now that the blood they had ingested turned cold. Only two members of each team had goggles, just in case anything went wrong and they needed to escape in the darkness. Each member had a powerful red beam light that would be their primary light source once they entered the crypt. The red beam would not interfere with the night goggles' effectiveness.

The SEALs had been divided up into three teams. Team Two carried the elixir in a modified canister that sprayed it in force. Team One carried the collars that would be placed around the necks of the creatures, if all went well. Team Three was assigned the ordinance and final line of defense if anything went wrong.

Team Three was the first to complete their preparations. They reported that their task to setup the explosives was complete. Their command post had been set up west of the ruins, behind a natural mound of dirt that would offer protection from the blast. The detonators were all rigged and ready to go. In the event that these men had to change their mission and go on the offensive, they were armed to the hilt. Some of their toys included several small rocket launchers and enough hand grenades to fend off a small army. Their instructions were explicit: blow up the entire area if given the word or if the two teams did not return prior to the sun touching the horizon. If anyone other than the two teams emerged, kill everything that came from the ruins—everything.

"Are you ready?" Johnson asked.

Reese shook off his feelings of trepidation.

"Yes. As ready as I'm ever going to be."

"Are you sure you want to go in there?" Johnson asked. "We can stay in communication with you the entire time."

"No. I have to go with you. But make no mistake: you are in tactical command and I will advise you on what to do based upon what we find."

"Understood," Johnson answered and stared at Reese with an unnerving cold stare that reflected no emotion—the perfect military visage.

"What is it, Lieutenant?" Reese asked. "What's wrong?"

"How did you ever get involved with this, sir?" Johnson asked, in a toneless manner that reflected no disrespect.

Reese smiled coldly. "I happen to have a hobby that someone just happened to have an urgent need for. I never would have imagined that this would ever get to this stage."

"Well, here we are." Johnson checked his watch. "It's time to go. I think it would be best if you took position behind me when we go in."

"Sounds good," Reese said. He exhaled deeply and prepared to move.

"One more thing, Commander," Johnson said, as he stepped abruptly in Reese's path. "These men are my family. I will not allow undue harm to come to them. If things get crazy and there is no way the mission can be accomplished, we'll wipe out the place."

"It won't get crazy if you follow my instructions," Reese said, although he wasn't really sure if that was correct. But he knew he had to keep Johnson in check as well. The last thing he needed was a shooting free-for-all. At times, the SEAL mindset could be a dangerous thing. What was their saying? *Death is better than defeat—defeat you have to live with.*

"It won't come to that if we all remain focused. Let's do it."

Johnson didn't respond to Reese. Instead he keyed his headset and gave the orders for the men to move in. "Team One in the lead and Team Two to follow."

Reese willed his body forward, noticing how warm and comforting the sun's rays felt and how he was leaving the light behind ... hopefully for only a while.

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## Chapter Twenty-two

The darkness swallowed them as they proceeded down the stone stairs into the depths of the ruins. Within minutes, only their red lights illuminated the cavern. The cool smell of damp stone surrounded them. Moisture oozed from the walls in areas; the red lights reflecting off the droplets gave them the appearance of dripping blood.

"This is a communications check, call it off by the numbers," Johnson's voice came through on the tiny headsets they all wore. Members called out their assigned numbers; Reese waited until the end and responded himself.

"Proceed," Johnson's voice came through. "One and Two have the point."

The point men moved their red beams from the stone walls to the ceiling. The eerie glow unsettled Reese, reinforcing the image that they were covered in blood. The rest of the men moved onward and into the darkness.

From what information they had been able to gather from local townspeople, they knew that the area under the ruins was expansive, but exactly how big they didn't know. Locals had not gone under the ruins in a very long time. All official historical information recorded locally had been destroyed when the building that had held the historical records had been burned to the ground during one of the many battles that besieged the area. In essence, they were flying blind as they descended into the depths.

To prevent the teams from getting lost, the last man on Team Two placed tracking sensors on the ground as they proceeded in to ensure they could find their way out and to alert the monitoring team on the outside of their position. Reese found it amazing that something built so long ago could be so complex and had survived all the turmoil of this country.

Johnson stopped as communication came in from the point men.

"T intersection," said a voice.

"Left side first," Johnson answered. "Team Two, hold position at T."

"Team Two. Understood," came the response.

As they turned left, it became apparent how easy it would be to get lost down here. Everything looked the same as they followed the passages that wound through the caverns. They came across rooms where the wooden doors had decayed into piles of damp sawdust. Wood that still clung to the iron hinges fell apart at the touch of

the disturbed air as they moved through the area.

The air thickened with age as they moved further into the darkness; a breathable but musty old smell permeated the air. Reese imagined that perhaps some of the archaic air system that fed the catacombs had failed long ago, probably by caving in somewhere at the surface. Simple as it was, when working it was an effective system that drew fresh air in and through the underground and vented somewhere at the surface. But now, the air hung like an old curtain in a movie theater that had never been cleaned and had absorbed the odors of thousands of people who had sat in its presence.

"Hold," the voice came through the headset. "Tunnel ends."

"Back track, One and Two, we'll wait," Johnson replied. "Proceed through other corridor."

Within a few minutes, the two Navy SEALs came back and reversed direction down the corridor they had come. Everyone else turned and proceeded in the direction toward the intersection. As they passed Team Two at the intersection, glances of acknowledgement were exchanged, but no words.

They proceeded down the opposite tunnel, looking at walls and ceilings that looked the same, the repetitiveness offering its own specter of fear. They passed more of the same, doors of rotting wood that opened into small rooms.

"Hold," the voice called. "Tunnel ends."

"Commander Reese?" Johnson's voice called. "Any suggestions?"

Reese was silent. The vampires had to be here. He had seen them last night on the satellite surveillance return to the tunnel that had just traversed down. They had to be here, but not in an obvious spot that would be easy to detect. That would be too simple for creatures that had evaded capture and death for hundreds of years. An entrance had to be here somewhere.

"The opening where they are must be concealed in some way to blend in with the walls," Reese said. "There would be a change in the air pressure with that type of enclosure between the two spaces. If we could look at the air in here in some way to show changes in air pressure, we might be able to find it."

"Got it," Johnson answered and then spoke to the point men. "One and Two, reverse track and ignite a low light flare. Keep it close to the walls and watch the smoke for any variations in direction or flow."

"Understood," the response came.

Seconds later, the glowing light from the flare could be seen down the passageway as they proceeded toward where Team Two waited. Time seem to stand still as they slowly made their way, holding the flares close to the walls searching for any telltale



signs of air escaping to indicate an opening.

Johnson came and sat next to Reese and covered his microphone from his headset as they waited. "What do you think?"

"The room has to be here somewhere," Reese answered. "It's just hidden." He looked around at the cavernous walls. "Who knows how long they have been here, but one thing is for sure, they are very cautious when it comes to where they rest. They wouldn't choose it without a lot of thought."

"Do you think they know we are here?" Johnson asked.

"That's a tough call, but from what I understand, during the day when they sleep, they are in a semi-conscious state and somewhat oblivious to what is going on around them. It's like a drunk who wakes up but hasn't slept off the full effects of the alcohol. They're awake, but only sort of."

"Okay," Johnson said. "But if we don't find anything by the time we are to get out of here, then what?"

"I'd blow it up, seal it, and call it a day. That way if they come back here and they can't get in, we can track them by satellite again and see if we can locate where it is they are hiding."

"My thoughts exactly," Johnson said. "Good call."

"But I don't think it will come to that. It's here somewhere, I know it."

"We'll see."

Johnson left Reese and went from man to man, checking their status. There was nothing to do but wait at this point. Then Reese heard the voice over the headset.

"Located," the SEAL said. All the members on Team One looked in the direction of the flare. They saw smoke being pushed by an obvious air current coming through the wall.

"Let's get it open," Johnson said over the headset.

Reese felt his stomach tighten. "Look for a stone that looks out of place," Reese added. "Discolored or worn more than the others. But don't open it until you are..."

It was too late. The SEAL standing on the left side of the door outline grabbed at a stone; the door swung open with such force that the man standing next to him was hit and thrown like a rag doll against the wall. There was an audible cracking sound as all the bones in his body were shattered by the impact.

The Navy SEALs reacted like a swarm of angry bees as they secured the area around the door, watching for any form of attack.

Reese was still shocked at the death he had witnessed. He stared at the mangled body that lie on the ground. The way in which it was horribly twisted indicated the massive dislocation of bones from the force of the stone door. A pool of dark liquid was beginning to form next to the man.

Nothing else happened. There were no rushing onslaught attack from the room. Once satisfied all was secure for the moment, Johnson checked the downed man, but everyone knew he hadn't survived. He felt for a pulse but it was evident that he did not detect any by the look on his face in the red glow of the flare. It became too quiet for Reese as he struggled to find his voice.

"These creatures are very strong and smart," he said finally. "That door is designed to be hard to open, but when it does, between them knowing which side to stand on and their own strength, they avoid what just happened and anyone not knowing what to look for ends up dead."

"Will there be anymore surprises?" Johnson's voice crackled over the headset.

"It's impossible to tell," Reese answered. "I've read some accounts that sometimes they have human watchdogs or animals to guard their tombs. But these are ... modern-day creatures; there is no telling what they have come up with. All I can say is to approach cautiously."

"Understood," Johnson said. "One and Three, take the point and be careful, use the night vision goggles to look for anything odd that might be a trap. Let's go, we'll pick up Two on the way out." Johnson's voice showed no emotion at the loss of one of his team members, but with all their discipline, Reese knew they would not mourn until the remaining team was out of harm's way.

The team entered through the door, feeling the slight change in the air pressure. But there was something else: a hideous smell. Reese compared it to rotting garbage on a hot summer day; a gush of air rose and made him gag. He fought the urge to vomit and forced out words.

"We're close," Reese said, his voice gasping as he fought to control his stomach.

The doorway led into another narrow passageway that they followed for a few minutes before the point men spoke.

"Large open chamber ... four stone crypts on stone pedestals."

The words came into Reese's thoughts and lingered. Four crypts. They were really here. Confirmation of their existence—finally within his grasp.

"Any movement?" Johnson asked.

"None. All quiet."

"Hold station, Team One. Team Two?"

"Team Two," responded a new voice.

"Follow our markers and rendezvous on point position."

"ETA one minute."

Johnson moved toward where Reese waited and again covered his microphone.

"What do you think?"

"We do them one by one," Reese said. "But if we can determine which one is the master or dominant one, that is the one we must try and capture first. Then maybe the rest will submit."

"You don't sound too confident."

"It's legend, for God sakes. I don't know if it's true," he admitted. "We need to take precautions and be ready to kill them all."

"Agreed." Johnson said, then received a message that Team Two was in position.

"Let's do it," he said. "Team One and Two, move in."

They entered into the open chamber that held the stone crypts. The chamber had a high ceiling of twelve to fourteen feet, the blocks of stone neatly carved into perfect squares that comprised the walls. The stone was covered by a fine layer of dirt and muffled the sounds of their approach.

Johnson indicated for some of his men to take up defensive positions. Reese studied the arrangement of the crypts and noted one of the four sat slightly off center from the other three and decided the leader might be in that one. He gestured to the coffin.

"That one first," Reese said.

Johnson nodded in response.

The plan called for four men to handle the operation: One would open the crypt; the second would stand ready with the spray solution; the third would place the collar on the creature; the fourth held a poised machete to be used as a last resort. Two men would stand at each crypt with solution and machete if the others awakened before they were ready to handle them. The rest of the men stood at the ready with their pistols.

Reese felt his mouth go suddenly dry. He could hear his heart beating in his ears as the sweat trickled down his back. If this didn't go right—they would all be dead in a matter of minutes.

They approached the first crypt. Reese and Johnson followed the four men who were assigned to open it. The SEAL assigned to the task of removing the lid placed his hands on the sides and tested the weight, his arms the size of most men's thighs.

He nodded that he could slide it off. Johnson gave him the silent go ahead by nodding back. The man slid the lid off of the crypt and sent it crashing to the ground. The sound was deafening as it slammed onto the ground.

Reese just stared in amazement at what he saw—it was not what had he had expected.

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## Chapter Twenty-three

Inside the crypt lay the body of a man, whom Reese guessed was about twenty-five years of age. He was dressed in traditional local garb, looking serene in a state of sleep. His face reflected a sense of calm and even nobility with its hawk-like features. His skin appeared to be pale, but in the light it was hard to determine the actual shade. All in all, he appeared to be a human, not a monster.

The rest of the team appeared mesmerized by the tranquility of the sleeping man; even Reese momentarily wondered if this harmless-looking man could be a monster who killed to survive. But when the man's eyelids began to flutter as it appeared to ascend to wakefulness, the act reminded Reese of all the stories he had read. The vampires always looked normal, just like anyone else. It's how they survived. They used their appearance to get close to others so that they could kill them. No one suspected anything until it was too late.

Reese spoke to break the inactivity of the group. "Keep that spray ready," he barked. "Let's get the collar on ... quickly!"

The SEAL with the collar readied it for installation as the creature's eyes opened fully. The SEAL stopped as the red feral eyes stared at him. Time ceased for the members of the team as the creature surveyed the scene around him, registering the situation. Seeing that the sanctity of their crypt area had been violated, the creature became alarmed and prepared for attack as its features hardened and fangs protruded.

Reese knew that if they didn't move now, this creature would attain an advantage and all would be lost. But he found himself paralyzed by the eyes of the creature and was unable to move or speak.

"Give it a short burst of the spray!" Johnson's voice screamed, breaking the trance. "NOW!"

The SEAL with the canister hesitated before the command registered in his mind and then he keyed a short burst at the creature. The molecules of the spray seem to hang in the air, crawling through the space between it and the creature. Finally the elixir touched the creature and tiny rivulets of flame burst along his skin.

"Reese!" Johnson snarled. "Suggestion?"

The creature screamed and writhed in its crypt. Its flesh turned dark as blood oozed from the burned areas.

Reese awoke from his stupor, which he imagined had been supplied by the vampire as a means to give him time to react, and quickly stepped forward.

"Listen to me," Reese said to the creature firmly as its writhing slowed. "I know you can understand me. You know what this substance is and you know what it can do to you. We can cover you with this if you do not do as you are instructed. Do you understand?"

The creature emitted a guttural growl. Reese couldn't decide if it was animal or human.

"Answer me or die!" Reese said.

The creature continued its display of fierceness, its fangs bared and its eyes so red that Reese could see no white within them.

"Stand ready to spray!" shouted Reese to the SEAL beside him.

"I understand..." the creature said in a surprisingly clear voice as compared to the animalistic ravings it had emitted only seconds ago.

*Amazing*, Reese thought but then quickly said, "A device will be placed around your neck. Do not attempt to attack the man or remove the device or you will die." Reese gestured for the SEAL who held the collar to come closer. The SEAL raised the creature's head, carefully avoiding the sharp teeth, and quickly attached the device. An audible click could be heard when it was sealed together. Reese held a remote in his hand that would control the injection in various amounts into the creature's system.

The creature, now almost totally recovered and healed from the initial spraying, raised his hands to the collar as if meaning to tear it off. Reese's finger was posed over the button; he placed the injection quantity to its lowest level and pressed the button.

The creature violently lurched in the crypt as the mixture made its way into its body. It screamed.

"Do that again and I will kill you," Reese said. "Do anything but what I tell you and you will die a painful death. I think you know that now, don't you?"

The creature settled back into its crypt and stared at Reese. It bared its teeth in an act of defiance. Reese posed his finger over the button again.

"I understand," the creature said disdainfully. Its low and regal voice was level and controlled. "What do you want?"

"Listen very carefully," Reese said, knowing he now had the full attention of the creature. "Any move you make is being tracked, both by myself and someone on the outside of this area. Any sudden moves will result in the device at your neck being

activated. Understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Do you have a name?" Reese asked.

"I am Dimitri," he said, as his eyes glowed red in the low light.

"All right, Dimitri. I assume you are the leader of this group?" Reese indicated the other stone crypts.

"In a way, I am their leader."

"We offer the same arrangement to each one. They either accept the collar or die. Can you speak with them without them leaving their crypts?"

"I can speak to them through their dreams," he answered and then added, "What is it that you want from us?"

Reese ignored the question. "Tell them that we will kill them if they resist the placement of the collars on their necks. I want them—"

One of the other crypts suddenly opened—the top flipped off by the powerful thrust of one of the creatures. The creature leapt out of his crypt and lunged at the two men flanking his crypt. In a fraction of a second, one man was down, his throat slashed and gushing blood onto the stone floor.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," Reese heard over the headset, unsure who had said it.

The creature grabbed the other man but did not attack. Instead he looked at the rest of the men as he displayed large nails from his hands and elongated teeth from his mouth.

"No, Josip!" Dimitri yelled, but it was too late to stop the bloodshed. Josip sliced the throat of the other man and dropped him onto the stone floor next to the other corpse.

The back-up SEAL team, although surprised by the swiftness of the attack, responded as planned. The men with elixir-filled canisters covered the area with the fine spray of mixture before the attack progressed any further. The creature named Josip howled in pain as his body was covered with rivulets of fire. He collapsed to the ground, screaming, his burning flesh smoldering as he rolled on the ground.

"Quick!" Reese yelled. "Get the collar on him. If he makes a move, douse him and cut off his head." He was surprised at the viciousness of the words coming out of his mouth. Dimitri looked at him with a loathing sneer.

"Will he recover?" Reese asked.

"Possibly," Dimitri answered.

"I suggest you let the others know what will happen if they repeat this. There will be no warnings."

"The rest will not pose any problem," Dimitri said calmly.

"We'll see," Reese said questioningly.

The collar was placed on Josip and he was returned to the crypt. The men, prepared for a reoccurrence of another attack, guarded the other crypts. Johnson checked the two bodies on the ground. His look conveyed the story: both were dead. But he was a professional; he would finish what he had come to do. He indicated the next crypt to Reese that was to be opened. Reese nodded.

They removed the lid and found the creature lying there awake and alert but not offering any resistance. Reese made Dimitri leave his crypt and walk in the direction of the newly-opened one. He had Dimitri show the inhabitant that he wore the collar and explain that he also would receive one. The collar went on without any form of resistance, except a stare that was cold enough to freeze a man's soul. They carried out the same procedure on the remaining vampire without any difficulty.

When they were done, the creatures were given a small example of how the collar worked and its affect on their bodies. After they had calmed down after the test, Dimitri spoke quietly to the rest and then turned and spoke to Reese.

"What are you going to do with us?"

"That's a good question," Reese said. "For now, you will remain here under guard."

"We need to feed," Dimitri said. "You obviously know about us and what that means."

"Yes," Reese agreed. "We will bring a cow down here later. You will not leave this space. If any motion is detected by the sensors we have installed, the collars will be activated."

"I understand."

"Is there anything else you need to ... survive?" Reese asked.

"Our freedom," Dimitri said and then fired off another question. "How did you find us, and who told you of the elixir?"

"A man." Reese answered. Why he volunteered this information puzzled him; he hadn't even hesitated about responding to Dimitri's question. The answer seemed to flow from him.

"His name?" Dimitri asked.

"Idriz Laupki."



*Stop it. Why are you answering his questions?* Reese thought to himself.

Dimitri closed his eyes. After a few moments he looked toward the crypt that held Josip and shook his head.

"No more questions!" Reese said. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. "You pull that hypnotic crap again and you'll be punished. Do you understand?"

Dimitri turned to face Reese.

"Punished? It's too late to worry about that now. Our punishment has already begun."

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## Chapter Twenty-four

Commander Scott finished his conversation with Commander Reese and replaced the secure phone in its red cradle on his desk. Instead of taking the report to the general, Scott sat there for a few moments, thinking about the conversation.

He had seen many strange situations in the time of his service under General Stone, but the majority of those were contrived or conjured up by man. Here was something truly bizarre, something straight out of a nightmare. These creatures ... or vampires, as he would call them, even though he noted Reese did not use that term, existed and had been captured.

"Scott," Stone said, as he entered his office. "Have we heard from Reese yet?"

"Ah ... yes, sir." Scott's throat felt dry and uncomfortable. "Just called in. They ... have them."

General Stone's face lit up as the realization of the words struck. "They have them! We actually have them! This is fantastic!" He yelled like a child whose wildest dream had come true.

"The SEALs lost three men in the capture," Scott added.

"Who would have thought," Stone said, either ignoring the remark or not caring to comment. "These creatures exist and they are ours."

"They lost three men in the attack," Scott repeated.

"I heard you," Stone answered abruptly. "Let me enjoy this moment, will you, Scott? Don't you see? After all this damn time, don't you see the potential? After all the crap that I have had to endure from my colleagues—not being able to take revenge for my daughter. Three lives spent today will save many more in the future."

"Sir?" Scott said, confused. "How will that—"

"Never mind." Stone cut him off. "We have to make arrangements. We need a story about the three deaths. Make it a training accident. Maybe a cave-in."

"Yes, sir."

"Get with Reese and figure out how we are going to bring the creatures back to the states. They'll be working with the SEALs, so let's keep them up Norfolk way, maybe even at Little Creek with the other teams. They'll need quarters ... very secure quarters."

"Yes, sir."

"I want everyone involved with this to be brought back here for debriefing, and I mean *everyone*."

"The civilian?" Scott asked.

"What civilian?"

"The Serbian, the man who pointed us toward them. His daughters were killed by the creatures."

"I don't like involving civilians in this operation. Make him part of the accident where the three SEALs were killed. I want all loose ends tied up, Commander."

"I understand, sir, but he is the one that developed the elixir, the solution that keeps the creatures controllable. We have not learned how to duplicate it yet."

Stone looked angry, as if he had expected Scott to take care of this aspect of the mission already.

"Bring him back then. But I want the liquid studied and its contents determined. After that, get rid of him."

"Understood," Scott answered.

"Find out whose ass I need to kiss or stomp on in order to do this discreetly. Make it look like all of the personnel we are bringing back are being rewarded for their efforts in Kosovo."

"Are you going to talk with the Joint Chiefs?"

"Not yet. I want to inspect the creatures and measure their potential."

"Potential?"

"Yes ... potential. If we can control them ... we will be able to conduct a new campaign of operations and make military history."

"Sir?"

"Christ, you still don't see it! Get your head out of my ass and everyone else's! There is more happening here than just your own career! Look at what their talents are: they're fast, ferocious, hard to detect, extremely difficult to kill ... they're perfect."

"But they kill for the blood. They're unholy."

"A minor drawback for what they may be able to deliver for us," Stone said, with a casual wave of the hand.

"This is extremely risky, General. If anyone finds out—"

"That's your job—to make sure no one finds out," Stone said, placing his finger on Scott's chest as he smiled at the Navy commander. "That you should be good at, after all your career is at stake, isn't it?" He turned away from Scott. "We will make history," he continued. "But it's the kind of history that no one must ever know about. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Now start working on the plans to get them back to the States," Stone said as he picked another report to read.

"Immediately, sir."

"Oh, and two things," Stone said.

"Sir?"

"Make sure you let Reese know if the situation gets out of control, subdue the creatures *but do not kill them under any circumstances.*"

"But what if they should try and escape or kill—"

"Is your hearing not working?"

"It's working fine, sir," Scott answered, his voice shaky. "I'll take care of it. And the other thing?"

"I want them sent here," Stone said.

"Sir?" Scott asked. "I don't understand. You want *what* sent here?"

General Stone looked up from the report he was reading. Scott saw his expression of aggravation by the way he energetically removed his reading glasses. If the general hated any one thing, it was being questioned about something he thought everyone should know or be able to figure out what he meant without him having to say it.

"Didn't we just have a discussion about your hearing, Commander? I thought we decided that you were not hard of hearing? Was I mistaken?"

"No, sir. I just don't understand what you mean?"

"Did you not read the same report I did, Commander? This report?" He held up the folder in his hand. Scott recognized it as the original operational report that started this whole affair, the report from the Base Commander of Camp Bondsteel that detailed the murder of the Captain Block and the two civilian girls.

"Yes, sir. I did."

"And did that report detail the deaths of two civilians?"

"Yes, sir, and the death of Captain Block."

"Very good, Commander; I'm glad to see that the damn United States Navy is still teaching its people to read. Now if only they could master the process of thinking for themselves ... well wouldn't that be a fucking grand accomplishment?"

Scott stood silently, waiting for the tirade to end. He had been through them many before and knew it was best to remain silent.

"Now, listen carefully, Commander. I want the two civilian bodies sent back to SOCOM. Captain Block doesn't have a body anymore, it was torn to pieces, so even you should be able to figure out who I mean. Make it happen—quietly."

"Yes sir, I'll have Major Barkley see to it pers—"

"No." Stone said adamantly. "Not Barkley. I want someone outside to do it so that this can't be traced through normal channels. Aren't there any spooks in the area from Army Intelligence?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have them do it then," Stone said and replaced his glasses and went back to reading the report he had started earlier.

"There may be strings attached, General."

"There are always strings attached to everything that happens—that's the only way anything ever gets done these days. But that's okay. If things work out the way I think they might, we'll be in good with our clandestine friends. And if they don't—well they can just have another piece of me. Soon it won't matter either way."

"Yes, sir, I'll see to it," Scott said and turned to leave.

"One more thing," Stone said.

Scott stopped and turned back toward the general.

General Stone took out a small note pad from his desk drawer and scribbled some things upon it. A smirk appeared on his face as he continued to write. "Somebody will think I've gone off the deep end for sure on this one," he said, as he continued to write. When he finished, he looked over it, verifying what he had written and ensuring he hadn't forgotten anything. Satisfied, he held it up for Scott.

Commander Scott walked to where the general sat and took the note from his outstretched hand. Stone did not look at him but returned to reading the report he had begun only moments ago.

Scott studied the contents of the note for several seconds. His eyes moved over it again and again, re-reading it several times before he spoke.

"Sir, I don't..."

"Just precautions," he said calmly, apparently allowing Scott some leeway because the content of note was a bit untraditional. "We aren't really sure what we are dealing with here yet and I am not one to take chances. Just have them do exactly as I have instructed. I know it seems odd, but this way it's safe just in case ... just in case."

Scott turned to leave, but only got one step before Stone spoke again.

"I don't want him to know about this. This will be our little secret."

"Who, sir?"

"Reese. I want him kept in the dark on this."

"I don't understand," Scott said. "He's the expert and—"

"I don't care what you think. Just do it!"

"Yes, sir."

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## Chapter Twenty-five

Commander Reese and Lieutenant Johnson watched the remote viewers that showed their captives in their underground prison. When Reese had finished his conversation with Dimitri and left the cavern, he felt his knees weaken and he had to lean up against one of the stone pillars to keep from falling down. The legends were true, he told himself over and over again. *Vampires actually existed!*

But his energy and excitement were overshadowed at the thought of what his dream had cost so far: the lives of three men. He fought his own feelings of guilt that he may have contributed to the deaths of the men by the combination of his own self interests with those of the general's desire to have the creatures. He only hoped the men had not died in vain and whatever the general hoped to use the creatures for would outweigh the losses. But what did the general have planned? Reese had his suspicions, but he wanted to wait—to study the creatures and to fulfill his lifelong dream.

Johnson finalized the security arrangements for their captives, then made arrangements to have the three bodies removed and taken to the medical facility at the Base Camp. He handled the procedure with a coolness that reflected almost robot-like effectiveness, but Reese imagined that Johnson would deal with his own grief in his own way.

"I'm sorry about the men," Reese said.

"So am I," Johnson said, looking at him. "They knew the risks. It doesn't make it any easier, but it's all part of the job we do and the life we lead." His gaze returned toward the view screen. "I just hope their sacrifices are worth it."

"General Stone thinks so," Reese said, and fell silent as he gazed at the creatures. They had not attempted to remove the collars, but they stared intently at each other, as if studying the devices for points of vulnerability.

"I think we have everything covered for the moment," Johnson said. "We have men outside the room they are in, directly outside of the entrance to the ruins, and one team here on standby."

"I'd feel better if we didn't have distance limitations on those collars," Reese said. "Once we get back to the States, the first priority will be to increase the distance parameters."

"When are we leaving?" Johnson asked.

"As soon as you make the arrangements," Reese said, smiling.

"Another challenge," he said. "I live for them, you know."

"Speaking of challenges, I have some more for you," Reese said.

"Should I bend over now?" Johnson asked, still smiling.

"Think of it as a chance to excel," Reese said.

"Let me have it, then," Johnson said.

"Well, it appears that we will all be under special assignment for General Stone as long as he wants us."

"Us?" Johnson asked, referring with his hand to Reese and himself.

"Everyone—and I mean everyone—involved with any facet of the operation is to head back to Norfolk. So we're going to need a plane with lots of room."

"Not a problem," Johnson said. "We have a C-5 at our disposal at all times."

"Make up a plan, but keep in mind that we have to do everything under the cover of darkness for the special cargo."

"Understood." Johnson answered. "I'll get to work on it right now."

Someone knocked at the door.

"Yes," Reese called. The door opened and Corporal Brosnev entered the room.

"Sorry to bother you, Commander, but Idriz Laupki would like to talk with you."

Reese wondered what he was going to tell the man whose children had been killed by the creatures. He knew he only wanted to hear one thing: when would the creatures be killed. This might not be the time to tell him that he had orders not to.

"Bring him in," Reese said.

"Yes, sir."

Moments later, the two men came into the office. Idriz's eyes looked intense as he surveyed the room and its occupants. He spoke quickly to Brosnev, who then translated.

"He says that his mixture worked or you would not be alive. He asks that you please describe how the murderers of his children died a horrible death at your hands."

"His mixture worked just as he said it would. We are very grateful for his help," Reese said, paused and indicated for Brosnev to translate it as he thought about how to explain that the creatures were not dead.



"We have not killed the creatures—they are still alive, but they are our prisoners," Reese said, and again indicated for the translator to tell him. As the translator told him, the expression on Idriz's features became sharp and drawn. Reese decided to just go ahead and tell him everything and get it over with.

"We are taking them back to the United States for further study and then ... and then they shall be killed," Reese said, knowing the lie was necessary.

He didn't like telling the lie; poor Idriz had suffered enough for one lifetime. But there was an opportunity here for research that could not be lost. Reese knew he would not be able to convince Idriz of that now, but maybe later.

Within seconds of translating, Idriz unleashed a volley of words upon them.

The corporal translated. "He says that this cannot be true! His precious daughters are dead because of them. They are beasts of the night that cannot be caged like wild dogs, for they are cunning and will learn how to escape. They must be killed immediately before they murder again."

"They are not going anywhere," Reese said, as he showed Idriz the video monitor and continued to speak as the interpreter translated what he said. "You see the band on their necks? That is a special device that contains your elixir." Idriz bent closer to the screen to look. "If they do anything that looks like they might try and escape, the device will inject the elixir into their body."

Idriz continued to stare at the screen without saying anything, but his face portrayed a loathing that was clearly evident.

"They will spend what is left of their lives as our prisoners and will never kill another innocent person." Reese paused, looking for any kind of reaction from the man. He knew there was nothing he could say that would heal his pain at the loss of his daughters—and grief could make Idriz a dangerous man. But there were still things Reese wanted and needed from this man. He knew, however, that if he told Idriz the truth, that he didn't have a choice in coming back to the States, as those were the orders of the general, he might pose a problem.

"They will need a keeper or jailer to watch over them," Reese continued. "And I still need help in learning about what else you know about their pasts. If you wish, you may come with us and help us. We need your help, Idriz."

Idriz suddenly spoke, but did so without taking his eyes from the monitor. Brosnev translated, "He says that he will come with you to the United States. He won't be their keeper, but their reminder of the painful death that awaits them at his hands."

Reese looked toward Johnson, who had been quiet during the exchange, his eyes reflected the same feeling that he had. Idriz would have to be watched closely.

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## Chapter Twenty-six

"So, you are awake," Dimitri said to Josip as he sat up from his crypt. Most of the burn marks that he had suffered had healed and only slight blemishes remained. He touched the tight-fitting device at his neck.

"Don't touch that unless you want more of the poison that burned you!" Dimitri shouted.

"What has happened?" Josip asked, as he looked around. "Did you kill them?"

"No. There was no way to attack without being killed. Your foolishness almost cost you your life. The device at your neck contains the mixture that killed Franjo. The man, Idriz, whose daughters you killed in your moment of revenge still hounds us."

"How can that be?" Josip asked.

"I don't know. He has gotten help from the Americans and now we are their prisoners."

"Remove the collars," Josip said, as he raised his hands to his throat again.

"Are you not listening? Touch it and you die," Dimitri said. "It has some kind of anti-tampering device built into it. And they are watching us," he said as he indicated the camera mounted into the ceiling. "They also have motion detectors attached to us, so they know our every movement. Whoever planned this knows about our kind. How we live, how we sleep. Everything."

"What are they going to do with us?" Josip asked.

"I don't know. The one in charge has not said anything yet."

"We must escape."

"You surely cannot be that ignorant," Dimitri said, raising his voice. The others of the group looked toward them now. "*Your* actions are what brought them down upon us. You will do nothing but what I tell you! We must observe them first and look for their weaknesses and when I feel it is time, we will do what *I* decide."

Josip remained silent.

"If they were going to kill us, they would have done so by now," Dimitri continued, this time speaking to the group. "So they have some other plan for us. We will go along with what they ask. The spirit of cooperation we will show shall lower their

guard and we will discover our way to escape. Is that understood?"

They all nodded in agreement, Josip last, his hesitation earning him a glare from Dimitri.

The sound of footsteps accompanied with the clop-clop of cow feet down the narrow passageway broke their conversation. The lone cow entered their chambers followed by several men, all heavily armed. The leader of the group stepped forward, the one that they called Commander Reese. Dimitri also saw that the one called Idriz was with him.

"Dimitri," Reese said. "I need some information from you about your feeding habits. How long can you go between feeding?"

"You don't want your prisoners to die?" Dimitri asked..

"Something like that," Reese answered, sounding somewhat impatient and not willing to spar in conversation. "We will leave this place in less than a day, and there will be no available food sources for you and your men."

Dimitri looked at the cow that they had brought down. "We will be able to survive for two to three days if we feed on this animal."

"Good," Reese replied. "How about being on an airplane? Does that pose any problems?"

"We ... have never been on an airplane before. We have seen them in the sky at night."

"So you don't know if there will be any adverse effects?"

"No. But I don't think it will pose any problems as long as darkness is maintained," Dimitri ventured. "We will need these crypts or something similar for us to rest in."

"I'll take that for a yes about flying. We will bring these," he said, indicating the crypts. "We will be back to get you at next sunset," Reese said as he turned to leave.

"Where are we going?" Dimitri asked, and then added, "If I may be permitted to know."

Suddenly Idriz Laupki spoke, his words echoing in the cavernous area. He had been standing there, along with Corporal Brosnev, who had been translating for him during the exchange between Dimitri and Reese. The look on his face and the tone in which he spoke gave the direction of his words.

Josip turned toward him and stared for a few moments and then answered him in their native Slavic tongue.

"What did they say, Corporal?" Reese asked.

"When Dimitri asked where they were going, Idriz told the one called Josip that they were going to their deaths."

"And the creature's response?"

"He agreed, but said that they would have much company on their journey."

Reese pondered the remarks for a few seconds then turned back to Dimitri.

"To the United States," Reese said. "We are going to the United States and I will see any man," he looked intently at Idriz when he said it, "or creature," he added as he looked toward Dimitri and the others, "severely punished or killed that interferes with our plans. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly, Commander," Dimitri answered.

"Idriz says he understands, Commander," Brosnev added.

"We'll see soon enough," Reese said.

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## Chapter Twenty-seven

As the next sunset arrived, a wave of activity commenced at the ruins. First the crypts were brought out of the caverns and loaded within standard twenty-foot shipping containers that were on four trucks that awaited them.

Dimitri and his men waited in the now-emptied area. Each of them had been given a box for personal belongings. Dimitri busied himself by picking some books from the library. He had so many favorites he was unsure which to take.

"We leave our home," Josip said, breaking the silence. "For more than a hundred years, this has been our place within our country."

"We do not have a choice in the matter, but what of it?" Dimitri asked "Is not one place like another? Besides, were you not saying that you were getting bored?"

"But this is not of our volition and we shall not be free to do as we choose."

"Stop complaining. You are like an old woman at times," Dimitri countered. "Remember what I said: Watch and learn. We will find our freedom in the new land. In America, there are no wars, no constant battering of the countryside by forces. They have large cities with many people who—"

The sound of footsteps approaching interrupted their conversation. Commander Reese and another man entered their room.

"Are you ready?" Reese asked.

"We are," Dimitri responded, as he tossed a final handful of books into his bag.

"Before we go," Reese began, "let me reassure you and your men that every precaution has been taken to prevent your escape or your attack, either physical or mental. When we leave here, each of you will be placed inside a steel container that has your crypt inside of it. That is where you shall remain for the next twelve to fourteen hours. There are video cameras inside to monitor your movements. Any attempt to leave the container shall result in the activation of the devices at your necks. Each container will be guarded by two men who are backed up by another team."

"We will be no problem," Dimitri said, as other men carrying weapons, spraying devices and shiny machetes attached to their belts arrived.

"You will be escorted out one at a time."

"We have not met you formally," Dimitri said, looking towards the other man.

"This is Lieutenant Johnson. He is in charge of the men, the Navy SEALs who will be escorting and guarding you."

"Our captor and keeper," Dimitri said bowing his head slightly. "Thank you, Commander Reese, for the introduction. I sense that we will be spending much time together in the future. I thought it appropriate that we be introduced."

Johnson stared coldly at the creature while Reese stared cautiously at Dimitri; he had much to learn about these creatures, but he also remembered from his studies that they had elevated conversation as distraction to a high art. There would be plenty of time later to develop some kind of understanding to further his studies. There was so much that he wanted to know about their pasts, but now they had to leave.

"Enough pleasantries for now," Reese said. "Johnson, get them moving."

Johnson issued orders to his men. Each vampire was escorted out, one at a time, into the cool night air and placed inside the shipping container. Dimitri came last and glanced skyward at the night sky, carefully noting the constellations for what may be his last time from his country. In his thoughts, he said his farewell to his teacher and master, Alexander.

*Good-bye old friend, we travel to whatever fate awaits us in the land they call America. But I have not forgotten your teachings or the search for the ultimate truth in our existence.*

The steel door of the shipping container closed and the trucks drove off into the night.

\* \* \* \*

The loading of the aircraft went as planned and within an hour they lifted off from the runway in Skopje, Macedonia and headed for Norfolk, Virginia. All cargo and passengers were safely tucked onboard the massive aircraft with continual monitoring of the containers that held the creatures.

Every person that had been involved in the operation was on the plane. Reese wondered what the debriefing would consist of, and although not an operator, he suspected it was more of a security concern than an informational exchange.

The creatures settled in their containers in a very human way, showing no adverse effects. The containers were supplied with battery-powered lights in order for the cameras to maintain surveillance. Reese was amused and somewhat surprised as he observed them become absorbed in whatever reading material they had brought with them; just as any normal person would do, he thought.

So much to learn. So much to understand. Reese decided to try and rest. Their flight would be approximately twelve hours and with the time change, they should arrive under cover of darkness for transference to their new quarters that had been

arranged by SOCOM on the Little Creek Amphibious Naval Base.

But instead of sleeping, he found himself contemplating all that had been accomplished in the past seventy-two hours since his arrival. It amazed him how relatively smooth everything had gone, with the exception of the three deaths. He had already seen the press release of the dead SEALs because Johnson had worked with SOCOM on the verbiage. Personal notifications to the next of kin were completed; it was downplayed as a regrettable training accident. There would be an investigation, but it would be under the cognizance of SOCOM so the results would be assured in the end. Reese was saddened the families would never know the truth of their deaths.

Having the resources in-country and committed people made it possible. It made him reflect what authority could do in the military without having to answer to the constant oversight of various other organizations as long as everything went okay and the information was contained as it had been in this case. SOCOM was a dark command that did not fall under the constraints that the other geographical commanders did; they hid behind the curtain of national security and other convenient methods similar to those used by the CIA.

"Mind some company?" Johnson asked. He stood in the aircraft aisle, his physical appearance similar to Reese's. He looked tired, but was unable to sleep.

"Sure," Reese answered, as Johnson slipped into the seat next to him.

"It's going smooth so far."

"Yes, surprisingly enough."

The two men fell into a brooding silence of unasked questions for several minutes. Finally Johnson ventured one.

"What is going to happen to the creatures?"

"We get back to Norfolk and find out," Reese answered.

"No that's not what I asked. What do *you* think is going to happen?"

"I ... I'm not actually sure," Reese said.

"Not sure or can't say?"

"Don't know."

"No ideas at all?" Johnson asked. "I have some. You want to hear?"

"Sure," Reese said, although inside he really did not want to for fear of resurrecting his own doubts.

"These creatures ... are supposed to possess some interesting characteristics that would be of interest to the military. Don't you think?"

"Sure, if the legends are true," Reese admitted.

"Suppose for a minute, they are true."

"All right," Reese agreed, "go ahead."

"Number one: We study the physical makeup to determine what makes them work and ascertain if those factors can be duplicated."

"Sounds logical."

"Number two: Destroy these creatures once we have created our own."

"Keep going." Reese felt the inevitable option coming that he suspected was the true purpose of capturing the creatures.

"Number three: Examine the possibility of using the creatures to perform in a certain way as to benefit us."

"Have them do the dirty work, you mean?"

"Something like that," Johnson said. "The ultimate killing machines as long as you keep them fed ... and why not let them feed on the victims? A perfect symmetry."

"Kill two birds with one stone," Reese added, but quickly regretted his analogy. "All of this is purely speculative thinking on our part, right?"

"Of course," Johnson said.

"Don't you think that there would be a particular morality issue with this line of thought?"

"Morality?" Johnson asked with a perplexed look on his face. "Who says that the military needs morality? Not me. Changing times call for unique actions. Bottom line is to get the job done and everything ... everything is expendable when it comes to that. Besides, think about it from a military standpoint. Would you mess with a country that had control of creatures like these?"

"Good point," Reese agreed. "But if another country knew, then it might become known to the public."

"I don't think so," Johnson argued. "Could you see our military claiming that some vampires from Russia or something attacked us? Hard to swallow and no flag officer in his right mind would ever make that claim if he wanted to remain on active duty."

Reese exhaled. "You realize what we are talking about will never be known outside of a very exclusive group?"

"Sure," Johnson said, following Reese's line of thought. "It would all appear as if no one could be involved in something as crazy as all this. Sounds like we are writing some science fiction story, huh?"



"Yeah," Reese said. "Some crazy stuff, but you know what?"

"What?"

"Who the hell would have ever thought that the damn creatures ever existed?"

"Who says they exist, Commander?"

Reese stared at him, searching for the meaning to his statement.

"After the debriefing," Johnson said, "I have a feeling that they won't. In fact, I would be willing to bet that the entire mission never happened."

Johnson looked at Reese with his usual emotionless expression that indicated the subject was closed.

"We should try and get some sleep while we can," Johnson said. He lay back in his seat and closed his eyes.

Reese stared at him before he reclined in his own seat. He thought of General Stone and wondered about the note again. His capture of the creatures made him a direct part of whatever happened and from this point on if they were used as Johnson had suggested, he would be as guilty as the creatures themselves.

Johnson stirred from his supposed rest and turned toward Reese.

"Sweet dreams, Commander," he said.

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## Chapter Twenty-eight

Commander Scott arrived on the quarterdeck of the Naval Special Warfare Group Two Building on the Naval Amphibious Base in Virginia Beach, Virginia; the largest base of its kind and the major operating station for the amphibious forces of the United States Atlantic Fleet.

The base, comprised of more than nine thousand acres that includes four locations in three states, was home to thirty ships. In addition, the base itself contained seventy-five tenant commands that resided on the property; some were supporting units while others were operational and dealt with amphibious operations. One of the tenants, the Commander Naval Special Warfare Group Two, was comprised of the Coastal Patrol Craft, Special Boat Units and the Navy SEAL Teams.

Scott was escorted into the Group Two Commander's office. Navy Captain John Foster impatiently awaited his arrival at this early hour of the morning. Foster was a lean and tall man, forty-eight years of age, and destined to never make admiral, or at least that is what the general had said. But Scott was ordered to not indicate that in any way: Stone needed Foster to make the preparations and if things went bad, Captain Foster could be used as a patsy to take the blame as Stone shored up his own position.

"Captain Foster," Scott said, as he extended his hand.

"Commander Scott, welcome to Little Creek. Please have a seat."

Scott sat in the plush leather chair opposite the captain's desk.

"Commander, I have to admit the general has had us jumping through some big hoops in the past forty-eight hours."

Scott detected the anxiety in the man's voice. Stone had indeed made some big demands on short notice. "Yes, sir, I apologize for the general. I can assure you that it is of the utmost importance."

"There's a new line I haven't heard before. Whenever someone needs something done in a hurry, they throw buzz words out at you that don't mean a damn thing."

"Captain, I'm sure the general—"

"We have just about everything ready," Foster said, ignoring Scott's assurance that Stone understood what he had to go through. Foster continued, "Now tell me what this is all about."

"Sir, we appreciate your efforts, but at the moment, until the general gives the green light, I can't say anything more than what you have already been told."

"I'd like to say I understand, Commander, but I have a right to know what is going on."

"Yes, sir, but please understand my position—"

"The hell with it," Foster scoffed. His voice became more friendly and conciliatory. "I know you have your orders. I just hope the general has a good memory when my name comes up before the board for admiral. I'm sure he may have some influence there."

"I know the general thinks highly of you, sir," Scott lied. "That is why he knew he could call on you for this important task."

"I'll take that for a yes."

"Yes, sir ... and thank you," Scott said, relieved the other man was dropping the subject.

"Here's what we have." Foster stood and walked to a large wall map of the base. "We have selected an old building that is not in use at the far end of the base." He pointed to a red square marked on the map. "It only has one road for access and if you're not going to the building you have no reason to be on it, so it's easy to guard. The building is old but still in good shape, built in 1945 when the base was commissioned. It has three-foot thick cinderblock walls, no windows, and a roof made of the largest timbers I have ever seen.

"Dimension-wise, it has about seven thousand square feet, plenty of room for what you need. High-security doors have been installed and monitoring cameras have been put throughout the building and are controlled from a main control room. The natural layout of the interior is about evenly divided into living and working spaces and has been furnished. A high security fence, electrified and wired at the top, has also been installed. It circles the entire circumference of the area."

"How about visibility from a distance?" Scott asked.

"Blocked by the woods. You would never know the place is there from any outward sign."

"Great." Scott was pleased with how everything was shaping up so far. "What about the other building requirement?"

"You weren't serious about that, were you? About the stable and barn?"

"Ah ... yes, sir. We were." Scott said, as his good feeling began to fade.

"I thought you were kidding about that, like the old expression ... you know, when someone asks for a lot, they usually end up with the 'you may as well throw in the

barn with it while you're at it.' You have heard that expression before, haven't you?"

"No, sir," Scott said coldly.

"You've been with the general too long, lost your sense of humor." Foster paused as he saw the expression of worry on Scott's face. "Relax, Commander, as fate would have it, the other reason why we chose this area was because that was where they had the horse stables on base. They're on the backside of the building. They've been empty for years, but we repaired the major problems and are finishing up some minor repairs. We'll have it ready by this evening."

The color returned to Scott's face as he breathed a sigh of relief. "Just one last thing before we go out and take a look. How about the cattle?"

"There are a half-dozen cows out there now. You wouldn't believe what I had to go through to get them," he said, exasperated. "Can you see me trying to write a justification to purchase cattle? I'm not even going to tell you where I got them from ... I'll be damned if I'm going to jail for buying damn cattle. What the hell are you guys going to do anyway, have one hell of a cookout?"

"Not exactly, sir, but if they do, you can be sure you will be invited," Scott said, trying to add a little humor to his tone.

"I'd better be after all I've gone through," Foster said, as he picked up the keys for a vehicle. "Let's go and take a look." He took steps toward the door and stopped to look at Scott. "I won't forget, you know, about the barbecue. Probably going to be a lot of VIPs there. Wouldn't hurt my career to meet some of them."

Scott didn't say anything as Foster marched out of the room, but his thoughts drifted through his mind. *This is one barbecue you don't want to go to, Captain, unless you want to be the meal.*

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## Chapter Twenty-nine

The vehicles moved smoothly from the runway at the Norfolk Naval Air Station toward the Naval Amphibious Base Little Creek, which was located less than thirty minutes away in the pre-dawn morning. Their convoy of three semi-trucks and six other associated vehicles would not attract any undue attention in the largest Naval community in the world. There was always an exercise going on, or ship battle groups coming and going at all hours of the night at anytime during the year.

As they approached the main gate to the base, Reese noticed Commander Scott from SOCOM waiting at the gate with the sentries. As the vehicle stopped, he

jumped in alongside Reese.

"Welcome back," he said, in an all-too-cheery voice that grated on Reese's tired disposition. "And congratulations on one hell of a job. The general is extremely pleased."

"Thanks," Reese responded, but without enthusiasm. He was too tired to be enthusiastic at the moment. "Is he here?"

"Not yet, but he should be in a day or so," Scott assured him. "He has some pressing issues up on the Hill, money matters."

"That's good. All of the men are worn out." Reese said, as he rubbed his eyes.

"All the quarters are ready. The living quarters for all of you are within the same facility as the ... new team."

"We're going to be living there, too?" Reese asked, surprised. "I have my own place in Norfolk I would really like to see again."

"Give it some time. The general thought it imperative that the team be kept together for a while longer," Scott said.

"How long is 'a while?'" Reese asked.

"Until the general says it is. You can discuss that with him if you like."

Reese sat in silence for a few seconds before he spoke again. "What did you call them? The new team?"

"Yes. We had to call it something in order to classify the expenditures under the black operations account."

"Black operations," Reese repeated, finding it amusing—black as the night all right. "Just call them 'team.' Why do we have to name them?"

"No, that's too boring, Reese," Scott said. "Let me see, they can't be killed easy so they are virtually immortal. So..." Scott went silent as he thought for several seconds.

"How far to the secure area?" Reese asked, wanting to change the subject.

"Not much further. I took a look at it today and was quite impressed."

"What about—" Reese began.

"I've got it!" Scott yelled. "They're immortal, right?"

"I suppose you could say that. Yeah," Reese answered.

"Operation Immortal Servitude! Does that sound complex or what? The accounting

weenies won't know what to think ... well, not that we pay them to think anyway. The general will love it," Scott said, almost glowing in self-admiration.

"Yeah ... catchy," Reese said uncaringly. "Now what about security? Men to guard and monitor our new arrivals?"

"Lieutenant Johnson and his team have been permanently assigned to this operation."

"He's a good man, but a little too military for me." Reese commented. "But his men performed well. It was a shame that we lost three."

"Yes, it was," Scott said. An uncomfortable silence fell between them.

"What about me? Do I go back to my other assignment?"

"We need you with this assignment. Your background is pertinent and critical to this mission, as is evident by the successful capture."

"I just supplied the information, Johnson handled the operational side. I'm interested in these creatures, but I need to know where this is going."

"What do you mean?" Scott asked.

"These creatures ... what will happen to them?"

"The general will explain all of that when he gets here." Scott said, in what Reese thought was a well-rehearsed statement.

"Here we are," Scott said. "Down this road for a bit, it's hidden really well, out of sight from everything else on the base."

Reese did not like the way the conversation had been ended—without any answers to his most important questions.

The trucks entered the road that led to the compound. Thick dense woods concealed its location from passing traffic. In a few minutes, they arrived at an area encircled by fencing and illuminated by high-intensity lighting. Their small convoy stopped. Reese and Scott got out of the vehicle and were joined by Johnson.

"Commander Scott," Johnson said as he saluted, then shook hands.

"Good work, Lieutenant. I was just explaining to Commander Reese that you and your men have been assigned to compound security and monitoring."

"We better take a look around then," Johnson said.

*Another sign of Johnson's devout allegiance, thought Reese. Ask no questions, just do as you are told.*

Johnson selected various members of his team for immediate assignments and took the rest on a tour of the facility. Reese and Scott followed, Scott explaining the

layout. They ended the tour in the control room of the facility.

The control room was completely sealed, designed to withstand any type of forced entry. Entry to this door and all of the others in the facility were controlled by electronic card and thumbprint; considered the most secure method in private industry and high-level government installations. Inside the control room, they became acquainted with the video monitors that displayed every inch of the facility, the security alarms and the motion detectors. The last piece of equipment to go in was the remote device that would activate the collars on the creatures.

"That about covers it for now," Reese said. "Are you comfortable with it, Johnson?"

"Looks good. But the true test is to get our friends out of the containers and turn them loose in their new quarters. The containers are off the trucks and ready to be opened. Double protection is ready."

"Let's get to it," Reese said.

Orders were passed and the men prepared in their hurried arrangement for double protection. The first team would unload one creature at a time and escort him into the area. The SEALs would be armed with the elixir in their spray apparatuses. At the same time, the creatures would be monitored from inside the control room in the event of an attack, whereby the collar device would be activated. Reese and Johnson accompanied the first team as they opened the container that carried Dimitri; Scott remained close to them, his anticipation evident as he paced about anxiously, as if waiting to see some type of show. They unbolted the door and swung it open.

Dimitri stood there, his stance reflecting that of a man that had just disembarked a train, as he curiously studied the new surroundings. He inhaled the air deeply, seeming to digest and dissect the smell to determine its individual ingredients. After a few seconds, he smiled at Reese and Johnson and spoke.

"We are near the ocean. It has been a long time since I have seen the ocean."

"Yes," Reese said. "We have arrived at our destination."

"And that is where?" Dimitri asked.

"Virginia," Reese stated. "These facilities are to be your home for the immediate future. We must get you and your men into these facilities quickly; dawn is less than a hour away."

"Yes, I can sense it coming. Our sense of timing in regards to the sunrise is acute."

"Let your men know what's happening. Remind them that the same precautions are in place that have always been and that as before, we will not hesitate in using them."

Dimitri looked around, studying the faces of the armed men; he saw the same

armaments as before. He raised his hand to the collar at his neck.

"These are very hard on our flesh; perhaps we can have different ones that will not abrade our skin."

"We will discuss that later. I want you and your men inside—now," Johnson ordered.

"Very well," Dimitri said. "I will tell them." He closed his eyes for several seconds as he communicated with the rest of his men. Reese was fascinated by this ability and hoped to learn more about it. "They all understand and are ready," Dimitri said.

"Okay. You first," Johnson said, as they escorted him into the facility. The area consisted of individual rooms for each creature. The furniture was sparse but appeared comfortable. Each room contained an alcove in which their crypt would be placed. The door to each room was also keyed with magnetic card reader and thumbprint verification.

"It's not much, but we didn't have time. If our plans go okay, we will add some more niceties for you," Reese said.

Dimitri scanned the area but did not speak. His face reflecting no concern for the words that Reese had just spoken.

"Did you hear what I said?" Reese asked.

"Yes. We are accustomed to living in an underground environment that had much in terms of amusement. However, this is quite satisfactory for a prison."

Reese ignored his comment. "We have to get everyone inside right now. Can you wait until this evening to feed?" Reese asked, his tone reflecting the obvious disdain at the thought.

"You find the concept difficult to comprehend, don't you, Commander? The fact that we must take the blood from a living creature in order to survive is revolting to you."

Reese said nothing.

"I have a feeling you will get used to it," Dimitri continued. "As I will have to get used to whatever it is that you have in store for us."

Reese still didn't say anything. He turned and exited the creature's quarters, ensuring that the door locked shut behind him. He couldn't help but wonder if Dimitri was right—would he get used to the fact these creatures had to take blood to survive? In theory, he had accepted the fact; however in reality, the theory took on a new life that scared him.

"They look like normal men," Scott said, surprising Reese out of his thoughts.



"What did you expect?" Reese snapped. "Did you think they would have three eyes or fangs that hung down to their chins?"

Reese saw a surprised look on Scott's face, but he couldn't decide if the commander was surprised at his outburst or the content of the statement.

"But don't worry," Reese continued. "They possess the attributes you and the general are looking for. Turn your back on them for a millisecond and they will slit your throat, like you or I open up a can of soda, and then drink your blood with as much delight."

"Whoa ... Reese," Scott said, holding up his hands. "Take it easy. I wasn't trying to be funny or anything. To most of us, that's the image we conjure up. We don't have the background that you do. To most of us, they're just fictional creatures up on the big screen."

Reese calmed himself. He sensed the edginess had been growing inside of him since the conversation on the plane with Johnson. His own doubts and fatigue plagued him. "Sorry. I didn't mean to jump on you."

"You're tired," Scott said. "Get some rest and we will talk tomorrow."

"Right ... right. Tomorrow," Reese said and walked off to finish unloading the remaining three creatures.

The off-loading went off without any problems. Apparently Dimitri's words to the rest carried some weight. The remaining vampires were placed into their individual quarters. Job done, Reese decided to call it a night.

He headed to the living quarters, meeting Johnson on his way and accompanied him to their respective rooms.

"Nice place?" Reese asked.

"Home sweet home, Commander." Johnson smiled. Reese imagined Johnson probably did really like the place. It had that sterile military air about it. No individuality or personal tastes; it was the same for everyone. They arrived at their rooms.

"I think Dimitri is right," Reese said.

"What's that?" Johnson asked.

"It's a prison. I'm just not sure who the prisoner is anymore. Them or us?"

"Get some sleep," Johnson said. "Tomorrow is bound to be a fun day."

Johnson closed his door.

Reese remembered what Dimitri had said. That he would get used to it—the fact that

they drank blood. Now he wondered if he really could get used to it and if he did, what that really meant about himself.

"Yeah ... fun," Reese said, as he entered his room and closed the door.

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## Chapter Thirty

"We are captives, nonetheless," Josip said, as the four of them stood in the main meeting room of their quarters; sunset having arrived after their first sleep in their new surroundings. When they awoke, they found new clothing that had been left for them—another step to the loss of their own identities, as they were now dressed in the same blue coveralls and black boots.

Dimitri sighed as he prepared to exchange words with Josip. He wondered why the man never learned. He glanced toward the quiet pair of Andre and Iliga. More and more, they listened rather than spoke. They were always quiet and withdrawn, almost sullen. More so after they had been changed. Dimitri wondered if this was possibly attributed to their weakened state at the time when Alexander took them. Though they lacked speech in any great amount, their comprehension was fine; they understood everything and followed Dimitri or Josip without hesitation.

"You must be careful with your words," Dimitri said. "We would not want to appear ungrateful to our hosts," as he indicated with a turn of his head to the remote cameras in the room. "However, your statement is correct. Still, we must make the best of the situation."

Then, speaking in a tone that the audio equipment could not pick up, but they would because of their enhanced hearing abilities, he said, "I will kill you myself, Josip, if you do anything rash. Remember what I said earlier. We will study and learn before we try anything. We are in a new part of the world that we do not understand. In our many years of our existence we have experienced much, but our country is not like the West. They are different than the back-country peasants that we are use to dealing with for cattle or—"

"Did you smell it?" Josip asked, interrupting Dimitri. "When they opened the doors, it was so strong."

"The ocean ... yes, I smelled it."

"And the other scent, did you smell that also? The smell of humans; the blood of millions in the area?"

"Yes, that too," Dimitri conceded. "Again, it is not like our home. Here the people are much closer and in large quantities. It will require more control of our hunger."

"And our captors will tempt us with their blood as they study us." Josip said. "Have they revealed anything to you yet?"

"No, but I believe soon we shall learn what they want of us. I will handle the one that appears to be in charge ... the one called Commander Reese. I believe he has an interest that I can tap into. He treats us as a curiosity, something from the past. The others have something else in mind, which we will learn through him."

"They are soldiers as we were once," Josip said, with a bit of reminiscence in his voice. "We marched off to protect—"

"And you see where that got us," Dimitri told him. "We lost our human souls to this other side that we call life. For what? The glory of fighting to save our country? And what would it have mattered? Look what has happened over the years in our precious country. It goes from one war to another and now they have even resorted to killing each other. And we are in the middle, between life and death, with no will to kill ourselves and our main focus on preserving our lives."

"You would prefer death?" Josip asked, incredulous.

"No, you fool! Of course not. But for what purpose, besides our self-preservation?"

"We are creatures, who belong to our own," Josip said. "We survive."

"But for what purpose, I ask you again? We have the abilities through our superior life spans and physical attributes—less our few hindrances in the light of day. Our physical surroundings present no problem to us like our human counterparts."

"What do you want, Dimitri?" Josip asked. "We have purpose. We must survive. That is all we will ever have. Why do you search for some greater meaning?"

"Of course we all have that, but there is more. What if survival was not a problem anymore? If food sources were always available and no one hunted us? We occupy our time with reading and exploring the world around us and remain unattached as much as possible to what goes on around us. I must have more ... we must have more," Dimitri said, as he turned away from the group.

"You have something on your mind, some grand idea, don't you?" Josip asked aloud, this time in a normal tone, apparently not caring if the humans heard him.

"I don't know," Dimitri responded. "Perhaps it will become more clear in time. Maybe it's just the environment change."

"Perhaps if you drank the human blood, it would raise your subconscious ideas," Josip said in the lower tone, not to be overheard.

"That's not an option, Josip. Get it out of your head. It will only lead to trouble."

"I will put it aside for the moment," he said. "But I will not forget it. Nor should you."

The comment jolted Dimitri. This was one of the times that Josip was correct, although Dimitri would not agree with it as easily as Josip would like. If he were to

compare it to anything, drinking human blood was like indulging in a fine whiskey, as compared to drinking animal blood, which would be like table wine. It quenched the thirst—but nothing more.

*Enough!* He could no longer think about it. His head pounded. He was hungry, as were the others. He saw the anxiety building in them. He hoped that Commander Reese had made some kind of arrangements for their feeding cycle.

As if in anticipation of his request, a voice sounded from the monitoring system as a door in the rear area of their quarters buzzed and clicked open. The voice was familiar and Dimitri recognized it as Reese's. He found it odd that it should come when he had thought about it.

"Go through the opened door. It will lead down a corridor and out into another closed area. There you will find cattle waiting for you. When you are done, return to this area. Is that understood?"

Dimitri moved into the direct line of sight of the camera and nodded that he understood the instructions. "And then?" he asked.

"Then we have things to do. Tests to conduct on you and your men."

Dimitri nodded and headed in the direction his men had gone. *Tests? But who is testing whom? This is a race for knowledge of strengths and weaknesses hidden under the poorly-knitted cloth of mankind that has too many holes in it, my friend.*

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## Chapter Thirty-one

From the control room, Reese and the SEALs on duty monitored the feeding habits of the creatures. For those that had not seen it before, they were riveted by the actions of the creatures taking of their meals. Reese, although still having difficulty with the concept, found himself adjusting to it as just another event. He found it interesting that the cattle became subdued so quickly and let the vampires drink their fill. He wondered if the same effect resulted from the humans they drank from. Were they subdued as easily as the cattle?

"Evening," Scott said as he entered the room. "Or is it morning for you? Your hours must be reversed to match the creatures now that..." He paused mid-sentence as his gazed moved to the monitor and witnessed the feeding. "My God!"

"What's wrong? Everyone has to eat," Reese said. "Including those of *Operation Immortal Servitude*, right?" His voice frothed with more sarcasm than he had intended.

"I suppose so," Scott said. "But it's so ... disturbing."

"Disturbing is hardly a strong enough word to describe it," Reese said. "But like anything else, we will learn to see as it as just another event of many that are sure to come along now."

"What is the schedule for them today?" Scott asked, ignoring Reese's statement as he looked away from the monitor with obvious relief.

"Today is test day. Major Barkley has a whole battery of tests to run on them: blood and tissue cultures, the whole gambit. We should have some answers in twelve hours or so. Maybe we can get some insight into what they really are."

"Good," Scott said. "The general will be here soon to see what we have come up with."

"I wouldn't get your hopes up for any fast results," Reese said. "I think we will come up with more questions than answers from the tests."

"Why?" Scott asked. "We have the equipment and the people here to analyze the data."

"I don't think this is going to be simply a matter of biological or scientific answers. It may boil down to a question of theology, which I won't know the answers to and I don't think anyone else does either. There are things here at work that may be

beyond our comprehension."

"Let's wait to see what results we get before we dismiss any physical evidence," Scott replied. "You know the general doesn't like questions ... he wants answers."

"What does the general think he has here?" Reese asked. "What does he see as the ultimate outcome of all this?"

"That will be for him to tell you, not me. I'm just a messenger," Scott answered. Reese could see the uncomfortable look on his face the subject had placed there.

"I know ... I know," Reese answered. "He's a man of vision."

Major Barkley entered in to the control room area, carrying what appeared to be a collar device.

"Commanders," he said in greeting to Reese and Scott. "I'm ready to begin testing when you are. I also have made some adjustments to the collar devices that will give them greater range and they have a built-in tracking device. And if comfort is an issue, I've placed a soft material on the inside."

"We can change collars when you have each one in the medical area." Reese turned toward one of the men at the monitor stations. "Let Lieutenant Johnson know so he can get the men prepared."

"Yes, sir," the man said. He picked up a phone marked "internal calls only" and made the call.

"How are you doing on the elixir ingredients?" Reese asked Barkley.

"That's the damn weirdest thing," he said. "I've analyzed that stuff three ways to Sunday, but when I put the ingredients together, it's just not the same as what Idriz made."

"That is interesting," Reese said. "But ... I know this will sound strange, but maybe he put a hex or some kind of spell on it."

"I wouldn't know about that," Barkley said. "But I do know that there is a time factor in the effectiveness of it. From what I can tell, it's effective for maybe seven days or so and that is a swag at best."

"Get Idriz onto making more of it," Scott ordered.

"I asked him and he politely refused until he talks with Commander Reese," Barkley said, as he looked at Reese.

"Who the hell does he think—" Scott began.

"Okay, I'll talk with him," Reese said, cutting Scott off. He turned to face Scott and said. "The man has some issues with the creatures and I can't blame him. He is also

vital to this project. I will deal with him."

"Very well, Commander. Whatever you think is best." Scott turned and left the control room.

Although Reese didn't like the idea of having to talk with Idriz, it was very necessary at this point. Scott's purely military mentality would only screw things up. What Reese didn't like about Idriz Laupki was that when he looked at the man, all he saw was an anger boiling beneath the surface of his flesh. A feeling of fear always accompanied Reese after their conversations.

"They're coming back in," one of the monitor personnel said. "They're in the outer corridor now."

"And Lieutenant Johnson?" Reese asked.

"Yes, sir. He is in position and ready," one of men responded.

"Let me talk to him first," Reese said. The man on watch dialed the phone and asked Johnson to stand by as he handed Reese the receiver.

"Slight change of plans," Reese said into the phone. "I have to speak with our favorite civilian, Mr. Laupki. Can you handle our friends?"

"No problem," Johnson said. "We're getting good at this stuff."

"Don't get overconfident. That's exactly what they're counting on," Reese said, with urgency in his voice. "Make sure your men understand that."

"Understood," Johnson replied curtly.

Reese hung up the phone and turned to Barkley. "Your game," Reese said to him.

Barkley walked up to Reese and spoke in a low voice, so as to not be overheard by the other men in the room. "I'm not sure which is worse, the creatures, the civilian or Commander Scott?"

"It's a close race," Reese said as he left the control room and went off to find Idriz Laupki.



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## Chapter Thirty-two

Reese found Idriz Laupki in the observation room that had a direct view into the chamber that Barkley used for a lab. Corporal Brosnev was next to him; the interpreter had become Idriz's constant companion. They watched Barkley take test samples from Dimitri.

As Reese approached, he was surprised to hear Idriz speaking in simplified English terms.

"Have you mastered the English language already?" Reese asked.

"Oh ... sir," Brosnev said, apparently surprised at Reese's appearance. "No, sir, but he is making some progress; he already had picked up some since the peacekeeping force had moved into the area."

"Interesting how none of his English came out before," Reese said. He thought perhaps that Idriz might have been able to pick up on some of the words in their conversations.

"Good a-a-a-fter-noon," Idriz said slowly.

"Not quite. Good evening would be more appropriate," Reese said.

"Good eveeee-ning ... my name ... is Idriz Laupki."

"Very good," Reese said, and then turned toward Brosnev. "Translate please."

"Yes, sir. I'm ready."

"Major Barkley tells me you won't make any more elixir until you talk to me. So here I am. What's on your mind?"

Idriz spoke to the interpreter, who then translated Reese's words. When he was done, he turned back to Reese and spoke. "He says that he wants to be involved with what is going on in there," and pointed to the room where Barkley was working on the creature.

"Why?" Reese asked. He had known that his earlier promise to Idriz of a role in the confinement of the creatures would come back to haunt him—and here it was.

"He wants to talk to the one named Josip," Brosnev said.

"Out of the question," Reese said. "When they are together, the tension between

them is quite evident. It endangers the entire operation."

As Brosnev translated, Reese knew he was fighting a losing battle. Idriz might have come from a country that lacked Western luxuries and technologies, but he knew the power of having something that the other side had to have. In this case, the elixir.

"He says that he promises to not start any problems."

"And I should believe him?" Reese asked.

Brosnev translated Reese's question and received a curt answer back from Idriz. The interpreter questioned him again and received the same response. "He says that you don't have a choice."

*He's right, Reese thought. I don't have any choice. But that doesn't mean he gets everything that he wants.*

"Tell him to be careful on what demands he makes. Remind him he is here only out of courtesy and respect. However, if he makes another supply of the elixir, I will *consider* assigning him to the guard staff, where he *may* have the opportunity to talk with Josip. But only under supervision."

The translator spoke with Idriz. When the interpreter had finished, Idriz turned and spoke to Reese.

"It's a ... done ... deal," Idriz said, fumbling over the words, and then brokered his hand to shake. Reese accepted the hand and shook but did not release it. He spoke to the translator.

"Tell him, that if he tries to do anything that causes the creatures harm, I will have him thrown into a jail cell for the rest of his life. Or better yet, I will throw him in with the damn creatures and let them feast on him." Reese paused, then continued. "And this time, I want him to write out the instructions so that we can make the elixir."

Brosnev translated. Slowly a smile appeared on Idriz's face. He nodded in agreement. Reese didn't like the smile and released Idriz's hand.

"Now get to work," Reese said, and quickly left the room.

As the door closed behind him, he exhaled a long breath of air. He had told himself not to let it happen, but he had allowed Idriz to get under his skin. There wasn't much doubt that Idriz only had one thing on his mind—revenge. That he was going to use the elixir as leverage to get it was not much of a surprise. Reese knew everything depended on him staying one step in front of everyone else.

Reese felt like he was in a race. Who was going to win? Would Idriz get the revenge he wanted? Would General Stone get what he wanted from the creatures? And what about him—would he get what he really wanted?

What was it that he wanted? Information? Yes, he wanted to know about the

creatures he had studied for years. What he could learn here would put him at the head in his field, if he could figure out some way of incorporating the knowledge into his own work. Yet he felt that there was something else behind his own drive in this quest, some other motivation that gnawed at him. He cast the thought aside for the moment and decided it was time for him to start learning about Dimitri and his group—right now.

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## Chapter Thirty-three

Reese used his electronic card and pressed his thumb against the reader device; the door opened and he found himself inside of the creatures' quarters. Another man, one of the Navy SEALs that stood watch outside of the door, accompanied Reese into the room. This followed the two-man rule created for protection when in the presence of the creatures.

Dimitri sat in a chair in one corner, reading a book. He looked up as Reese entered. The sharpness of his gaze disturbed Reese; he felt as if the creature could see right through him and knew what he was thinking, even his most innermost thoughts. Was this part of the vampire mystique he had read about: these creatures and their abilities to control the thoughts as well as the desires of mortal man and women? Was this the secret to how they maintained their control over humans and walked among them for so many centuries? He had so much to learn about the creatures that he had perhaps thought himself an expert of.

"Ah, the jailer comes at last," Dimitri said, as he placed a bookmark inside the book. "Have you come to see the latest device they have placed around our necks?" He indicated the new collar around his neck. "They are at least more comfortable—for which we are grateful," Dimitri continued, his voice somewhere between sarcastic and condemning.

Reese, however, did not hear the comments or the tone of Dimitri's voice. He sought to begin his own exploration into the ways of these vampires by seeking to understand Dimitri and what made these creatures tick. "It's time to begin our talks," Reese said, trying to maintain a sense of calmness in his voice. "I want to learn about you and your men."

"You really mean, *our kind*, don't you?"

"Yes," Reese replied.

"Please, have a seat," Dimitri said and indicated the empty chair across from him.

Reese sat, unable to take his eyes from Dimitri. It seemed as if there was an aura that surrounded the creature, radiating a sense of calmness in him that was almost disturbing.

"Our lives are different in mainly one way. We adjust quickly," Dimitri said, interrupting Reese's thoughts. "We have learned to adapt to changing situations."

"So I see," Reese said. "Can you tell me about you and your men?"

"Perhaps, but why do you want to know of us?" Dimitri asked.

"I have my reasons," Reese said, offering no more explanation.

"I see," Dimitri said. "Men have come to us before to solve their problems. A vendetta, isn't it? You wish to get even with someone?"

"No!" Reese said, feeling sweat forming at his brow as he felt himself go on the defensive against the creature.

"You know, we can tell if someone is lying," Dimitri said, a small thin smile appearing on his lips. "We can sense the change in the blood; we can hear your heart speed up."

"It's not against one person," Reese said, exhaling strongly. "It's against all of them. They all thought I wasted my time chasing the myths of ancient times. But you didn't answer my question."

"Why would someone be interested in creatures like myself?"

"I want to know ... what happens to your mind over the years. Do you get bored with life and just feed in order to survive the next day? Or do you have hopes and dreams for the future like everyone else? How does someone occupy eternity?"

"Everything has a purpose in this world, otherwise there would be no reason for existence," Dimitri said. "Everything must find its place within the fold and creases of life—otherwise it may be squashed out of existence. So many questions you have, Commander, and now you feel you have the answers right at your fingertips, is that it?"

"Yes. There is much about you I want to know," Reese said.

"You think we are so different from you," Dimitri said. "Yet we are so much alike. We were just like you once—men with a purpose."

"Tell me," Reese said imploringly. "I want to know about you and what you once were. Tell me about you and your men. Where are you from, how old are you and how did you become a ... creature or is vampire the correct term?"

\* \* \* \*

"There were five us," Dimitri said, without addressing Reese's question about vampires. "We were all born around 1890 in a little village not far from the town of Kacianik. Josip and I were best friends and we attracted three others that formed our little group. There was Franjo, who is dead now, and Andre and Iliga."

"We were young men who were susceptible to the ways of our country. Although we were not soldiers ... we answered the call. Little did we know what would come of our patriotic attempt. Dimitri closed his eyes and remembered..."

"Thank you, I have had enough to eat," Mikel, the runner from the main Serbian force, said. "Our army will be coming through Montenegro and over the Albanian Mountains. It will be a long march and the winter is descending upon us. The terrain will slow down the German tanks, but we need to slow down the invaders on foot. Our plan calls for small teams of soldiers left at critical points that will hamper the onward onslaught of the attackers, buying precious time for the main force to get to Corfu. One of these points is a pass through the mountain not far from this village. It is my responsibility to arrange volunteers to man it before I rejoin the main force."

Dimitri's eyes lit up at the words; he looked for a similar reaction from his four friends.

"Do you know of any volunteers?" Mikel asked.

Dimitri looked at his friends and they agreed without a word uttered between them. Dimitri would speak for the group; he'd always done so in the past.

"We will do it," Dimitri said. "It will be our honor to serve our great country to rid the bastard Germans from our soil. We will do it as our grandfathers rid the Turks from our land and as our fathers defeated the invaders from Bulgaria."

The words made him feel proud as courage flowed through his veins. Their chance to fight for their country had finally arrived.

"Good," Mikel said, but not with any enthusiasm. He lowered his eyes from the young Dimitri, as if knowing that he had just sentenced these young men to die against the hardened and experienced forces that were invading.

"Get your things together; we will leave at first light."

\* \* \* \*

Dimitri and his group had much to do that night to make preparations to depart in the morning. There was no discussion among their group of who would be in charge. Dimitri, being the oldest, had always been the leader, but more so because they believed in him than because of his age. He visited and assured all of their families that it was only a temporary assignment and that they would return once they were sure that the advance of the Germans had been halted. Dimitri's mother said very little, except to mention that when her husband had been called to the Balkan War that it, too, was only a temporary assignment from which he never returned.

Dimitri's last visit was to Josip's home.

"Wait here," Josip said.

"Do you not want me to talk with your father?"

"I will talk to him—alone."

Dimitri saw the sullen look on Josip's face. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. My father will always be ashamed that he refused to go off to the Balkan War. All the others from the village had been killed. He knows that I have paid the price for his decision."

"But this is your chance to redeem your family's honor."

"I know. But..."

"But what?"

"You remember the time with the bear?"

"Of course."

"When I told my father about it, he said I was spared death because it would have been an honest death."

"An honest death? I don't understand?"

"He believes that I am destined to die a horrible death without honor because of what he has done. Superstition and the old ways—it is all he believes."

"Nonsense. He is a fool."

"Maybe. But I will talk to him alone because he will go on about it again. There's no point in you having to listen to his ranting."

"As you wish," Dimitri said, placing his hand on Josip's shoulder. "I will see you in the morning."

Dimitri returned home thinking about what Josip had told him. As he slipped into bed, he wondered what Josip's father thought about his life being spared. Did he survive in order to die another way also? But he had done nothing wrong. His father had gone off to the war.

"Foolish old man," Dimitri said, as he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

The following morning, their feet crunching on the frozen ground, the five young men and Mikel headed for the pass in the mountains near the village.

"Where exactly are we going?" asked Dimitri.

"It's called different things by people," Mikel began. "Your village calls it Devil's Grip. I call it the Pass of Death because of the battle in the late 1300s with the Turks. A legion of their soldiers were ambushed by the Serbians and massacred in the pass with no escape."

"Such a sad place," Iliga said.

"Well, yes and no." Mikel said. "You see, after the battle, a small group of monks established a monastery in the region, they wanted to—how do you say? Purify the

place. They wanted to cleanse the evil by doing something good. They wanted their monastery to be special. It became the main resource for literature and history books that still remained in print."

"Books?" Franjo asked.

"Yes, books. Since the time of its establishment, they had amassed thousands of volumes of various subjects. People would come from all over to read and study the texts they preserved."

"What happened to it?" Iliga asked.

"The library remained for three hundred years until its destruction by a mysterious fire. All of the monks were killed as they attempted to save the books that were supposedly stored in deep caverns underneath the monastery. Burned to the ground. The ruins are still visible."

"You know what else they say about that place?" Josip said. "My grandmother told me that the monks weren't really monks at all but devil worshippers. They also did sacrifices ... blood sacrifices to the devil."

"Old wives' tales," Dimitri said with a casual air of dismissal. "I, too, have heard the stories of this place from my father. They are bedtime tales."

"I've heard some say the monks that were killed there still haunt it—still trying to save their books," Josip continued.

Mikel chuckled and waved his arm. "All grandmothers have stories to tell, don't they? The werewolves that stole the newborns was my grandmother's favorite."

They all laughed at Mikel's comment, because each of them had heard the same tale. The country was full of ruins and cemeteries that left no one wanting for any story that could possibly be imagined.

"Don't worry," Mikel said. "You won't be that close to the ruins. There are some caves I saw on my way through that will offer shelter to you as you keep guard. You won't have to stay at the ruins."

The group breathed sighs of relief.

"How long do you think it will be before the Germans come?" Dimitri asked.

"Maybe a week, maybe a month, and maybe not at all," Mikel answered with a shrug. "Damn Germans are crazy. Only God knows what they will do."

They arrived late in the afternoon and made camp at one of the caves that Mikel had seen on his previous trip.

"There is plenty of room here for all of you. With some work, the cave could be shaped into habitable living quarters, and easily protect you from attack," Mikel said.



As darkness settled upon them, Mikel instructed them to make a fire that would be hidden from sight by anyone approaching the pass. Once this was done, they ate and settled in for the night.

"The first thing we must do tomorrow is establish lookouts and plan a trap in case the Germans come through—along with your plan of escape. I have explosives and weapons that I will leave with you, but I must make sure you know how to use them."

"We will kill them with our bare hands if we must," Dimitri said, causing a rowdy stir from his friends. As their leader, he knew he must keep their spirits up. For now, talk would be the tool he chose.

Mikel smiled sadly. "I thought that way once. Have you ever killed anyone before?" He looked at each young man's face, but he could already tell they had not. "It is easier to kill at a distance than it is to kill up close. If you do it up close, you may either lose your nerve and be killed, or you may kill and be damned by nightmares the rest of your lives. Either way, you're damned if you have any kind of conscience at all. Yes, you'll be haunted for the rest of your lives." Mikel ignored their disbelieving expressions and lay down to sleep.

Dimitri looked at Mikel and wondered about the foreboding he felt that had accompanied the soldier's words of death and killing. He wondered if Mikel could see inside of him and know he was scared and know the doubts he had about risking his life. He saw the other men looking at him and knew he needed to say something to reassure them.

"It's the whiskey talking," Dimitri said softly. "It makes his words awkward and unworthy for a soldier of the great army of Serbia."

"We have seen death before. Those that died in the village from old age that came too early in their lives," Josip replied.

"But we have not killed another human before. Only sick farm animals or the wolves or bears that prey on our cattle during the winter months," Andre added.

"I can do it," Dimitri said, trying to bolster his own confidence as well as his friends. Inside he wondered if he really would be able to kill when the time came.

*But I must put aside my doubts if I am to be responsible for the lives of my friends.*

"If Dimitri can, so can I," Josip said.

"And I!" echoed the remaining three friends.

"We have all been raised in religious homes, but the killing of those that seek to remove our freedom will be forgiven. For our country," Dimitri said as he raised his metal cup to initiate the toast and dispel their fears, especially his own.

"For our country," the rest agreed. They raised their glasses and drank.

Dimitri didn't want to think about death anymore tonight. He also didn't know how long he could continue his pretense of not being scared. These men, his friends, were here because they trusted him. If he made the wrong decision, it could get them all killed. He didn't think he could live with that.

He passed the bottle of whiskey around until they all drank enough so that sleep overcame them.

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## Chapter Thirty-four

"You are their leader to this day," Reese said. "They followed you to fight for your country and since then. They must admire you greatly."

"Yes," Dimitri answered as he cleared his mind of the memory so many years ago. "We all thought we knew about life and death, but our education was about to begin. Even I was fooled."

"What happened?" Reese asked.

"Will you tell me why we are here?" Dimitri asked. He no longer cared to tell the story and he felt that it was time to get some of his own questions answered. Information and Reese went together and he surmised that he could use this in some way.

"I can tell you what I know," Reese said. "But I do not make the ultimate decision about what happens."

"But you appear to be in charge."

"I am what you would call a subject-matter expert. I have done my major contribution, capturing you and bringing you here. My main interest has always been the study of ancient histories to include myths and folklore. That is why I am here."

"A further quest for knowledge," Dimitri asked, his eyebrows raised.

"That is my personal desire, yes. But I am in the military too, so it is a double-edged sword, you might say."

"I understand. What do you want to know?" Dimitri asked.

"They don't speak very much, do they?" Reese asked, referring to the others who sat quietly in another corner of the room.

"No. But they understand perfectly. I believe that when we were made, they had been too badly injured by the Germans and Alexander could not save them in their entirety."

"What happened?" Reese asked.

Dimitri's voice turned harsh in tone, "Mikel's information about the German forces was wrong—the Germans were already there ... waiting for us."

1915

The German patrol watched the six men as they slept around the diminishing campfire.

"They are nothing," the seasoned sergeant said to the lieutenant. "Just farmers, with maybe one excuse of a soldier amongst them. We should not waste our time—"

"Since when do you decide how our time should be spent—Sergeant?" Lieutenant Oberman barked.

"Sorry ... sir," Sergeant Krause responded. His face turned red, but not from the embarrassment, but rather that the lieutenant refused to see the wisdom of his experience.

"Besides, it doesn't matter. Our orders are clear, Sergeant Krause," Oberman said. "We are to clear the passes and kill any of the locals that offer resistance. They must be taught a lesson about our occupation of this country and that this type of behavior will be punishable by death."

"I understand, sir. But something ... something is just not right about this place," Krause said.

"What do you mean? Do you think there are more of them hiding in the hills? An ambush?"

"I don't know how to explain it, but there is something odd—no, not odd, but something wrong about this place. I've been in the service many years and I have learned to trust my instincts. Those ruins we passed on the way in, they were—"

"Spare me your instincts, Sergeant. I am in charge here. Get the men ready," Oberman said, dismissing his sergeant's concerns.

"Yes, sir." Krause exhaled his frustration. He glanced with disdain at Oberman. The man was short and pudgy. Just a little more than five feet tall, he weighed about a hundred eighty pounds. His face was marred with the after effects of chicken pox.

"And Sergeant, I want our actions to reflect our ruthlessness. Don't kill them all at once. I want to interrogate them ... slowly."

Krause acknowledged Oberman's order with a half-hearted nod, then departed to get the men ready. He hated the lieutenant—not because of his position, for he had been a soldier for many years and understood the role that officers played. But he also had seen many inexperienced officers who did not learn from their experienced sergeants—and through their ignorance, sent many good soldiers to their deaths needlessly.

This one in particular possessed some other hatred that burned within him, consuming him and driving him to kill and brutalize. This night would end badly if

they were not careful.

The men were all in position shortly: Krause was thorough and his men were professionals. Oberman joined him at a vantage point where they could observe the action.

"The Serbs are all asleep and the capture should be easy enough," Krause said.

"Good. This should be a wonderful opportunity. Remember, I want them alive." Oberman smiled in anticipation, and Krause knew he looked forward to interrogating the prisoners. "Give the signal."

Krause gave the signal and the men moved in swiftly. Two shots were fired that exploded the otherwise silent night. The one soldier amongst the group had realized what was happening and drew a weapon. He was shot and killed. Oberman frowned as he saw he would be denied the torture of one less Serb, but the other five were captured easily. The operation was over in less than two minutes.

\* \* \* \*

The five young men sitting on the cold cave floor were petrified as their gazes darted from the Germans as well as to each other. They were both ashamed and scared. Ashamed that they had come to watch for and possibly kill the Germans, and had allowed their enemies to overwhelm them like helpless children on their first night. Fear accompanied the shame as they wondered what their fate shall be. Would they end up in a prison camp where they would die from overcrowding and starvation? Perhaps they deserved the fate because of their foolishness at thinking that they were anything more than just farmers.

"You are my prisoners." Oberman's high-pitched voice sliced through the night's air. "If you cooperate, you shall be released, and you may return to your village and your farms."

"Lying bastard," Josip said.

Oberman turned his gaze on Josip. He studied him for a few moments and then walked toward him.

"Arrogance shall not be tolerated," Oberman said. "You will not question what I say. You will answer all questions that are put to you."

As he neared Josip, Oberman casually removed his service revolver and shot Josip in the arm. Josip screamed in pain and shock as the blood flowed from the wound.

Sergeant Krause turned toward his men. "I want you to reinforce the positions on the perimeter." He knew this was not necessary, but it would take them away from the butchery that would follow. They didn't need to see what a failure the lieutenant was.

"Wait ... we don't know anything!" Dimitri cried to Oberman. "We are just farmers

who were asked to guard the pass. That's all! We haven't even been here a day!"

Oberman looked at Dimitri.

"You speak for the rest?"

"Yes," Dimitri answered. "I am their leader. Do with me as you wish, but I ask you to leave them be. I will tell you what I know."

Oberman shot him in the leg, a smile on his lips, as if he were a small child playing with favorite toys.

"I will not tolerate your Serbian lies!" Oberman replaced the revolver in its holster and removed a knife. "You shall be taught respect." He stepped toward the tied-up men; the knife blade gleamed in the glow of the fire.

"Lieutenant," interrupted Krause, trying to diffuse the lieutenant's anger. "Perhaps we should wait before continuing."

"Nonsense, Sergeant, the time is right," Oberman said, never taking his gaze from the prisoners.

"Their wounds ... we should tend to them and keep them alive to learn what we can," Krause lied to calm Oberman. He was sickened by the excitement in the man's eyes.

"Let them bleed. They don't know anything," Oberman said. "Sergeant, go check the men."

"I have already—"

"Check the men now!" Oberman shouted.

The sergeant looked at the bound men; the two who'd been shot were bleeding badly. Reluctantly, he left the cave.

"You bastard," Krause cursed, when he was far enough away to not be heard. "You will get us all killed with your sickening pleasures. I will not be part of it any longer. I'm going to report this to our superiors."

Back in the cave, Oberman moved in with his knife and began to slash the three prisoners who had not been shot. The screams of the men sent eerie chills into the night air as their blood flowed onto the cave floor.

\* \* \* \*

"Such cruelty," Reese said.

Dimitri opened his eyes and looked at Reese. "Perhaps now you understand our reluctance with being captured by the soldiers."

"Yes," agreed Reese. "I can see that now."

"We swore to not allow ourselves to be captured again. But I never thought that someone would understand how to accomplish it like you did. I underestimated you and the rest of the humanity."

"But why was Oberman so cruel?"

"A question that has been asked throughout time and will continue to be as long as humanity walks the planet. Perhaps he was taking revenge for something that happened to him in his life—anger is but love disappointed in one shape or another. A disjointed childhood, an abusive relationship; the causes are infinite but the outcome is always the same when it cannot be dealt with rationally—the unleashing of anger and cruelty."

"More philosophy?" asked Reese.

Dimitri grinned sarcastically. "Living a long time and seeing much will lead to one form of philosophizing or another. I tend to think it is a form of escapism that one must do in order to avoid going insane." Dimitri leaned forward in his chair bringing himself closer to Reese. "You must understand that concept—a man of education and one who lives in the past rather than the present. You must see the dangers that one must deal with—do you not?"

Reese shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "My understanding is not relevant at this point. Finish what happened that night?"

Dimitri sat back in his chair. His momentary grin turned into a sneer. "Oberman took his time. He made his enjoyment last for several hours and we each got to watch what he did to the other."

Dimitri closed his eyes and drifted back into the memory...

\* \* \* \*

"Leave them there to die," Oberman said. "We are done here."

Krause looked at the bloodstained uniform of the officer with revulsion. The lieutenant's hands were covered with blood from the beatings and stabbings he had administered. Krause was glad he had dispersed the men into the surrounding area so they wouldn't see the grotesque undertakings of their commanding officer.

Oberman used his canteen to wash his hands of the blood. He saw Krause was watching him with a look of disgust on his face.

"You don't approve of me or my actions do you, Sergeant Krause?" he asked with indifference.

"No," Krause said, purposely not using the word "sir." He continued, "You are cruel and you take it out on these men who are nothing but farmers. If word should get out, or if the bodies are found, it only makes for a harder occupation when there is bad blood from this kind of action."

"Makes it harder?" Oberman said, incredulous. "What do you think this is ... a picnic? This is war, Sergeant Krause!" He threw the canteen he had been holding in his hands against the cave wall.

"Even in war, Lieutenant Oberman, there is honor on the battlefield."

"That's enough—"

A scream erupted from the darkness, quickly followed by another; shattering the calm of the night. Gunfire sounded from another direction, which added to the confusion as to the direction of the attack; it appeared as if it was all around them.

Oberman and Krause drew their weapons and took cover among the rocks as they scanned the area for signs of movement.

"The men, where are they?" Oberman asked.

"They took positions encircling this area. Nothing could have gotten past them," Krause answered with confidence. His men were experienced. They would not succumb to irregular soldiers. Whatever it was that was killing them was not ordinary farmers.

Another scream, punctuated by gurgling sounds. The sporadic gunshots continued from all directions. From the sounds, Krause knew what was happening to his men; they were being killed one by one. Eerie silence engulfed the two men. They looked at each other.

"What do you think?" Oberman asked, his voice quavering with fear. Krause looked at him with disgust.

"I think all the men are dead," Krause said. "Just like we will be soon. I knew something was not right about this place. There is something evil here. My instincts, which you scoffed at, were right all along."

"What are you talking about?" Oberman shouted at him.

"I tried to tell you earlier but you wouldn't listen. At first I thought the bad feeling was just from you. But it's not. There is something else here. Something much worse."

"You fool! Get hold of yourself!"

"You're scared, aren't you? You deserve to die a miserable death. I prefer to die with my men." Krause removed his pistol from its holster, took one last look at Oberman and smiled. Then he ran off into the darkness with his gun drawn. Shots rang out followed by a short scream, then silence.

Oberman sat alone. The hand that held his revolver shook. The air was cold but he felt a numbing sensation along the back of his neck, the feeling you get when you know someone is watching you. He turned his head to find himself only feet away



from another man.

The man was tall but not large, and carried no weapons. His clothing was covered in blood; his face was bathed in the crimson color that looked almost black in the dim light of the dying fire. He had the dark and hawk-like features of the local peasants, like the ones he had tortured with his knife only minutes ago.

"Who are you?" Oberman blustered. "What do you want? I have a gun and I will kill you!"

The man said nothing as he approached with a quickness that immobilized Oberman. He clamped his hands around Oberman's throat so quickly he barely noticed it, until he felt the icy cold fingers pressing into his flesh. Finally regaining his sense of what was happening, Oberman pressed his pistol into the man's chest and fired his weapon, continuing to squeeze the trigger even after the magazine was empty. Oberman smelled the singed cloth from the bullets as he watched in horror. The man never wavered.

The face of the man was close now and Oberman could smell a foulness like rotting flesh as he breathed on him. He tried to move but the attacker's strength was tremendous; he threw all his weight into his frantic attack, but the man did not budge.

In an instant, he was lifted by his throat and carried to where the glowing embers of the fire still burned, casting an eerie glow of light. As they approached he saw with horror that his attacker's face was smeared with blood and that he had fangs protruding several inches from his mouth. This was not a man, Oberman thought as he felt his bladder let go, but some kind of creature.

"You are the scum of the earth," the creature said, in a voice deep and low. "I have been watching you since you came here. I kill for a reason, you for the sheer enjoyment of it. Your sergeant was right about you. You do deserve to die."

With an almost effortless gesture, the creature tore Oberman's head from his body. The sound of ripping flesh and bone echoed in the eerie silence. He cast the rest of the body aside and headed into the cave.

\* \* \* \*

Some time later, Dimitri opened his eyes expecting to see the cave and the German torturer in front of him. Instead, he found himself lying on a rock slab in an expansive underground area illuminated by torches and candles. The air was thick with the smell of damp earth and burning pitch. The rock walls were lined with shelves crowded with books, their bindings worn and tattered with age.

He tried to raise his head and was rewarded with searing pain that made his eyes water. Darkness engulfed him and he dreamt.

*He was back in the canyon with Josip again. His gun jammed and the bear was charging at him just as it had happened before. This time the bear looked*

*different: it was smiling at him. It will kill me this time. I will not escape death again.*

When the pain subsided, he opened his eyes. He saw that someone had attempted to bandage his wounds. He didn't think it had been the Germans, but whom then?

Carefully moving his head to the side, he saw his four compatriots lying on similar rock slabs. They looked as bad as he felt; their clothes were bloodstained, their skin pale. Their wounds were also shabbily bandaged.

He looked around at this place he found himself in. The furnishings were sparse and simple. The furniture was old, made of thick oak wood. Carpets covered areas of the dirt floor, their age and use evidenced by their frayed appearance.

Dimitri heard a sound. He looked toward the area of darkness where he perceived it had come from, but saw nothing.

"You're wounded very badly," a voice said, startling him.

He turned his head again in the direction he had thought he heard something earlier, but had seen nothing. However this time, he saw a man standing there and looking at him.

The man was dressed in simple clothing and he was tall and broad-shouldered. Dimitri guessed his age at maybe thirty or thirty-five. His face was long and possessed the features characteristic of his native people. He could have easily passed for an inhabitant of his own village. But there was something in his eyes that made Dimitri think that he was much older and different than the people in his own village.

Dimitri felt those eyes staring into him as if they could see through him and there was the odd reflection of something. The flames of the torches danced within them but Dimitri saw something within those eyes that he had never seen before. They glowed like a hot ember, the red-velvet illumination both enticing and fearful at the same time.

"Am I dying?" Dimitri asked. The question came naturally to his lips. But at the same moment, he felt as if he knew the answer already—he felt it in his body. Perhaps this strange man was his angel that had come to comfort him in his last minutes of life.

"Yes, the blood loss is too great," the stranger said in a low but calm tone of voice that reflected what Dimitri thought was actually sympathy.

"I'm sorry," the man continued. "You are all in the same condition. I tried to do what I could, but time is against you."

"Who are you? What happened to the Germans?" Dimitri asked, as he teetered on the edge of consciousness.

"I was a soldier once, a young man like you, called from the fields of food to the

fields of death for the greater glory of Serbia,” the stranger said as he appeared to drift off into a memory of a past time. He remained silent for a few moments and then said, “My name is Alexander.”

“How did we get here? What happened to the—”

“I brought you here. This is my home. As far as the Germans—they are all dead; I killed them. It's unfortunate as I think of it now. I should have spared some of them, they were not all as evil as the one that did this to you. But I lost myself in the fervor of the kill and the smell of their blood, a bad habit that even I have not broken yet.”

“Where are we?”

“We are underneath the ruins of what once was a monastery, a true treasury of the hidden libraries of centuries past. But that doesn't matter right now. Your time is short for the world of the living. It reminds me so much of what happened to me. It was a very long time ago.”

The man seemed to drift off again into a memory as he fell silent for several seconds. He still stared at Dimitri, but his eyes and their dazed appearance reflected that the man was deeply into thought.

“What happened?” Dimitri asked, not wanting to die in the silence.

“I, like you, was very near death after a battle,” the man said as his eyes returned to Dimitri. “But something came to me while I lay in the field, bleeding to death from a bayonet wound—it came and offered me a chance to live.”

“Was it ... an angel?”

“I thought it was an angel sent from heaven, offering me another chance at life, to return home and back to the fields. It was dark and I was delirious from the loss of blood, so I couldn't tell what was real or not, just as I could not tell what was good and what was evil. I still debate that to this day. But it offered me life and I wanted that. I was too young to die. I thought it was my chance to come back to life. But it wasn't.”

“I don't understand,” Dimitri whispered. “What are you saying?”

“You must listen carefully. Do you want to live?” Alexander asked. “Do you want to breathe the air of this country, this world?”

“Yes,” Dimitri murmured.

“Would you still say yes if you had to make some sacrifices? What if you were to be feared and loathed by others and your existence was based solely upon the death of others? Could you live a life such as this?”

“Yes, of course,” Dimitri said. His eyes wanted to close. He felt cold and he wanted the warmth of sleep.

"And your friends? Can you speak for them?"

"I ... of course. I am their leader." Everything was beginning to turn gray around him.

"Then you must do what I say. If you love life, if you want to live, you must do what I say," Alexander said, with a soothing quality in his voice that relaxed Dimitri. "Do you understand?"

"Yes. I want to ... live," Dimitri said.

"Then live you shall, my friend. It will be a life of darkness, but it will be life nonetheless. I pray that God forgive me if this is done against his will and I pray that I do not do this just for myself—for my own benefit of companionship—but rather for you."

Without any more words, Alexander leaned over Dimitri, opening his mouth to reveal large teeth. He slowly bit into Dimitri's neck. Dimitri moaned as the initial incision was made, but then he quieted, as if an anesthetic had been applied.

Alexander drank for a few moments then raised his face, the blood of Dimitri on his lips, the glow of his eyes even stronger.

"You must do what I say," he said again in that calm tone, his voice possessing a hypnotic ambiance to it.

"Do as you say," Dimitri answered dreamily, his eyes glazed.

Alexander bit into his own wrist and watched as droplets welled at the wound. He placed it over Dimitri's mouth.

"If you want to live, you must drink. Drink!"

Dimitri reacted to the command and sucked at the wound. His body lurched at the copper-like taste but he fought the revulsion as the words of Alexander reverberated through his mind.

*If you love life, if you want to live, you must do what I say.*

Dimitri felt a surge of cold run through his body, chasing the warmth that had nurtured it for all these years. He was sure his heart had stopped and he had died, but then he was brought back to his body again, as if reborn into the world.

"That's enough for now," Alexander said. "The process has begun. I must now tend to the others. Rest now as the changes take over your body. When you awaken, we shall talk about your new life."

"New life..."

"Yes. Your new life, where the night shall become your day, and the day shall become your night, and where death is bountiful in both."

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## Chapter Thirty-five

"So that was the point you became a vampire," Reese said.

"Yes." Dimitri answered, as he pushed the last remnants of the past out of his thoughts.

"Is the process of creating a vampire accurate with what is recorded in most myths—the sharing of the blood of the vampire?" Reese asked.

"Yes. There is more to the process but that is basically correct. There is no way for us to reproduce without that process occurring."

"Why aren't there more vampires then?" Reese asked. "I would think that if you could change a mortal human into a vampire with relative ease, there would naturally be more of you?"

"We do not seek to perform this act of creation as a wanton act of desire such as your own method of producing offspring from a one-night liaison with a woman. I have never created another, nor do I have a desire to." Dimitri became silent and offered no more on the subject.

"What about women?" Reese asked. "Female vampires? Do you have any ... relationships?"

Dimitri smiled. "I sense a strong interest from you in this matter? Perhaps you wish to unlock more than one mystery of the world?"

Dimitri watched as Reese shifted uncomfortably in his chair and sensed that his heart rate accelerated. Apparently this area was one that Reese was especially interested in. That may be useful later.

"We have not come across any female vampires in our time," Dimitri continued. "Do they exist? I believe so. Can we have a ... how you say, a relationship? Not in the way you can imagine. But are we capable of love? Of course. However, to love a mortal woman is not possible without the blood thirst, which would lead to a one-sided affair of using the female to achieve our desire—nothing more. As you mentioned earlier, everybody uses somebody for something."

"What about the others, Andre, Iliga, and Josip. How did they take this change?" asked Reese.

"It was difficult ... in the beginning. For all of us," Dimitri said as he drifted into the

memory...

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Dimitri remembered the troubled sleep that followed. It was as if there were two realms that beckoned to him—one light and one dark. But only one offered a return to the life he wanted. He chose that one, knowing that the price for such a choice held consequences. Nevertheless, his love for life demanded that he do it.

When Dimitri awoke, he felt weak but his pain was gone. He sat up from the stone table. When he examined his leg where he had been shot, he saw the wound was healed, leaving only a minor blemish on his skin. He wondered how it could have healed so quickly, unless he had been unconscious a very long time. He also found that he was starved, but unsure of what he wanted.

"Dimitri," Josip called, startling Dimitri. "You are awake?"

"Yes, how are you, Josip?" He slid off of the stone slab he was on and walked to where Josip sat on another similar slab of stone. Josip looked pale but otherwise fine, the wound in his arm also healed.

"I'm fine. My wounds, they are all healed."

"As are mine." Dimitri said as he glanced around the cavernous area. "What about the others? Franjo, Andre and Iliga?"

"They are fine," the voice that Dimitri recognized as Alexander said. As before, Dimitri had not heard him enter the room. "They are in another area, still resting."

"We owe you our lives," Dimitri said. "We would be dead right now if it weren't for you. How were you able to heal us so quickly?"

"You may change your mind after we talk. Come and sit." Alexander directed them to a table with chairs. "There is much we must talk about."

Dimitri and Josip joined Alexander at the crude table and chairs.

"I don't understand," Dimitri said. "Why would we change our minds? We're alive."

"You all were nearly dead. There was only one thing I could do to save your lives. I took your human lives and made you as I am. One who walks the night and hides from the light of day."

"Dead? Walks the night?" Dimitri said trying to hold back his laugh as if the man was joking with them. "I mean no disrespect, sir, but why do you jest about such things?"

Josip touched his arm and Dimitri saw the questioning look in his face. He made a facial expression for Josip to wait.

"I do not jest. I will prove it. Do you remember the stories? The creatures that drink of blood and are unable to be seen in a mirror?"

"Yes, I have heard such stories," Josip said.

Dimitri nodded as well.

"There is a mirror on that wall. Go and look." Alexander indicated the smooth glass hanging on the rock wall. Dimitri and Josip walked to the location and stood in front of the mirror. They saw light images of themselves, barely noticeable.

"I can see something," Dimitri said, as he squinted and looked. "The light is poor in this cavern."

"It is good enough to see the truth. You see the faint image of what you were," Alexander said. "Soon that will be gone." He walked behind them. Dimitri and Josip looked into the mirror again, but it was empty, with only the books on the back wall visible.

"A trick?" Josip said.

"No trick." Alexander said, as he gestured back to the nearby table. "There is some cheese, are you hungry?"

"Yes," said Dimitri, who truly was very hungry even though his mind was trying to comprehend what he was hearing and seeing.

"Eat it then."

Dimitri went to the table and sliced two pieces of cheese. He handed one to Josip and picked up the other. He raised it to his mouth. Suddenly, he was overwhelmed with extreme nausea at the thought of eating such a thing. He dropped the cheese. Josip did the same.

"I can't," Dimitri said. "I don't understand. I am hungry!"

"Me, too," Josip added.

"You are hungry for blood," Alexander said, as he cut his wrist with a knife and drained a few drops of blood into two small cups. Dimitri and Josip watched in fascinated horror.

Dimitri's senses smelled something. It reminded him of the sweetness of a woman's strong perfume.

Alexander moved the two cups toward them, so that they were within their grasp.

Without hesitation, Dimitri and Josip picked up the cups, consumed the contents, licking every possible drop, and set them down on the table. Dimitri was shocked by his actions, yet he felt growing warmth inside of him that made him feel—good.

"Mother of God. This cannot be," Dimitri said, incredulous. "The walking dead?"

He looked at Josip and saw the same dread expression on his face.

As a child, Dimitri had been told the stories of the creatures of the night. They would steal away the people and consume their blood. They were evil and filthy creatures who feared the light of day because it would consume their evilness, leaving them nothing but empty shells. They lived in the mountains, but occasionally came down to the villages to steal away the young virgins and even the babies shortly after birth. If anyone was suspected of being one of the creatures, they would be banned or even burned to death. Those who were outcast from the village for crimes were said to meet their fate by one of these creatures, a sacrifice to ensure that the innocent people of the village would be left alone.

"No, not exactly," Alexander said, driving Dimitri from his thoughts. "The term vampire describes you better. You are alive. Your only requirement to live will be to nourish and sustain your body on the live blood of animal or human. The only way you can die is to lose your head, go out in the sunlight or drink the poisoned blood of a dead thing."

"This is true?" Josip said.

Dimitri thought he heard enthusiasm in his friend's voice.

"Oh yes, quite true," Alexander said. "I'll be honest with you: your circumstances were extreme at the time. You may not want this kind of life. I have heard that there are those who go mad after a while and just kill themselves rather than making the adjustment to the new way of life."

"We cannot go home to our families," Dimitri said sadly. "Our villages would no longer accept us."

"Probably not. Some who, if they know you, will believe you are not a threat. For a while, I visited those who I knew I could trust. Then they grew old and died—another fact that you must accept. You will live ... forever."

"Forever," Josip said admiringly.

"Yes, forever. But it is safest to let your family believe that you were killed, allow them to grieve your death, than to imagine you as a creature of the night. Society has condemned our lives to the dark side. People will always fear and associate us with terrible happenings. Perhaps, someday, they will see us as just creatures who roam this Earth, but that day is still a long way off."

"How have you managed to live ... like this?" Dimitri asked, still unsure of all that he was hearing.

"It's a story that began a long time ago. I fell in battle during the uprising of 1804. As I said earlier, I was dying just like you, lying on the battlefield near death, my blood



flowing freely from a bayonet wound in my chest. A creature came to me and promised me life and I grabbed at it. I didn't care about the consequences."

"You are more than one hundred years old!" Josip cried.

Dimitri's mind raced with possibilities of his new life, unsure of what to believe or how he could live this way.

"I am one hundred and thirty years old. I was thirty when I fell in battle. I have lived here most of the time. As you have seen, there are volumes and volumes of books here that contain various subjects to hold my interest. Even after all these years, I have barely touched half of them. I travel to other areas when I grow restless. That is how I found this place," he said, indicating their surroundings.

"And you drink the blood of humans?" Dimitri asked.

"Some. But mostly I live off of cattle and wild animals. When I must take a human, I only take those who are near death or who will not be missed, the drunks or the vagabonds. You must remember that your life depends on the secrecy of your existence. To draw attention to yourself is to flirt with death. Whether you continue to live or die, the blood that you choose will dictate your future. But I don't want to confuse you with too much information all at once. That is the one benefit that you will have that I did not."

"What benefit?" Dimitri asked.

"The creature that made me left that same night. I had to learn what I was through trial and error," he said. "I was horrified and sought shelter from those that I knew, and some of them were not very congenial. But we can talk more about this later; it is time to feed before the sunrise so that you can regain your strength."

Startled, Dimitri looked at Alexander wondering how he knew what time of day it could possibly be; he did not possess a timepiece.

"You learn how to *feel* the time of day," Alexander said, surprising Dimitri. "You also learn to sense many things, such as the thoughts of those close to you."

Dimitri nodded, but he didn't really understand. It was all too much to try and comprehend so quickly.

"I have some cattle outside in a pen. For some reason, animals adapt quickly to us. I have an understanding with them," Alexander said.

Dimitri and Josip looked at each other in confusion.

"It's a bit of humor," Alexander said smiling "Did you think you lost your sense of humor as well?"

Dimitri managed a weak smile as Josip laughed out loud.

"I keep them well-fed and they are used to me feeding off of them. But as with humans, you must be careful to not take too much or you will kill them and possibly injure yourself. That is the most important rule you must remember: do not take the blood from an animal or human that is dead, or so close to death that you may—how can I explain it—be drawn into them and their death. Do you understand?"

Dimitri and Josip numbly nodded again, as Alexander rose from his chair.

"What of the rest?" Dimitri asked. "Franjo, Andre, and Iliga?"

"We will come back and get them in a little while," Alexander said. "But you should know, they were much closer to death than you or Josip."

"What does that mean?" Dimitri asked.

"The process of this change seems to react differently depending on how close the person is to actual death. It varies, but sometimes it appears to affect the outgoingness or the shyness of an individual, perhaps even the personality. It all depends how they were in life. If someone was shy or outgoing, the process may have amplified those attributes. We will have to watch them and see what happens."

"And if there is something ... not right with them?" Dimitri asked.

"Then we may have to destroy them."

\* \* \* \*

As they walked up the slope from the underground cavern, Dimitri asked: "Have you—made others before?"

For the first time, Alexander seemed unclear how he should answer. After a few seconds he said: "There was this one time ... but since then I have avoided doing so."

"Why?" Dimitri asked.

"There were ... complications. Besides, it's also a philosophical issue I have not come to terms with. It's hard to explain."

"But us—you changed us?"

"It seemed the right thing in this case. Your deaths were from an evil and cruel man. If not for him, you might have lived."

"So how do you know these things about the process?"

"There are others I have met in my travels. Our kind are drawn together for short periods of friendship. But our survival depends on being alone or in small groups. It is easier to stay hidden. Come now, we must go."

As Dimitri followed Alexander outside into the dark and cool night air, his feelings for his friends troubled him. He had been responsible for their safety and thereby their lives. But did he have the right to make the decision for them to live a life such as Alexander had described? For a moment, he wondered if death would not have been better and simpler for him and his friends.

The darkness and the coolness of the air felt exhilarating after spending so much time underground and helped to clear his minds of some of the thoughts that troubled him.

As he stood in the open air, he felt his senses come alive with the sounds of the night; he saw everything differently and he thought he was more in tune with everything around him.

Alexander saw their reactions and acknowledged their realizations.

"You will be more aware of your surroundings in all respects. It will take a while to get adjusted to it, but you will in time."

They followed Alexander for about seventy-five feet until they reached the cattle pen.

"Here are the cattle. I know it will be hard for you the first time, as it was for me. Just give in to it and let it your hunger lead you. I shall go first so you can observe."

Alexander moved to the first cow and rubbed its neck with his hands as if stroking the animal into a sense of calmness. As the cow relaxed, he moved his face to its neck and gently sunk his teeth to it. The cow did not stir or react in a threatened manner; instead, it calmly stood and allowed him to do as he pleased.

Dimitri became aware of the scent of the blood. Its smell was driving him into a frenzy that insisted his body partake in what only moments ago he had considered an act of revulsion and one that could not possibly be for him. He moved without any sense of willing his body into motion.

He motioned for Josip to follow. In an unspoken acknowledgement, they singled out a cow and began the same process as Alexander. Dimitri relaxed the animal and allowed himself to be drawn to the tender flesh. Two of his teeth elongated in response to his craving the blood. Slowly he bit the animal and began to draw its blood. His mind and body bathed in the euphoria of warmth as the blood flowed into and through his body. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Josip performing the same actions as him.

Any thoughts Dimitri had about death and choosing the correct path vanished as he languished in the warmth of the blood. He felt a heightening of his senses, as if his mind was opening to things he had only imagined before, but now seemed to be close to reality. He felt the large heart of the beast beating as it surged the blood into his mouth. Each pulse increased his awareness and allowed him to explore the uncharted areas of his mind. Death would be such a waste, he thought. The beating

grew louder in his mind....

"Enough!" Alexander screamed.

Both Dimitri and Josip released their hold on the animal.

Dimitri was shocked as Alexander's voice reverberated through his mind with a strength that shook him. He saw Josip also cringing and assumed he had experienced the same. At first Dimitri felt fear at the power Alexander displayed with his command. Would he be their master and they his dominions? Would this be the price that they had paid by the creation of what they now were?

"No. Do not fear," Alexander said.

"You know our thoughts?" Josip asked.

"No. I sense your fear. I will not be your master, but your teacher. You must learn that the key to your lives is moderation in everything you do. You do not want to draw attention to yourselves. You must learn this if you are to survive."

Alexander turned to face only Dimitri. "You have made the decision for your band of men. Now I want you to go and get your comrades and instruct them as I have you. Make sure they understand, for if they fail, you fail, and it will cost you your lives."

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## Chapter Thirty-six

"Alexander was an intelligent man." Reese said.

"And a caring man as well," Dimitri added. "He was like a father to me ... and all of us. He taught us how to live and survive."

"What happened to Alexander?" Reese asked.

"Like everything that is good—he was snatched away from us by the brutal savagery of mankind." Dimitri turned his head from Reese to hide his momentary anger. He did not want Reese to see this as a potential threat against them. He wanted to keep things on a level that was as humanly compassionate as possible—to keep Reese at ease with them and perhaps ... to even trust them.

"Can you tell me?" Reese asked.

"Of course," Dimitri said and dipped into the eternal well of memories that both thrilled and frightened him.

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The six men returned to the monastery in urgency as the artillery shelling of the area continued and the oncoming troops came closer. They had known of the approaching armies and had been making final preparations to hide the opening to their underground home.

"It won't be much longer until they are on us," Dimitri said to Alexander. "They mean to take over all of this area. Before it was just the Germans; now it is the Germans and the Italians."

"All things pass in time," Alexander said calmly. "The people come and go, but in the end, the Serbs will have it back. History has taught us this much so far. You will have to get use to that fact."

"It is still the patriotism in me, in all of us," Dimitri said, as he indicated the others.

"There is a time to fight the evil in the world and there is a time to just let it be," Alexander said. "On the grand scheme of war, it would mean nothing, just more dying on the human behalf to appease the evil gods of war. But in a smaller scale, it would most likely tip the balance in the favor of humanity if the evil could be removed."

"And of our humanity? Where do we fit?" Dimitri asked.

A shell exploded closer than any previous ones.

"This is not the time or place for me to lecture you on where our kind fits into the world. The enemy shells are getting closer, a sure sign of approaching troops."

"Yes," Dimitri agreed. "We should head to our home."

"You have learned much over these past years," Alexander began as he placed his hand on Dimitri's shoulder. "With slyness and cunning, you and your group will live for a very long time and you will see the coming of our country."

"You speak as if you will not be there to see it with us," Dimitri said, the sincerity in his voice evidence of his concern. His feelings for Alexander were as great as the feelings he had many years ago for his own paternal father.

"One never knows for sure, but I have my suspicions. War and killing always make me feel unsettled."

"I detect a hidden meaning to your thoughts," Dimitri probed.

"You know me too well," Alexander said, "as well as a son knows his father. War is always the same. The politicians hide it within the words of diplomacy, but it never changes its face. It is an ugly thing in more ways than one. I worry about you and your group. If you are not careful, you will use it as an excuse to feed on the humans. It is addictive, like a narcotic, and shall instill the desire to always feed on humans. You will think of them as nothing more than a food source, rather than what you once were—and that would be your downfall."

"You have told us all about the temptation many times. Why are you so worried about it now?"

"Because I have seen those that have fallen to it. They became reckless and careless, thinking they were indestructible. Human blood makes you more powerful, yes; that is true, but it also inflates your ego, makes you feel superior. When you think you are untouchable, you become sloppy and the locals learn of you."

"And the locals, they can harm us?"

"We live in a precarious balance. They tolerate us as long as we don't cross over certain lines of decency. We both know that we can be dangerous to the other. So we keep the peace in our own way. If we don't, they have their ancient books that tell them of the old myths and legends of our kind. They go to their books from their ancestors and find information about what can be used against us."

"You have seen these books?" Dimitri asked.

"No, but I know that there are such things. We are not able to look upon the words on the paper without causing pain to our eyes. They are written in the light of day and cannot be looked upon by eyes that can only see in the darkness of night."

"Philosophical?"

"No, just one of the realities imposed upon us. There are certain things that I cannot explain, they just are. Why do you always search for more than what is there?"

"It's in my nature," Dimitri answered, with a sly grin. "I am naturally curious about everything."

"It is good to question our roles in this world. But for now, just accept it as fact. Philosophical issues are best left for debate, not to be tested."

"I understand," Dimitri said. "These books, are there not any in our library?"

"No. But believe me, they exist. You have been out in the fields and smelled the foulness in the air. They spread their elixir sometimes after we steal a cow. Do not believe that they don't know we are here because we do not sense them. That would be a fool's mistake. As I alluded to already, we have an unspoken agreement with the villagers."

"What should we do? How should this peace be maintained?"

"Instead of stealing, we shall go to town at night and buy the cattle when we need it. I am sure our money will be welcomed, and a little extra over the agreed purchase price will remove any inhibitions of doing business at night. That would solve..."

Suddenly their senses came alive and alert; danger lurked nearby, something was about to happen. They all raised their heads as if smelling the scent on the breeze, sensing the direction of the danger.

Dimitri felt a sense of helplessness and dread overwhelm him—he knew that death would visit them tonight.

"We must go—now!" Alexander exclaimed, although he knew it was too late to reach the underground shelter. He cursed himself for dawdling out here discussing philosophy instead of paying more attention to what was around them. Suddenly the Germans sprang from the woods, their guns firing wildly as intermediate shelling burst around them.

"The fools!" Dimitri exclaimed. "They attack while their own bombs rain death upon them."

"Never mind that now!" Alexander screamed. "They have found us and our sanctuary, they must be driven off!"

The bullets fell harmlessly around them and into them, causing no damage to their bodies. The Germans, still lost in the confusion of the uncoordinated attack in the dark, did not realize their enemies were impervious to their bullets.

"Immobilize them," Alexander ordered. "Do not kill unless you have to!"

Dimitri and his group did as they were told. The orders of Alexander still had an hypnotic affect of obedience upon them. They made quick work of the men, using their strength and agility to subdue the attackers. Several lay upon the ground unconscious as others who had witnessed the creatures resistance to bullets, began a flailing retreat.

At first Dimitri thought it was over, the enemy defeated for the moment. However, an intense feeling of impending danger struck him hard. He turned toward Alexander just as one of the remaining Germans fired an explosive round at him.

Time came to a near standstill as Dimitri saw the round travel toward Alexander, but he could do nothing. Even his speed could not best the velocity of the weapon. To attempt would cost them both their lives. Alexander looked toward Dimitri and acknowledged his concern with his usual expression of warmth.

*Stay where you are. You are ready to live your life on your own terms now. Remember—to live is everything...*

The projectile exploded at point blank range. Alexander's body was blown apart into hundreds of pieces that scattered over a large area.

"No!" Dimitri cried.

Unfrozen from the torture of time, Dimitri awoke with a rage that overcame all reasoning.

He immediately turned his attention to the German who had fired the weapon that had killed Alexander. The soldier was reloading his weapon. Dimitri flew across the distance that separated them. He snatched the weapon from the soldier's hands and ripped it apart. Taking his hands, he grasped the German by the neck and lifted him off the ground. Rage consumed him as his fangs extended to their maximum capacity. He wanted this man to know that he was going to die a miserable death.

"Nein! Nein!" yelled the German, apparently seeing the creature that held him in its true nature. Dimitri smiled at the man's realization of his death.

"Bitte ... gnade," the soldier pleaded.

"Please ... mercy! You dare to beg for your life!" Dimitri shouted, his voice harsh and animal like.

Holding him by the neck with one hand, he tore the man's right arm off and held it in front of him, the fingers still twitching with life.

The soldier screamed.

Dimitri tossed the arm to the ground, then tore the remaining one from its socket slowly, relishing each snap of bone and the tearing of muscles and flesh.

The soldier's eyes closed. Dimitri tossed him on the ground and began slapping him



over and over trying to revive him. He knew he wasn't dead and he wasn't done either. He wanted this man alive long enough to experience more agonizing pain. The soldier's eyes fluttered open. Dimitri smiled.

"You think your angels will come for you soon, but you will not see them. I deny you that privilege for what you have done." Dimitri dug his fingers into the man's eyes and tore them out of their sockets.

When Dimitri had finished, he looked around him and discovered that the others, Josip, Franjo, Andre, and Illiga, had also exhausted their fury on the soldiers. The area was covered in blood. Parts of bodies were strewn about like a poorly managed junkyard. His men were covered in the blood. Dimitri realized they had taken part in a feeding frenzy as they killed.

Dimitri focused on the blood that covered their faces.

"How can you drink the blood of these foul men? The killers of our beloved teacher and mentor?"

"It just happened," Josip said.

Josip stood next to Franjo, who also nodded his agreement with what Josip had said.

"And it will never happen again," Dimitri shouted. "I need your word on it tonight—right now."

Josip and Franjo said nothing.

Dimitri continued, "We must decide how we will live and what we shall be. I chose a life of peace by avoidance. I have seen enough killing to last me a lifetime. There will be no more. If you cannot agree with what I am suggesting—we part our ways now."

Dimitri turned and looked at Andre and Illiga. "What say you?"

"We will do as you ask, Dimitri," Andre said. "You have always led us and you shall always will."

Dimitri turned back to Franjo and Josip. "And you?" What is your decision?"

"We have the power to be greater than they are," Josip said.

"Power?" Dimitri asked. "You believe you have power over mankind?"

"Yes, is it not obvious to you? Look around you," Josip said, indicating the dead bodies that were strewn around them. "Yet you choose to hide from what you could be."

"And what is that? A murderer? A killer? Do you not see what the blood has done to

you? You're a fool if you believe that."

"And what would you choose, Dimitri?" Franjo asked.

"I choose life a life free of killing innocent people. I don't have the stomach for it. I was never a soldier, just a simple farmer, as we all were. Or have you forgotten that? Do you not recall our times in the field and the simple pleasures we got from that?"

Josip and Franjo looked downcast. Dimitri's words obviously shamed them.

"We can never have that life back," Dimitri added, "but I will take no more part of this killing. I choose a life of solitary pursuits, of achieving an understanding of what I am. It may never come, but I can live with that. If things change later—they change. But right now, you can go and do as you will; if you stay, you must follow what I say."

A long silence fell between them.

"I ... shall stay," Josip finally said. "We have been friends too long to do otherwise. You have always done what is right."

"And you, Franjo?" Dimitri asked. "Will you listen and follow my guidance?"

"Yes, I too shall stay," Franjo agreed.

"Good. We may have lost a father tonight, but we are still a family," Dimitri said.

He knelt at the pile of white phosphorus ash that was all that remained of Alexander. He scooped them up and held his hand out to the night breeze and let the wind carry them away.

"Good-bye, my friend. We will do as you have taught us and hope that we will find our place in this world where we can live in peace."

As the last ashes left his hand drifted off into the troubled night air of a country lost in its turmoil, Dimitri, hiding his red-tinged tears, returned to the sanctuary beneath the monastery as the others followed.

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## Chapter Thirty-seven

"There was no way to save him?" Reese asked.

"No. The explosive device dismembered him too badly for his restorative abilities to compensate."

"I'm sorry," Reese said.

Dimitri sensed that the feeling was genuine. "He was a good man," Dimitri said. "He taught us how to survive and how to fight the temptation of human blood."

"Why? I thought—"

"Of course you did," Dimitri said, before Reese could finish. "More of your myth and folklore. They say we steal the blood of babies, don't they? I suppose some of it is true, but we can live on the blood of animals just as well as we can on the blood that runs through your body."

Dimitri noted that Reese winced at the analogy. "I apologize for the terminology. I am trying to explain the best way so that you will understand."

Reese nodded.

"It is easy to become addicted to the human blood because of the effects. It's like a narcotic. It enhances our thinking and creative processes." Dimitri paused before continuing. "Don't you want to know?"

"What?" Reese asked.

"If I have drank human blood?"

"Have you?"

"Yes." Dimitri said calmly. "On occasion we would encounter some of the—how would you say ... the lesser quality people that the town had discarded, such as drunks and vagabonds. If their own kind saw no worth in them, what would it matter if we took them? It was as if the town had given them to us, saying, take them and save the world from any further foolishness or abuse of such idiots."

"But that was not the case with Idriz's daughters, was it?" Reese asked.

Dimitri eyed Reese with a cautious look. The sudden change of topic was an obvious ploy to see how he would react. "That was a blood feud that was carried

too far. Idriz's parents were makers of the elixir; they used it to keep us away from their cattle. When they did, we stayed away until things got quiet. Then we moved back in and stole some of their cattle for our food supply. This type of arrangement had been going on for years, passed through the generations. We avoided all other unnecessary contact with the villagers."

"So what happened? What went wrong?"

"Idriz's parents came to where we live in the mountains and Franjo found them before we did. He went crazy at the sight of them and killed them both before I could stop him. Idriz sought retribution and arranged a very purposeful trap that snared Franjo. He used a cow that he had continually fed the elixir to until the animal's blood became saturated with it. Franjo drained the animal and ingested the elixir. He died a horrible death. Josip swore to seek revenge, and I told him he could have it, but I never thought that he would take the daughters."

"But he did," Reese said.

"Yes," Dimitri said, as he rubbed his face. "I put the issue to the back of my mind. We all agreed to wait and came up with a better way to get food. We decided that in order to avoid a reoccurrence of the missing cattle, we would buy cattle from the villagers every few years and drive them up into the mountains. That way they all would believe that Idriz had killed the creature that lurked in the mountains."

"And did it work?"

"Yes. Things had been going well until Josip killed the girls. We had been content in a way to continue our lives hidden in the mountains. One thing about finding yourself immortal is you have a new perspective on all things. There is no more rush or hurry to do or see things. It is just a matter of catering to your fantasies in ways that most men could never dream of." Dimitri looked away and reflected on his words. After a few seconds, he turned back to Reese and said, "Now what can you tell me about our future?"

"You're not a fool, Dimitri. You're intelligent, you must know what people are thinking in regards to the powers that you possess and how they might benefit in a military use."

"Of course, the thoughts crossed our minds many times. You know what my country has gone through. It has always been in a constant state of bloodshed. But we do not get involved with the trivial matters of mankind anymore. As I stated earlier, we have a different perspective about the world around us."

"I don't think you will have a choice in that anymore. If your powers cannot be reproduced, you may be—"

"Asked to do things in order to keep on living," Dimitri said, finishing Reese's statement.

"Yes."

"You are not a fool either," Dimitri said. "You must surely realize that no good can come from it."

"I know. But in this case, I don't have a choice and neither do you."

"There are always choices, Commander Reese. No one knows that better than I do. However, it's what we do with those choices that truly defines our existence."

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## Chapter Thirty-eight

General Stone arrived early and without notice, a habit that he enjoyed. He liked catching people off-guard; it gave him an advantage he had found useful on more than one occasion. He especially found pleasure in that it didn't let the ass kissers and brown-nosing scum get ready for him, and there were so many of them these days. The military was just as much of a haven for them as any civilian corporation.

Stone was no fool and he realized that a certain amount of brown-nosing was required; after all, he had done his share on the way up. However, he saw it as a tool rather than an easy route to success. He thought how it was so closely related to the Italian Mafia and their skillful art of performing favors in order to have the ability to call in your own one day. He had managed to perform his favors carefully, used those paybacks to rise through the ranks by obtaining the jobs he required in the places that would reap him the most benefits based upon his performance rather than his empty promises.

He had called in a lot of favors during this latest operation in order to cover his tracks. He may have been in charge of one of the most powerful commands in the world, but it still required him to go outside his chain of command and that was where the danger lay. Most of his favors had come from his buddy, General Arthur Sorrell, who was in charge of the European Command responsible for the operation in Kosovo. Fortunately Arthur had had some rough times in the past where he had been helped out of some very damaging situations from his good friend, Stone. Now they were even and there would be no more help that might jeopardize Arthur's career. The debt had been paid in full.

As he left his rented vehicle that he had picked up at the commercial airport and approached the main entrance door to the facility, he removed the plastic card Commander Scott had sent him. He placed it in the slot and touched the pad with his thumb to authenticate himself to the security system. The door unlocked with a heavy metallic click, and he went inside as the first strokes of sunrise painted their red-orange glow across the horizon.

He knew the layout, having familiarized himself with the plans Scott had sent. He made his way to the control room, where he used his card and thumbprint again and entered into the secure area. He surprised a young Navy SEAL petty officer who had been looking at the remote camera monitors and making annotations in his desk log. At the sight of the general, the young sailor leaped from his seat as his eyes fixed upon the three shiny stars on the large man's shoulders.

"Sir," the sailor yelled, surprised. "May I be of assistance?"

"At ease, young man," Stone said. "I'm early and just poking around some, getting a look at the place." He glanced at the clock on the wall; the time was 0615 in the morning. "I would have liked to have gotten here when it was still night so I could have gotten a look at our visitors."

"We have all of it recorded," the young sailor began, trying to be as helpful to his superior officer as he could. "Would you like me to play it for you?"

"Yes ... I think I would. What did they do yesterday, or I should say last night?" he asked.

"Mostly medical examinations, sir. Major Barkley took a lot of samples and conducted physicals on them."

"That sounds fine. Let me see it."

"Yes, sir." The young sailor took a compact disc and placed it in a player that was not in use. He indicated the monitor that would display the recording.

"Thank you, son," Stone said. "Perhaps you should return to your station. If I need anything else, I will let you know."

"Yes, sir," he said and returned to his seat, where he observed the monitors and went back to entering information into his logbook.

The video displayed the scene of what appeared to be any ordinary person getting a physical, with the exception that this man was wearing a collar around his neck of some sort. The man on the screen in the blue jumpsuit sat on the table as the doctor examined him. Stone watched as the men in the white lab jackets drew blood for testing. The general felt disappointed at this initial view of these creatures he had risked so much for. He had imagined they would be different, perhaps looking more like a beast of some sort, with dominant features or bulging biceps or something. But instead, the man sitting on the table appeared to be nothing more than a plain man, with the exception of the skin color being slightly paler than an average human.

How would these creatures help him? Where were the powers that they were supposed to have? How could they help him in achieving his goal? Had he been wrong in pursuing this action without a field test that would have confirmed or denied what they thought about these creatures? If this information ever leaked out, he would be finished and retirement to some obscure life would be bestowed upon him. This had to work; this had to be the way that the United States would regain its seat of power and world dominance. The U.S. needed to stop taking all the crap from these third world shit-holes that were getting their hands on weapons that threatened the country.

"Found what you're looking for, General?" Reese asked, as he walked into the control room.

"Commander Reese, how are you?" Stone asked. "And no, I haven't seen anything yet that says that they are what you claim they might be."

"Stick around for feeding time. That's always an eye-opening experience to what these creatures are."

"But what does that prove? They drink blood. It's a strange world out there, Commander. I need something more."

"Unfortunately, we didn't have a video recording of the initial attack when one of them took out two SEALs in a matter of seconds as if they were children."

"The men could have been careless and the creature just lucky," Stone said, with a shrug. "We need some kind of test of their abilities."

"Why the hurry, sir? We've only been here for a few days."

"Do you have any idea how much this is costing, Commander?" Stone asked sharply. "I can understand your personal interest because of your background in studying these ... creatures or whatever they are. But I need something to keep the money flowing."

Reese had no response to that. He knew the costs must have been staggering for the resources expended on the capture and the captivity—taxpayer dollars at work. And he had to admit his personal interest was greater than his military interest. For now, the key thing was to keep Stone engaged with what was happening. Keep him interested.

"I understand, sir." Reese said. "If I may suggest, perhaps we should get the doctor's briefing and Lieutenant Johnson's report. Then we can figure out our next move."

"Fine, Commander Reese."

"How about some breakfast first?" Reese asked. "The briefing is not scheduled for another two hours and this is probably going to be a long day."

"Lead on, Commander." Reese led Stone into the small dining area within the facility. The Navy cook on duty took their orders and they sat down at an isolated table. Reese drank a large cup of coffee; he had been up all night with the creatures and was fighting exhaustion with the caffeine. He had assumed he was going to be able to grab a couple of hours of sleep, since Stone was not scheduled to show up until nine. But here the general sat and he would have to just suck it up and try and get through the day.

"So tell me, Commander, are you still thinking about retiring in a year or so?"

"Yes, sir." Reese was caught off-guard by the personal question.

"Why is that, Commander? You have an opportunity to pick up captain in



what—two or three years?"

"Yes, sir, that's correct. It's just a time for a change. I've been thinking about teaching, maybe even writing a book," Reese said as he felt his guard drop at the unusual interest Stone was showing in his life.

"A book? What kind?" Stone asked.

"It's a comparative work of myth and folklore and how they are related to the modern world."

"It sounds interesting—and how appropriate for you that you are involved with this operation."

"You could say that, sir," Reese answered cautiously.

"I just did, Commander." Stone's tone changed. It became irritated, his eyes darting back and forth rapidly. His body lifted out of his chair as he leaned close to Reese's face. "You realize that you cannot write anything about this operation until it is declassified, if it ever is."

"Yes, sir, I understand that," Reese answered. He would not let himself be lured into complacency by the general's personal questions again.

"Good." Stone re-seated himself. "I just wanted to be sure of that because if you weren't, I would have to remove you from this operation."

"Yes, sir, I imagine you would," Reese said, trying to keep his voice neutral.

The matter-of-fact tone Stone had used made Reese think the man would do whatever he had to in order to reach the end he wanted.

"General, if I may ask, what are your intentions with these creatures? I read the note you placed in the briefing package you gave me when I was heading to Kosovo and I have to admit, it was somewhat disturbing," Reese said.

"Oh, that," Stone said in a casual tone again. "I just wanted to get you thinking that's all. Pretty wild thoughts, huh?"

"Yes, sir. They certainly were. So you're telling me it was what—just idle chatter?"

One of the cooks arrived with their food.

"Ah, our food is here," Stone said. "Let's eat and leave this business talk for later, Commander."

They ate in silence; it was obvious they were both deep in thought. However, Reese's eyes were drawn continually back to the glass of liquid Stone drank.

"What's wrong?" Stone asked, noticing Reese's stare.

"Oh ... nothing," Reese said, his eyes still on the glass.

"It's good, you should have some," Stone said. "Nothing like a good glass of tomato juice."

"No, thanks," Reese said. There was something about its deep red color that reminded Reese too much about his new acquaintances and the likeness in disposition he saw in Stone: the plan within plans.

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## Chapter Thirty-nine

The briefing was in the main conference room of the facility. Commander Reese and General Stone entered and found Commander Scott, Lieutenant Johnson and Major Barkley present. They all rose as Stone entered.

"Carry on, gentleman," he barked. "I'm in the mood for some good news and I hate to be disappointed. Who wants to start?"

"I think the medical aspect is the most relevant," Reese said. "Major Barkley, please begin."

"Yes, sir," he said hesitantly, his eyes reflected an uncertainty that obviously had him considering his manner of presentation and approach. "Unfortunately, my report is not as conclusive as I would like."

Reese figured Barkley would cut to the heart of the matter.

"These creatures," he continued, "have had a full battery of blood work and analysis, along with standard motor control and flexibility tests. They have the best dexterity and motor control movement that I have ever seen. If I were to guess, I would say that they have the strength and endurance of three to five men, maybe more. In addition, all of their senses are highly acute, much more than our own. It's as if they inherited animal characteristics such a strong sense of smell, anticipation of danger and so forth. Quite amazing."

"That's extraordinary," Stone said, his face was riveted on Barkley's every word.

"Yes, sir, it is. But," he said hesitantly. "I cannot tell you *why* they have this ability. Or why if you inflict a minor injury to them that it heals incredibly fast. During the blood work, by the time I filled one tube and went to inject the next, the hole had healed up and closed."

"Perfect," Stone said, elated. "Does it occur at the same rate every time?"

"It depends on the size of the wound," Barkley answered. "The smaller the wound, the quicker it heals."

"So they cannot be killed?" Scott asked.

"They can die," Barkley said. "We put a vile of the blood out in the sunlight, and it boiled itself off in a matter of seconds. Also, it appears that their bodies cannot recover from massive wounds. For example, if they were close enough to an

explosion, it could kill them by decapitation or severe dismemberment."

"How did you determine that?" Scott asked.

"Through deduction and information obtained from them. The one called Dimitri, he said that he saw one of them killed that way during World War II," Reese said.

"World War II?" Stone asked.

"Yes, sir. From what we have been able to determine from what they have told us so far and by the tests, they are more than a hundred years old."

"Amazing!" Stone exclaimed. His face lit up like a child's on Christmas morning. However, the excitement quickly faded as he asked his next question. "But doctor, surely there must be some explanation for these attributes?"

"Their blood has to be the key. It is quite different. Unlike ours, it has no living cells. The living cells they ingest from the blood from a living organism all die, and that causes them to require more living blood to sustain them. That is how the cycle works, or at least how I believe it works. You have to understand, General, that this is all new ground we are covering."

"Something in their bodies causes the blood to die?" Reese asked.

"That's my guess," Barkley said. "They don't use the organs that they were born with, not in any way that I can tell. They don't require food or water to live nor do they require to relieve their bodies of any waste."

"What about their ... ah ... reproduction organs?" Scott asked.

"They no longer function. As far as how that works, perhaps Commander Reese would be more of an authority."

"According to legend and myth, they breed by taking a human to the point of death by draining the blood from them," Reese said. "Then the human drinks the dead blood from the creature and that begins the cycle of transformation. The creature that created them becomes the master and those that were created are subservient to this master. Please keep in mind that this is purely legend, but hopefully I can learn if this is in fact. I have had conversations with Dimitri that indicates that an older creature, someone called Alexander, created them which would make him the master. However, he was killed in World War II."

"So, Major Barkley," Stone said. "What you are telling me is that we cannot figure out what gives them the power that they possess?"

"Not at this time, sir," Barkley answered. "And if I may speculate, I don't believe there is a medical reason for it."

Stone looked incredulous. "There must be a reason why they are the way they are. You're not going to go off in some mumbo-jumbo bullshit area, are you?"

Barkley nervously glanced at Reese and then spoke. "Some things go beyond normal reasoning and medicine, sir. I don't believe we'll find a scientific explanation."

Stone waved a hand of dismissal and said, "We'll see about that issue. Are you positive there is no way to duplicate or replicate these powers?"

"Not without subscribing to their method of reproduction that Commander Reese spoke about."

"Thank you, Major," Stone said. He turned to Johnson. "Your report, Johnson."

"During their physicals, we installed a more advanced collar device. It provides a range of two to three miles so if they try to escape, the devices will activate from a safe distance. It also has a more sensitive anti-removal device. There is available technology that would increase this function if we so choose to use it. The elixir that was developed by the civilian is an obvious deterrent against them trying anything against us. We have positive control over distance as long as we have potent elixir or as long as the creatures believe it to be."

"This elixir, have we learned to duplicate it yet?" Stone asked.

"Not quite," Reese said. "Idriz has production methods that we have not been able to duplicate yet. He insists on playing an active part of the control of the creatures; a way of taunting them with death because they killed his daughters as part of a blood feud between the creatures and his family. I had to promise him that he could speak with the creature known as Josip in order to get him to produce a new batch of elixir. He's also agreed to put together explicit instructions on its development."

"Offer him money," Stone said, with a wave of his hand.

"It's not money he wants, General," Reese said. "I think he wants to inflict as much pain as possible on the creatures."

"I'll talk to him," Stone said. "I'll get him to see reason. Besides if he keeps the fear in the creatures, then all the better for us in using and controlling them."

Reese was about to object, but thought he would save his reservations for another time when he was alone with Stone.

"Are there any other comments?" Stone asked.

"I have one," Reese said. "Just a note of concern. All security measures must be adhered to—to ensure the creatures aren't allowed to get any human blood. That would complicate things and put everyone at risk."

"Of course not, Commander," Stone said, with an exaggerated air of shock. "Aside from the obvious reason, do you have any other concerns in this matter?"

"From what we can tell, these creatures have subsisted mainly on animal blood. It's possible that the taking of human blood causes a development of some kind of a

superiority complex, and makes them more dangerous, such as a drug addict who uses enhancement drugs that remove their fear and makes them reckless and—"

"Thank you, Commander. Are there any more questions?"

The men fell silent at the sudden rebuke upon Reese.

"So," Stone began. "Gentleman, from what I am hearing, we have positive control over these creatures and we should be able to control them and to put them through a operational test."

"An operational test to determine what?" Reese asked.

"Any military benefit," Stone said. "Why else have we gone through all of this?"

Reese did not answer. Instead he glanced at Johnson whose face was, as usual, motionless as he stared straight ahead.

"We'll arrange a test for tonight; something simple but enough to show us what they can do. Make it happen, gentleman!"

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## Chapter Forty

Johnson and Reese sat in the common area with Dimitri and his men.

"They have arranged a test for you and your men," Reese said to Dimitri. "You are to attack a defensive position that has been set up, penetrate inside, kill the target and return without being detected."

"A test? It sounds more like a game," Dimitri said.

"In a way," Reese said. "Lieutenant Johnson will brief you on the particulars of the mission."

Johnson moved away from the group and toward a table where there was a map laid out. Dimitri and his men still remained seated with Reese.

"They want to see how their specimens work, is that it?" Dimitri smiled. A chuckle came from Josip, who had so far remained silent. "Why bother?"

"If you don't go through with it," Reese said. "There will be no sense in maintaining this facility."

"A threat?" Dimitri's eyebrows rose.

"No. Not from me, but as I told you earlier, I am not in charge. If there is no benefit derived, then there is no justification for expenditure."

"When do we meet who is in charge?" Dimitri asked.

"Perhaps after the test."

"Then that is reason enough to go through with this charade." Dimitri motioned for his men to assemble around where Johnson waited to show them the specifics of the mission.

"This is the building," Johnson began with military formality, as he indicated the position on the map. "You and your men will be dropped off here, approximately two miles away. From there, you make your way through their outlying defenses. After you clear the preliminary defenses, you will find guards stationed at these areas," he indicated red X's that had been marked on the map. "Once through them, there are motion detectors here, here and here." He pointed to areas he had circled on the map. "The target will be located somewhere within this building. You will spray him with the paint gun indicating a positive kill, then return to the point that you were dropped at. Any questions?"

"We will be armed with weapons?" Josip asked.

"Paint guns," Johnson said. "They shoot a ball of paint. Upon impact, they release their material and mark the person as a confirmed kill."

Josip laughed at the explanation and received a stern look from Dimitri.

"Clothing and equipment will be provided to each of you. We leave within the hour for the drop-off point."

"One more thing," Reese said. "I know how fast you are. You might be able to escape, but you cannot hide from the tracking devices in your collars. Any deviation from the direction of the target will result in activation of the devices."

Dimitri looked at Reese curiously. "And whose finger will be poised on the button?"

"Get ready to go," Reese said.

\* \* \* \*

Two hours later, Dimitri and his men were dropped at the specified spot near the ocean front of the base.

"I'll wait here. Good luck," Johnson said to the creatures. He received no responses.

The four men headed off until they were out of direct sight of Johnson, and then stopped.

"We play this madness?" Josip asked, incredulous, as he held out the weapon in front of him.

"For now," Dimitri answered. "Remember, learn what we can from them and when we are ready, we will disappear. But tonight, we must give them a good show."

Josip did not respond, but Dimitri could feel his gaze upon him as he indicated the direction for them to go. They moved swiftly and without sound. They passed through the first line of defenses easily. There were six men armed with night-vision goggles, but Dimitri and his men gave off no heat that would allow them to be detected. They approached the building that held their target. The four men crouched together outside the beams of strong light that penetrated the darkness and illuminated the approach to the building.

"You will take the guards out with the paint guns," Dimitri indicated to Andre and Iliga. "Scale the walls where they are not looking; they do not expect an attack from their walled areas because it offers no grips for anyone to climb. We will wait here until you give the sign that all is clear, then you act like guards while Josip and I go inside. And remember," Dimitri said, putting an arm on each of their shoulders, "do not injure them, understand?"

Dimitri received looks of confusion from the two.



"We must show control, my friends. If we appear reckless and uncooperative, that will make them watch us that much more. Understand?"

"Yes," Andre said, while Illiga nodded his head in agreement. They disappeared into the night.

Dimitri and Josip waited in the darkness. Dimitri was confident that they would do as they were told. He had Josip stay with him so he could keep an eye on his ill-tempered friend.

"Fools," Josip cursed. "We could have simply marched in the front entrance and killed them before they knew what was happening. Why do we waste time?"

"Yes, we could have," Dimitri agreed. "But we don't want to give away all our secrets now, do we? All we have to do is enough to get the job done."

Josip smiled at Dimitri's cunning as the signal from Andre and Illiga was given.

"Let's go," Dimitri said.

They glided over the motion detectors which were easily visible to their vision and entered the building. There was a guard seated at a desk. A radio blared as he wrote in a logbook. Dimitri indicated for Josip to take him. Josip moved forward just as the guard looked up. Josip locked his eyes onto his and the guard did not move as Josip came towards him. When he was close enough, he raised and fired the paint gun at the mesmerized guard.

As the red paint dripped from the guard's clothing, Josip said, "You're dead," and he bared his exposed fangs to the man. "Be quiet now and just lay there or I will get angry." His eyes focused on the dark red paint with longing and licked his lips with his tongue. The guard watched in fear as Josip inched closer.

"Enough," Dimitri said. "Let's finish this." He pointed toward the interior of the building. They moved forward, their feet not making any sound.

Within minutes they heard voices coming from a room, two doors down in the corridor. They passed by the first and went into the second. The men in the room gazed up, startled by their appearance, and went for their weapons. But Dimitri moved quickly into the room and sprayed them with bursts from the paint gun.

"Which of you is the designated target?" Dimitri asked.

"We're dead," one of them said as they lay on the ground. But Dimitri noticed the smiles on their faces instead of looks of defeat.

"Josip!" Dimitri yelled, realizing that they had made a mistake. "Check the room we passed."

Instead of going back the way he came, Josip charged the wall that joined the two rooms. He smashed through the wood and dry wall to find two more men preparing

to exit through a door that led to the outside. He grabbed them both, one by each hand, and threw them toward the way that he had come, through the broken wall. They landed a few feet from where Dimitri stood. Josip charged toward them, his face enraged with fury that Dimitri knew meant trouble.

"Stop!" Dimitri cried, but Josip kept coming with a red rage that filled his eyes. His teeth were bared and his fingernails had elongated into sharp claws. As he moved toward the nearest man, Dimitri slapped Josip with a force that sent him flying. Josip got up, and Dimitri saw that the rage had not passed completely.

"Go out into the corridor and wait," Dimitri said to Josip.

Josip didn't move—his eyes remaining fixated on the two cowering men.

"Now, Josip!" Dimitri screamed.

Josip shook his head as if Dimitri's words had caused him pain.

"Go, Josip," Dimitri said, not as forcefully as he had earlier. "I will join you shortly"

When Josip was gone, Dimitri used the paint gun on the two men to confirm the kills that would end this part of the charade. He then threw the weapon on the ground in disgust. He left them and joined Josip in the corridor.

"Let's go," he told Josip. "I trust there will be no more outbursts?"

Josip shook his head and said, "I guess I got a little excited."

"Yes, I believe you did. But if you don't learn to control your temper, we will all be killed. They must believe they have us under control. I don't want them to know the full range of our strengths or weaknesses."

"I understand," Josip said, obviously incensed by his own behavior. "I will do better."

"Let's get Andre and Iliga and get back. We have done what we had to do. The show is over for the moment."

On their trip back to their pick-up point, Dimitri indicated for Andre and Iliga to take out the guards they had easily circumvented. He knew that this was not necessary, but would give an appearance that they were bragging or that they were vain about their abilities. A weakness the Americans would think they might be able to use against them.

They met Johnson and their transport vehicle at the pick-up point. Johnson appeared surprised to see them so soon. He looked at his watch and then at them.

"How the hell did you do that so..." He stopped his statement when even he realized the senselessness of it.

"Please take us back," Dimitri said, ignoring the half-finished statement. "My men are hungry after expending so much energy. It is time for us to feed. The feast of the victors, wouldn't you say, Lieutenant Johnson?"

Dimitri wanted to learn more about this military man. Find out what his weaknesses were, so they could use against him later. Johnson's reaction to their return indicated both surprise and awe. This would be the beginning of determining how they could use him.

Johnson looked at the group with an apparent admiration that Dimitri thought he usually held in reserve, only giving it to those who had performed superbly in the field. And why not? They had completed their task successfully and in a mere fraction of the amount of time that their captors had anticipated. There were no red splotches of paint staining their clothing. They have seen what they have wanted to see.

"Get in the back of the truck," Johnson said.

As they got in the truck, Dimitri waited to be last. Before he jumped in, he turned to Johnson. "From one warrior to another," Dimitri said. "We both have an appreciation for the art of military tactics."

"Yes," Johnson said, "apparently so."

Dimitri smiled and hopped in.

Johnson closed the back of the vehicle and took his place in the cab with the driver. He instructed the driver to return to the facility.

As the vehicle made its way back, Dimitri felt satisfied for the moment. He had sensed what he wanted to from Johnson and he thought he had found a leverage point that they could use to their advantage. Johnson admired them.

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## Chapter Forty-one

"I'd call that a damned successful test," General Stone said. His entire body exhibited excitement and pleasure at the successful outcome of the mission. "In fact, with a little training in tactics they could be operational in no time." He looked at Reese, Stone, Johnson and Barkley as they sat in the briefing room going over the results of the test.

"Lieutenant Johnson," he said. "From an operational platoon commander, what is your assessment?"

Johnson hesitated before he spoke, glancing sideways at Reese.

Reese gave him a stern glare, hoping that he would not fuel Stone's enthusiasm any further.

"They achieved the objective well above expected parameters that were set for them," Johnson said, in a straightforward tone of voice.

Reese exhaled, appreciating the professional tone of Johnson's answer.

"However," Johnson continued, in a voice that now reflected his own pleasure and enthusiasm. "I would like to also say that our own forces could not have performed as well."

"Commander Reese, any comment?"

Reese knew he had to be careful on how he answered. If he went too far in opposition, Stone would not like it. He had to find some sort of middle ground for the moment. He remembered what Dimitri had said when he told them about the test. To see how their specimens acted.

"General, I concur with the findings and results of the test; however, I think that if any further thoughts as to the use of this team in the future is to have any success, then some type of terms will have to be arranged with them."

"Terms? What the hell are you talking about, Reese?"

"I don't think that the threat of death for not performing what you dictate to them will have the effect you desire. I would suggest a—"

"I have a way of finding the weak points in people, Commander," Stone interrupted. "Once I talk to them, I'll figure out something."

*Talk is good, Reese thought. If I keep everyone talking, it might mean less action for the moment. Perhaps once Stone gets a chance to see how Dimitri is, he might move more cautiously.*

"Then may I suggest that now might be a good time? That was the bargain I struck with them in order to go on this test mission," Reese interjected boldly. "The leader, Dimitri, wants to speak with you."

Stone eyed Reese speculatively for several seconds and then spoke. "Well then, we shouldn't keep them waiting." He turned toward the rest of the men and said, "Thank you, gentlemen, for your time. Commander Reese, take me to our friends."

They proceeded toward the confinement area of the creatures. Reese wondered what Stone would use for leverage against them. The look he had in his eyes as he saw the creatures complete the mission was one of awe and enthusiasm. He had plans in his mind; there was no doubt about that. And Johnson was acting differently as well. It appeared as if he admired the creatures in some way. But Reese thought he knew Johnson enough to think otherwise.

As Reese thought about Johnson, they turned the final corner to find Idriz Laupki waiting outside the door to the confinement area along with Corporal Brosnev. Reese felt his stomach lurch at the sight of him, knowing that he wanted access now, as was the agreement of their bargain.

Earlier, Barkley had informed Reese that he had received a new batch of the elixir, with explicit instructions on how to make it. Idriz had lived up to his half of the bargain. Now Reese would have to live up to his.

Reese made introductions and the interpreter translated, but Idriz made no response; instead, he pointed at his throat.

"He has laryngitis," Brosnev said. "He said he inhaled some fumes from the new batch of elixir that he made. It caused his throat to become sore and he lost his voice. Major Barkley said it would be temporary."

"Please pass along my personal thanks for the good work he has been doing for us," Stone said to Brosnev, who quickly translated it. Idriz nodded and smiled but emitted no sound. "He is welcome to join us. I know that was part of the bargain for the work he has done."

Again the translator spoke and Idriz bowed his head.

"Sir, perhaps now is not the best time," Reese said.

"Are you telling me it is not safe, Commander? All these safeguards you have should be more than enough."

"No, sir, that's not the problem," Reese said. He lowered his voice so that only Stone would hear him. "It's just that there is bad blood between this man and the

creatures, and if you intend to bargain with them to reach—"

"Bargain? No, Commander, I don't intend to bargain," he said, his cheeks flushed with anger. "I think you used the correct word earlier. I plan to dictate to them. Now let's go."

Reese hesitated for several seconds before sliding his card and pressing his thumbprint to the scanner. Before he entered the confinement area, he turned toward Brosnev and spoke in a low voice.

"Corporal, you stay out here. Call Lieutenant Johnson for me and tell him to meet us here—ASAP."

"Yes, sir."

The door slid open and the three men entered. Brosnev was on the phone locating Lieutenant Johnson, as one of the guards stood watch at the door. As they entered the common area, they found the creatures sitting and talking amongst themselves.

Dimitri rose to meet them and placed a hand on Josip's shoulder so that he would stay seated. Reese saw a look pass between the two creatures. Dimitri was nervous about something; probably about the presence of Idriz Laupki, just as Reese was.

"Dimitri," Reese said. "This is General Stone. He is in charge of what happens around here. You said you wished to speak with him."

"Ah ... General. It is an honor to meet you," Dimitri said. "If I may suggest, this other man," he said, pointing at Idriz, "should not be in here. It is not a good time."

"This man is part of my team," Stone said as he squared his shoulders in an obvious attempt to set the tone for the conversation. "And if I want him—"

"Forgive me, General," Dimitri continued, "but my men have been on your little test and they are wound up. It happens sometimes and it takes a while for them to calm down. The sight of this man—"

"Who do you think you are?" Stone boomed. "You can't tell me who I can bring in here."

"It is him," Josip said. "The one that killed Franjo. He comes in here to taunt us with that fact."

Idriz smiled but did not say anything as he locked gazes with Josip. Then he said something in his native tongue that Reese did not understand, but it was clear that Josip understood perfectly.

*What the hell?* Surprise flooded Reese. Idriz was supposed to have lost his voice, and yet he sounded clear as always.

Josip rose from his chair and was at Idriz before Reese had blinked. His hands

clasped the man's throat, but Idriz still smiled even as Josip slit it open with his long fingernail. Blood flowed a deep red down Idriz's throat as Josip began to drink voraciously. Idriz laughed and Reese saw his tongue coated with blood.

Reese awoke from the stupor and turned to the observation window of the control room.

"Activate the—"

Before Reese finished his sentence, Josip screamed, dropping Idriz onto the ground. Johnson and his standby security team burst into the room and surrounded the remaining three creatures. Idriz fell into a heap, blood still squirting from the main artery in his throat. Josip's skin exploded into a ball of flame which consumed his flesh.

Barkley came running in after Johnson and his men. He knelt over Idriz, searching for a pulse in the mess of flesh that had been his neck.

"He's dead," Barkley said.

Reese turned to Josip, who was nothing more than a heap of burning flesh.

Dimitri knelt at the side of his friend, shaking his head as blood-filled tears flowed down his cheeks. Andre and Iliga joined him, placing their hands on his shoulder and not saying a word.

General Stone appeared unaffected at the event that had taken only seconds to transpire. But Reese knew that beneath that stoic demeanor, he was plotting and planning even as death lay within five feet of him. He had now seen up close the capability of his new team.

Reese turned to Johnson. "My compliments to the control room. They activated the collar just—"

"They didn't," exclaimed Johnson. "I told them to hold off until I was in the room and signaled. I was going to try and resolve the conflict before ordering the activation."

"But if the collar wasn't activated, how did the elixir get released?"

Barkley looked up from Idriz's body. "I think Idriz drank the elixir. His throat and mouth tissues show signs of massive bleeding. There is scar tissue, too. He's been drinking the elixir for a while."

"He goaded Josip into attacking," Dimitri said. "Just as he did to Franjo with the poisoned cow ... except this time, he was the bait."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Stone asked.

Reese explained. "Idriz knew that if he could get into this room, he would have a

chance to kill Josip. He saturated his body with the elixir, and then said something to Josip to rile him. He knew that if Josip attacked, either the control room would activate the collar, or Josip would get the elixir from him. Either way, he got what he wanted.

"Death?" Stone exclaimed. "He wanted to die? He's nothing more than a farmer and now a fool to give up his life!"

"No, sir, not death, but revenge," Reese said. His voice was stern and angry at the general's easy dismissal of Idriz's death, as well as the loss of Josip. "He had nothing else in life to look forward to except seeing the killer of his daughters punished. He carefully plotted this entire scenario out from the moment he walked into Camp Bondsteel to report the deaths of his two daughters. He knew that he couldn't get to Josip on his own, so he let us do it for him. He used us all the way. He hid the manner in which he made the elixir in order to ensure that he would accompany us back to the States. He was thorough as well as methodical. Not bad for a person we thought of as just a local farmer from—"

"That's enough, Commander," General Stone said, his voice indicating his strong dislike of Reese's tone. "I get your point."

"Yes, sir," Reese answered.

"Bring Dimitri to the conference room."

"Sir? After what just—"

"Just do it, Commander," Stone said, as he turned and left the room.



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## Chapter Forty-two

"Please accept my apology for the loss of your friend," Stone said to Dimitri. The two of them sat at large table across from each other in a conference room. General Stone had thought it best to talk to Dimitri alone, against protests from both Reese and Johnson. "We did not expect the man to act the way he did," Stone continued. "However, as much as we do mourn the loss of him, he has paid the price for inappropriate behavior."

"Is that supposed to be some kind of conciliation?" Dimitri asked angrily.

"No, of course not," Stone said. "But I saw in the reports from Commander Reese that Josip attacked and killed two other men. I surmised it was only a matter of time before he would have tried to kill others." Stone leaned forward on his elbows and continued. "And I was right because I know people. I understand the motivation that drives us, and that includes you and your kind. You are not any different then the rest of us."

Dimitri looked into the cold hard eyes of General Stone. He knew this man was here to not offer his sympathy, but to get to the heart of what he wanted. But Dimitri thought along the same lines; he needed to find this man's leverage point.

"Possibly you understand," Dimitri answered. He lowered his voice to a non-threatening tone. "But no one should have to die like that. Especially a soldier." He wanted to see what Stone's reaction would be.

Stone stared at Dimitri with a curious look and said, "A soldier?"

"Yes," Dimitri affirmed. "That is what we were, more in spirit than in body, but soldiers of our country nonetheless."

"You wanted to fight to keep your country from the invading bastards, isn't that correct?" Stone asked.

"Yes," Dimitri said, and he saw the look in Stone's eyes that he needed. This would be the way to lead him to get what he wanted, which would ultimately get them their freedom. "It was a long time ago..."

"Things are not the same anymore as they were in the time you marched off to fight. Politics have worsened. The soldiers have become the politician's puppets."

"Ah," Dimitri said. "There is the obvious battleground and there is the other."

"Yes, yes. You understand."

"So are we to become a politician's tool?" Dimitri asked. "Is that what you want from me and my men?"

"I want you to fight for my country," Stone blurted out, as if the words had been confined too long inside of him and he had been waiting for the perfect opportunity to shout them out. "Fight for what I believe!"

"Fight?" Dimitri questioned. "We are but a handful of men; soldiers briefly, with nothing but farming in our blood. How can we turn the great tide of the West for you? You have the strongest force in the world today."

"That is true, but we cannot use them where we need to because of these political borders that have been set up to protect the rich and bureaucratic assholes of the world."

"And where are these borders?" Dimitri asked.

"Many places, but first I would attack those that are nearest to us. Those that send their drugs into our country. Drugs that people are tricked into using and then used to kill themselves."

"What are these drugs?" Dimitri asked.

"They rob the body and mind of life. They are substances that people place inside of their bodies thinking they will remove all their problems. But then they become a slave to the substance and it drives their lives to the point of death. It's a poison, nothing more. Those that make it know it and they thrive on the deaths of others. They don't use guns to do the killing, but it is killing just the same. This is war."

"I detect a strong emotion to this commitment," Dimitri said, probing further. "There is more."

"My daughter, she was killed by these drugs," Stone said.

"You seek revenge then?"

"No—it is not only that," Stone said and pounded his fists on the table top. "I want an end to the madness that is destroying us!"

"You are a man who cares about your country and its people," Dimitri said. "It sounds like a noble cause that you carry upon your shoulder, but..."

"But what?"

"Surely this cannot be sanctioned by your politicians."

Stone laughed bitterly. "No, of course not. The politicians think they will resolve the problem by diplomatic means, by giving the governments of these countries money

to make them fight this drug war. What they don't want to talk about is the economic balance that is involved. These shit countries would fall apart if they didn't participate in the drug trade. It takes lots of people to grow, manufacture, package and then move the product to market. If we put an end to the drugs, these country's economies would fall apart. So instead, we act like we are doing something to make the public think we are actively engaged in fighting drugs but we're not. The children are dying and all we are worried about is fucking public relations."

"So how can you fight this without backing from your government?" Dimitri asked.

"Simple. They wouldn't know about it directly. I have the ability by my position to keep all of this secret. This would be a clandestine operation. I would be in charge of the team. I would pick the missions, outfit you and your men with whatever you need."

"I see," Dimitri said. "You have obviously thought this out very carefully."

"I have," Stone agreed. "You don't get as far as I do without being able to obtain and use leverage."

"Yes," Dimitri said. "Leverage is very important—very important. However, you have given me no reason, besides death, why my men and I should engage in this endeavor of yours."

"You said you are a soldier," Stone said.

"Yes, we were. Soldiers who wanted to free our country."

"You cannot help your own country," Stone said pointedly. "They need to settle their internal squabbles. But you can help mine. You can rid the world of those that prey on humanity. It will be a long war until we get all of them. And when it is done and things have settled down in your own country, I'll send you back, well-trained and prepared for modern warfare. You will be able to shape your country into what you want it to be."

"I see," Dimitri said. "You offer us a truly noble cause."

"That's the long term plan. In the short term, I will ensure that you and your men have all the human blood of the enemy you want," Stone added. "In addition, I will afford you and your men every accommodation that you may desire, within reason of course."

"An attractive proposition."

"It is, considering the other option," Stone said coldly.

"Death," Dimitri said. "Why is it that the concept of death never leaves the bargaining table? It is like your drugs in a way—the silent killer."

"Yes," Stone said and nodded.

A silence settled upon the two men in the room as they sat and stared at each other.

Dimitri sat quietly, appearing to think it over, even though his mind had been made up before they had began the conversation. He knew that he and his men never had the option of choice. They would have to do what the general wanted; however, their dialogue had established a deeper meaning between them. Dimitri doubted that Stone had any intention of offering them anything in terms of freedom. Yet he had and now the path had been laid for him to ask for more.

"It appears that your offer to utilize our talents for the good of your country is the best option of the two," Dimitri said.

"I thought you would agree," Stone said. "I—"

"I hope that you will find it to your benefit to help us adjust to this country so that we can work efficiently," Dimitri interjected.

"What do you mean?" Stone asked.

"We have been out of touch for a very long time. We have an idea of what the world is like around us, but much is missing. We would like to be taught how things have progressed; especially the technological advancements."

"So you want to go back to school, so to speak?"

"Yes, and we would like Commander Reese to be our teacher."

"Why Reese?"

"He best understands our background and he can build upon that during our education."

"I'll think about it," Stone said. "Commander Reese is not exactly on the same line of thought as I am on certain matters."

"And the man called Johnson. Will he remain our operational point of contact? I ask that because he, too, is familiar with us and understands us."

"Johnson is a good man. I want him to stay and be team leader on all operations."

"Excellent," Dimitri said. "We will treat him as one of our own."

"Then we have come to terms?"

"Yes," Dimitri said, and held out his hand.

Stone smiled as he accepted his hand, but Dimitri watched as the smile quickly faded from his face as he felt the coldness of his hand touch his.

"Now, if you will forgive me, General, it is time to feed. Would you care to join us?" Dimitri smiled, as he intentionally showed a portion of his fangs.

"No, thank you," Stone said. "I will have someone escort you back." Then he rose and left the room.

As Dimitri waited for someone to escort him back, he thought how times had changed and now how they must change as well. *We use each other to attain our goals, but your thinking, General, is long-term ... and mine is much shorter.*

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## Chapter Forty-three

"It's all arranged," General Stone said to Reese and Johnson after they entered the conference room where Dimitri and Stone had negotiated terms. "Dimitri and I have come to an agreement."

"An agreement? May I ask what kind of agreement, sir?" Reese asked.

"Yes, you may, Commander. Dimitri has agreed to use his men in support of ... covert surveillance."

"Surveillance?" Reese questioned. "After what happened a few hours ago, you think you can trust them?"

"Yes, I do. He will use his men in the ways that I specify to benefit the United States, and in return they will survive. He is a patriot in a way, from a different time and place, but a patriot all the same. He is also a soldier and we see eye to eye on certain things, Commander. No offense to the Navy, mind you, but there is a world of difference between floating on a ship as compared to being in the trenches—so to speak. There is a connection there."

"General," Reese said, his voice filled with frustration. "Do you actually think that you ... I don't know, bonded with this creature or something? They aren't like that, survival is their primary—"

"That's quite enough, Commander!" Stone barked. "If you wish to remain on this special assignment, you had better adjust your attitude and go along with the program!" Then he lowered his voice to a normal tone. "Don't you see what is happening here? This is history in the making. No one will know it for years to come, but someday they will. You have to decide if you will contribute to history or just watch it being made. Personally, I don't think you have the stomach for it. If you want out, now's the time."

Reese remained silent, his cheeks flushing in anger.

"However, your services have been requested as an instructor," Stone continued. "Your job will be to bring the creatures up to speed with the world as it is. Can you handle that, Commander, or do I need to find someone else?"

"I can handle it," Reese replied flatly.

"You can handle it—what?" Stone's voice rose.

"I can handle it—SIR."

"Good. Good. You are dismissed. I need to speak with to Lieutenant Johnson about some tactical concerns."

"Yes, sir," Reese replied and gave a sideward glance at Johnson, who continued to look ahead, his eyes fixed on Stone as if he had not seen or heard anything. Reese exited the room and closed the door behind him.

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"Have a seat, Lieutenant," Stone said, indicating the chair next to him. "What is your opinion of this whole operation? Be honest."

"Sir, we have an uncertain potential for the use of these creatures," Johnson said. "I say uncertain because unless they truly cooperate, any benefit derived will be useless."

"A good point," Stone said. "And what do you think about Commander Reese?"

"He's not an operator, sir," Johnson said simply.

"No, he certainly is not," Stone agreed. "What do you think of him in terms of being an asset to this operation?"

"He has background knowledge from his association with the teams, but nothing practical to actual operations. However, these creatures are here, and without his help, we would not have captured them. He lacks the Special Forces intuition, but he could be trained. Until that time, he would be out of his league in terms of any operational uses."

"I would agree, but the creatures for some reason relate to him, probably that history crap or something. I will keep him on until he becomes a hindrance, but he will not be involved with the operational side unless I decide he needs to be. Is that clearly understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you are not to mention anything that would imply that the creatures are being used for anything else but surveillance. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, how about you?"

"Sir?" Johnson asked, a confused look on his face.

"I have a few questions for you before I decide if *you* should stay on this project or not," Stone said. "What do you think of them, the creatures?"

"Permission to speak freely?" Johnson asked.

"Of course."

"I am ... fascinated by them. The more I am around them and see them operate, I find myself becoming more in tuned to them in a way. Almost envious."

"Envious? How so?" Stone probed.

"They are almost indestructible. Their lightning-fast reflexes and highly tuned senses make them a formidable adversary, the perfect killing machine."

"Yes, they are. But what about their blood thirst? Do you find that envious also?"

Johnson thought for a few moments before answering. "It seems a reasonable price to pay for their attributes and for the price of immortality." Johnson said it without reservation, which caused a surprised look to cross Stone's face for a moment.

"Very well, Lieutenant. Now how do you feel about them killing human beings?"

"Depends of whom we were talking about, sir."

"The enemy, of course."

"Then that would be a casualty of war, a fact of life for a warrior or soldier," Johnson said coldly.

"My feelings exactly. I like you. You are a lot like me when I was your age. Earlier when I was talking with Commander Reese, those remarks about the Navy didn't apply to you—you understand that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good," Stone said enthusiastically. "Now that all that formality is over, I am glad to tell you I want you to be team leader. Go on the missions and use them as I specify. Can you live with that?"

"Yes, sir," Johnson said as his lips struggled to hide a smile that threatened to appear.

"Can you direct them to kill?"

"Yes, sir."

"To kill and feed off of their prey?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good, Lieutenant. Now I have one final question for you. You understand the need to keep something like this confidential?"

"Yes, sir."

"If the information got into the wrong hands, there could be trouble."



"Yes, sir."

"You would do whatever was needed to prevent that, wouldn't you?"

"Of course, sir."

"Good. I think we have an arrangement." Stone shook Johnson's hand, glad to feel the human warmth, unlike Dimitri's handshake. "I want you to begin their training in tactics. They almost got caught from behind in the test mission. Their strength and cunning saved them, but I don't want to take any chances."

"Is there a particular strategy that you want me to follow?"

"Stay in the infiltration and assassination mode of operation," he said. "But remember, if Commander Reese or anyone else asks, fall back to the surveillance cover. If you need anything, contact Commander Scott and he will get it for you. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's all. I'll be in touch."

Johnson turned and left the room.

Stone caught a glimpse of a smile on Johnson's face. He could tell they were going to get along very well.

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## Chapter Forty-four

Reese was pissed off as he entered into the secure area. After the berating by Stone and the so-called deal the man had struck with Dimitri, he was ready to tear someone's head off. He found Dimitri sitting in a corner, appearing to be deep in thought as he gazed straight in front of him; his eyes had that glazed-over look one gets when you aren't really looking at anything. Andre and Iliga sat silently off on another end of the room at a table playing a game of chess, their gazes riveted to the pieces on the board. Reese wondered how they could be so calm and unvoiced after what Dimitri had just done. Was their allegiance that steadfast to him?

Reese walked over to where Dimitri was sitting and stood over him. "Sold your soul again, didn't you?" Reese asked, his voice tense and curt. "Did you get your pieces of silver? Tell me, does it get easier over time?"

Dimitri calmly looked up at Reese and smiled. "Commander, everything gets easier over time," he answered. "Especially if you have all the time that there is. And I do. As a human, you live such a short span of time that you do not learn that life is a continuous battle with one enemy—and that compromise is the only way to ultimately win. Those that do not understand this and think they can control everything, fall to the death of illusion. However, those that bend with the changes and learn to find the compromise do not break. Instead, they adapt to the situation and find a way to survive for what may be an uncomfortable period of time, knowing that it will be worth the wait in the end."

Reese looked at Dimitri with an unbelieving look. "Philosophy? You quote philosophy at a time like this? Do you know what is at stake here? You've struck a deal with a..." Reese stopped short of finishing the statement, realizing that his conversation could be monitored.

"And what were we suppose to do, Commander?" Dimitri asked. "You know what the other option was, and death does not appeal to me. We have already lost one of us since we have been here."

An uncomfortable silence settled between them. Reese found it hard to not feel somewhat responsible. He had not directly caused the death of Josip; however, his bringing them together and taking the creatures out of their own environment had contributed to it. If he had not moved them from the Balkans, Josip and Idriz might still be alive.

Finally Dimitri spoke. "Are you having an attack of conscience?" he asked.

Reese was surprised at the creature's ability to sense his mood or what he was feeling. He was sure that Dimitri had probably used this ability when he spoke with General Stone.

Dimitri continued, "You who orchestrated our capture. You must have known what you were getting involved in and what you might discover."

"I didn't think," Reese admitted. "I didn't think there was any truth to the story of your discovery when I got the assignment. I thought it would turn out to be just another explained mystery, or that the general was just being eccentric. When it turned out to be true, people depended on me to get the mission done. All I wanted was to study you and learn about what life for you is like."

"So you sought your own personal gain from us, just as the general seeks his own. Does that make you any different from him?"

"He has other plans. I know that and so do you. I would venture to say that his are a bit more involved than what I had in mind. Speaking of which, would you care to describe this arrangement he has with you and what it entails?"

"We, you and I, shall have an arrangement of our own," Dimitri said. "You will be our teacher, to bring us into the current time of this country and the rest of the world. There is much we need to learn about this time and all its technological advancements. You do this and in exchange, I will teach you about what I know. That is what you want, isn't it, Commander?"

"That's how you do it, isn't it?" Reese asked. "You negotiate everything."

"Is it not a fair exchange, Commander?"

Reese ignored his question. "So you won't tell me then—the specifics that you and the general have worked out?"

"No. There is no beneficial point in doing so. It would only get you removed from this position," Dimitri said in a matter-of-fact tone. "The general and I have an understanding between us in a way that I feel comfortable with. Besides, this arrangement will be good for all of us. We learn more about this new world, you learn more about our kind, and the general gets what he wants. Perfect symmetry. You aren't going to upset the balance and miss the opportunity of a lifetime, are you? That would be extremely foolish on your part."

Reese exhaled in frustration. Dimitri's perfection of the art of argumentative rhetoric was astounding. He felt tired and knew that at the moment there was no point in trying to argue with him. It wouldn't get him anywhere. Instead, he stuffed his hands into his pockets and walked around the room, shuffling his feet.

Dimitri appeared to watch him with a look of amusement on his face, as if he knew he had won this debate.

"Okay," Reese finally said. "I give up. You said compromise was a good thing to learn."

"It is," Dimitri agreed. "For those of us who must. It is just one more battle that you can say that you survived."

Reese smiled, although it was a faint one. He couldn't help but wonder about the underlying scenario that Dimitri had put into motion. He said, "Well, where do we begin your education? Specifically, what do you want to learn about?"

"We want to learn all about the world."

"The world is a very big place," Reese said. "Could you be a little more precise?"

"Start first with the United States and this area. What area is it?"

"Norfolk, Virginia," Reese replied.

"Good then, we might as well learn about our new home—Norfolk, Virginia."

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## Chapter Forty-five

Reese returned to his quarters as morning approached. He was becoming more acquainted with the night/day routine, although he still longed for his own apartment and his own bed. Sleeping here at the compound was unfamiliar, so when he slept, it was not a restful sleep. He imagined this morning would be even more difficult after his discussion with Dimitri and this latest turn of events. He knew sleep would not come easily as his mind searched his thoughts to better understand the motivations of these creatures, as well as the man that was in charge of them.

He wasn't sure if it was an attack of conscience as Dimitri had said, or that he felt that he couldn't trust Stone not to misuse these creatures in some macabre manner. And the images of the deaths of Idriz and Josip refused to leave his thoughts. The operation was becoming like a bad dream that kept escalating as each night went by, and getting closer to some dreaded event that lay at the end.

He heard the door to the room next to him open and close. *Lieutenant Johnson must have returned*, he thought. He left his own room and stepped out into the corridor. He knocked on the door of the room adjacent to his own.

Johnson answered the door and immediately Reese thought something about his demeanor had changed, but he couldn't exactly say what the change was.

"Commander?" Johnson said.

"Got a minute?" Reese asked.

"Yes, sir, come on in."

Reese entered as Johnson offered him a chair. They both sat.

"So," Reese began. "I understand that you are in charge of the team."

"Purely from an operational standpoint, Commander. You can see the purpose in that, can't you?"

"Of course," Reese said, detecting something peculiar in Johnson's voice. "So what's next then?"

"Training. I am going to teach them tactics in warfare and bring them up to speed on detection equipment and the like. They are going to be a surveillance team for deep cover missions."

"Surveillance?"

"Yes, sir," Johnson said, offering no further explanation.

Reese studied the face of the man in front of him and saw how it had changed in the past couple of days. He appeared haggard and his face had a withdrawn look, but his eyes seemed more alive than Reese remembered since the operation had started. But there was something else that seemed out of place: his words sounded rehearsed, as if he was using scripted answers.

"You've changed," Reese said. "You're not letting this all get to you are you? The creatures and the general?"

"No, sir—of course not. I admire the general's courage and determination for taking on such an operation. Also, I am fascinated by the creatures," he said, as his eyes seemed to glimmer.

"Yes, they are fascinating," Reese agreed.

"Ever since I watched them perform the test mission—the way they move and blend into their surroundings—it's as if they were made for it."

"Survival instincts," Reese said. "All creatures have them to an extent in order that they can survive. These creatures, however, not only possess those instincts, but the brains by which they use them."

"Survival of the fittest," Johnson said. "The weak shall perish and only the strong remain to carry on."

"Yes, something like that," Reese answered. He found Johnson's take on this aspect a little disturbing.

"Why do suppose they never took over the world?" Johnson asked.

"Tough question," Reese said, as he again wondered where Johnson was going with all this. "You have to remember that until a few days ago, we weren't even sure they existed at all."

"Can you speculate?" Johnson asked. Reese thought his tone was close to demanding an answer and he didn't use the characteristic 'sir' he always did.

"It's mainly from a standpoint of control. If the master has many under him, he could be challenged for control and the chances of losing it would be greater. There is no reference to any large groups that indicates that they prefer it that way. I have read that they basically stake their territory, so to speak, and will chase out any other vampire that might enter it, as a manner of protecting their food supply."

"Territorial."

"Exactly," Reese agreed, and decided it was time to go. He rose to leave. "It's late and we both need some rest. I must be going."

"Wait a minute, please—sir," Johnson asked as he reached for Reese's arm. "Just one more question."

"All right," Reese said, surprised at Johnson's sudden interest. He sat back down.

"What if they weren't that way, territorial or isolationists. Say someone had brought them all together to form a large group and descended on humanity town by town, making more creatures. And the cycle kept on going and going. Wouldn't the world be an interesting place today?"

"Interesting?" Reese asked. To himself, he thought Johnson had lost it. "No, I wouldn't say that. I wouldn't even want to imagine something like that. Why are you asking these kinds of questions?"

"Just thinking," Johnson said simply.

"If you want some advice, you need to back away from thoughts like that. These creatures and their talents are obviously consuming you. This whole affair is crazy and you better watch out for General Stone. He has plans within plans and I don't trust him. He strikes me as the kind of person that would do whatever it takes to get something done, regardless of the cost."

"Of course he would," Johnson agreed. "He's a soldier. His main concern is with the protection of this country against all enemies foreign and domestic. That is what the military is supposed to do. You do remember that oath, Commander, don't you?"

"Of course I do," Reese snapped. "And don't take that tone with me, Lieutenant! You are not General Stone, nor are you the expert on military law. As with most things, these oaths and commitments come with morals and conscience. We do not act blindly without considering the consequence of our actions, regardless of what superior officer issues the order."

"I am aware of that, Commander."

"Good, glad to hear it, Lieutenant. What the hell has gotten into you? It's the general, isn't it? He's gotten to you, hasn't he?" Reese asked. "Filled your mind with enough patriotic flavor to hide the real taste of what he has in mind. What does he really have planned?"

"Good night, Commander," Johnson said, as he rose and opened the door for Reese. "It's late and, as you said, we are both tired. Our passions seem to be getting the best of us."

Reese rose and stepped toward the open door but did not go through it. He turned to face Johnson. "Lieutenant, all I am saying is that you need to be very careful here. You're being drawn in two directions, by the general and Dimitri."

"Thank you for your concern, Commander."

"Look, Johnson, Dimitri and the others gave up their souls more than a hundred years ago so that they could continue to live. They didn't have any choice in the matter, but you do," Reese said, pointing at him. "Don't do anything you might regret later."

Johnson did not respond to Reese's words or gesture as Reese exited the room.

The door was slammed shut behind him. Reese opened his own door and went into his room. He closed his door, and lay on the bunk, but did not sleep for a long time.



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## Chapter Forty-six

"I think it's time for a more advanced test of our little group," Stone said.

Scott looked up from what he had been reading with a look of surprise on his face. "Sir?"

"Stop that 'you didn't hear me' bullshit!" Stone said. "This is nothing too big, but just enough to give them a true test of the real conditions they will be operating under."

"Sir," Scott said in a cautious voice. "I thought we were going to wait until they underwent some special ops training with Johnson."

"That is correct," he agreed. "The target I have in mind won't require as much stealth as going up against the Columbian cartels. This is ... more local and a less-developed enemy."

"Where?" Scott asked.

"Mexico," Stone said coolly. "They can't match the Columbian cartels' ability to produce cocaine; however, they are starting to buy direct on their own and then get it across the border and into established networks for distribution. We need to slap them hard to make them think twice about going off on their own. We can't afford to fight on two fronts so we need to eliminate one, and that one is Mexico."

"But sir, isn't this a local affair, DEA and the Mexican authorities?"

"Of course it is, you asshole. But the Mexicans are so corrupt they can't do anything on their own without every drug trafficker from San Diego to Tijuana knowing about it."

"Aren't we stepping on some toes here—do we want the added attention?" Scott asked.

"They won't know it's us. This will be a strictly covert op, completely on our own. We can't let this shit keep coming in to our country. Do you have any idea how many people died in this country last year from illegal drugs?"

"No, sir."

"Over 50,000 people, and that doesn't even take into account the billions it costs our economy alone. We have to strike early to keep them from organizing like the Columbians have. We rout them once and in just the right way, we can put them

back into the Stone Age for a while, forcing them to go back to the Columbians for help."

General Stone picked up a folder lying on his desk. "Here is the target," he said, handing Scott the folder. "DEA intelligence has located a tunnel that runs from the border at Tijuana for about 1500 feet and onto the California side. The drug lord is Joaquin Guzman and he's a real nice guy. Supposedly he murdered all the workers that dug the tunnel to make sure its location remained a secret. He must think he is some goddamned pharaoh or something."

"How come DEA hasn't moved on it yet?" Scott asked.

"They will in four days," Stone replied.

"Then why—"

"Because the Mexicans are bound to screw it up and the Americans can't do a damn thing because what happens on their side of the border is their business and what happens on our side is our business. Fucking politics as usual. That's why we will send in our team. We don't give a rat's ass about borders. Not now—not ever."

"I see," Scott said unconvincingly.

"I doubt that," Stone shot back, "but I don't care if you see it or not. I want the operation completed in two days. That gives you a day to get them there and staged and then into the operation on the next night."

"What do we—"

"And I don't want them to know what is happening. Just tell them it is a training operation. The same goes for Johnson. We need to see how he reacts under pressure as well. Make up some story about going against a West Coast SEAL team or something."

"Sir, this is highly—"

"I don't want to hear it. Just do it!"

"Yes, sir," Scott said and turned to leave.

"Two more things," Stone said.

Scott stopped and turned back to face him.

"First, keep Commander Reese back here, he doesn't need to go. Second, ensure the team is not fed prior to departure."

"Yes, sir," Scott answered and left the office.

General Stone closed the folder he had been looking at and smiled.

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One hour later, Lieutenant Johnson stood in front of Commander Scott's desk at parade rest as Scott explained the situation.

"The general has requested that you and your team participate in a training..." he paused, "in a live ammo training exercise on the West Coast."

Johnson's eyes showed momentary confusion at the announcement but he quickly recovered with his usual military and unquestioning demeanor. "Yes, sir."

"You need to get the team to the West Coast in eighteen hours and commence the operation at the twenty-four-hour mark. Do you see any problems with that?"

"No, sir."

"Good. After you stage your team in San Diego, you will have transportation at your disposal to the target. It's all there in the package. Any questions?"

"Sir, you did say live ammo training?"

"That's correct."

"Very well," Johnson said. "Is that all?"

"Just one more thing," Scott said. "Be prepared for anything. Do you understand me, Lieutenant? Anything."

"Yes, sir, I understand. Is there anything else?"

"The creatures are not to be fed before you depart."

Johnson nodded and turned and left the office.

Scott watched him leave and wondered if he would see him again—alive.

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Reese was heading toward the vampires' quarters for the educational portion of their training. He surprised himself that he actually thought of them as vampires now rather than creatures. Was his perception of them changing or was he trying to justify something to himself about their existence? Or was it that Dimitri had clouded his thoughts with his philosophy and word manipulation? His thoughts were interrupted as he ran into Johnson exiting the area where they were waiting for him.

"Lieutenant," Reese said in a greeting. The relations between the two men still cool since their heated discussion from the other night.

"Commander," Johnson replied. "I'm afraid your time with the creatures tonight will have to be cancelled."

"Why?" Reese asked.

"Training operation in San Diego. Dimitri and his men are preparing to go. We will

be leaving in the next hour."

"Why such short notice?" Reese asked.

"I don't know," Johnson said. "I just got word myself from Commander Scott."

"Well, I better get my things ready," Reese said.

"You aren't going, sir. General Stone wants you to remain here."

"Reason?"

"Don't know, sir. But probably because it's a fast turnaround and there won't be any time for you to work with them."

Reese detected edginess in Johnson's tone, as if he was worried about something.

"Is there something going on I should know about?" Reese asked.

"No, sir. Everything is fine. I need to get my own gear ready," Johnson replied. "If you will excuse me, sir, I need to get moving."

"Of course," Reese answered. "You're sure there isn't anything—"

Before Reese finished his statement, Johnson was moving quickly down the corridor to his room.

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## Chapter Forty-seven

The night air in San Diego was cool and clear, revealing a starlit sky. Johnson watched as his team boarded the truck for the short ride to the starting point of their operation. They were all dressed in black clothing, which included gloves and a hood that was to be pulled over their faces. The only weapon the vampires were allowed were knives, which were sheathed and attached to their ankles. When the last member was in, Johnson jumped in the truck with them. The truck rumbled off into the darkness of the night as the men sat in silence.

There were two SEALs in the front seat of the truck who were not part of Johnson's unit but had been assigned as a support element for anything Johnson needed. One of them slid the window open that joined the cab area to the cargo area.

"Lieutenant Johnson," the man said. "This came for you about twenty minutes ago." He reached through the window with an arm and handed Johnson a sealed envelope. Johnson took the envelope and opened it. Inside there was one sheet of paper with one line of handwritten text on it. He immediately recognized the handwriting: it was General Stone's. The message was simply, *This is not a training exercise. Show these bastards what your men can do—kill them all—no prisoners.*

Johnson looked up from the note to find Dimitri looking at him. The red reflection in his eyes glittered from the illumination from the light as the truck bumped along the rough road. He found his eyes focusing upon the collars they wore.

"Are you really surprised?" Dimitri asked, his voice calm and sure.

"What?" Johnson asked, trying to hide his reaction to the abruptness of the note and the suddenness of Dimitri's question.

"This is not just a training mission," Dimitri said. "Even I know that. The general still seeks proof of what we can do. He seeks proof in the number of bodies we give him tonight. Is this not true?"

Johnson did not answer Dimitri's question.

"You have been around my men long enough to know our capabilities as well as our weaknesses. This prolonged period of not feeding will cause us to be swift as well as efficient. We will end it quickly."

"But you don't even know who or what you are up against," Johnson said.

"It does not matter. They are men. They are human. They can and will die."

"Isn't that a little over-confident? I've seen good men die from that kind of attitude."

"We are not men, nor are we good," Dimitri answered. "However, your caution is correct in one respect. We can die if their weaponry is sophisticated enough."

"It shouldn't be," Johnson said. "All intelligence suggests low tech."

"Let us hope so," Dimitri said.

The truck came to a stop at a lone house that sat in the middle of an expansive open area consisting of a mixture of sand and rock.

"Let's go," Johnson said.

The team climbed out of the back of the truck and entered the house. They found the stairs and headed downward into the basement. At one end of the basement there was a tunnel opening of four foot wide by seven foot tall. By the opening of the tunnel stood two SEALs from Johnson's original unit. In the corner, there were three people tied up with cloth sacks over their heads and lying on their side.

"Any problem?" Johnson asked.

"No, sir," said one of the SEALs. "They're DEA agents, so we went kind of easy on them," he said and smiled at Johnson. "We'll make a call after the op and let their people know to come and get them."

"Is everything ready?" Johnson asked.

"Yes, sir," the other one replied. "There has been no activity from the listening devices in the tunnel."

"Good." Johnson said, as he gestured for Dimitri to come closer so as to hear the conversation. "One hour is the limit of this op," Johnson said. "If we aren't back in that time, blow the tunnel and activate the collars. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Understood," Dimitri answered.

"Cover up, gentleman," Johnson said, as he pulled on his mask. When all the men had covered up their faces, he continued, "The tunnel is about 1500 feet in length. I will lead and—"

"Lieutenant," Dimitri said. "If I may suggest, one of us should go first in case there is any danger or booby traps."

"Negative," Johnson said curtly. "I lead."

Dimitri eyed him warily but did not say anything.

"These might come in handy," Johnson said, as he handed them night vision

goggles."

"They are not necessary," Dimitri said. "We can see fine in the darkness."

Johnson didn't say anything but took the glasses back from them. He fastened his own pair around his neck. "Let's go."

They entered into the darkness of the tunnel. Johnson moved ahead cautiously as he observed and studied the green glowing areas of the heat from the rock structure. Stopping, he looked behind him and did not see his team. Suddenly he felt a cool hand on his shoulder.

"You will not see us in this state," Dimitri said softly. "After we have fed, you will see an indication of body heat."

"Right," Johnson said as he remembered.

They continued on for several minutes, although it seemed like hours for Johnson, because he couldn't see the enemy ahead of him or the vampires behind him. He wasn't sure which to fear more. He touched the remote device in his web belt and felt some reassurance. The creatures could not harm him in any way without the device going off and ending their own lives.

"We are close," he heard Dimitri whisper nearby him. "We can smell them."

"Affirmative," Johnson answered. He hated talking out loud, but Stone had limited the technical gear they could bring with them, which included their communication devices.

As they turned a corner in the tunnel, the first indications of artificial light and sounds of people reached Johnson. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"There is some form of light beam ahead," Dimitri whispered. "I can see it."

"How the hell can you see—" Johnson began but then stopped as he remembered what Reese had said, superior vision as well as hearing. "Motion sensor."

"It will not detect us," Dimitri replied. "We give off no heat so there is no motion to detect. We should go first."

"No," Johnson said.

"Why are you so foolish?" Dimitri asked. "You put yourself in harm's way for no reason."

"I am in charge," Johnson replied, as if those words were enough to explain his reason. Although Dimitri's logic was correct, he felt the need to prove that he was in control of the operation. He also was aware of Dimitri's ability with words and persuasion and he didn't want any influence on how the operation would be run. "You will show me where the sensor is and I will step over it."

Without waiting for an answer, Johnson stepped in front of Dimitri and motioned for them to fall in behind him. With Johnson in the lead, he continued on step by step, waiting for Dimitri to give him the signal that they had reached the motion sensor beam.

Suddenly an alarm sounded and high intensity lights lit the area. Johnson was blinded. He ripped his night vision goggles off of his face, but the sudden transition from the subtle green light of the night vision goggles to the intense bright halogens which now blazed directly at him left him helplessly blind. There were voices shouting, and then the sound of gunfire erupted. He heard the bullets and their telltale whine as they passed close to him. His immediate instinct told him to dive for the ground, but before he could act, he felt himself being thrown hard against the wall with such force that he blacked out.

When he opened his eyes again, it was quiet. There was a distinct smell around him—death. The air was heavy with the smell of gun powder mixed with sour sweat and blood. He rose to his knees, fighting the dizziness that accompanied his movement. He drew his Glock 9 mm pistol and took slow cautious steps forward.

Someone had turned the halogen lamps off. The illumination came from a string of light bulbs that hung from the ceiling at three-foot intervals. The cavernous corridor led to a large open area. He felt a breeze tickle his skin on his face indicating that an entrance was nearby, probably the staging area for the drugs that were to traverse from Mexico into the United States. A few more steps brought him to the open room, and that was when he saw the bodies piled in the center of the room. Dimitri and his men stood off to one side, their own clothing covered in blood. Dimitri, seeing him enter, approached Johnson.

"It's over," Dimitri said. "You were knocked out and I saw no other alternative but to continue the attack."

"You deliberately pushed me into the wall," Johnson said, the Glock still in his hand and pointed at Dimitri.

"You would have been killed," Dimitri said simply, with his hands open in front of him. "If you die, then WE die as well. I cannot have that."

"But you know nothing about tactics. That is why I am here," Johnson said.

"You speak of tactics, but what you really mean is killing. We know how to do that. There were six men here when we found them and now there are six bodies. Is that not what you sought?"

"Yes," Johnson answered. There was no point in arguing the obvious intent of this mission. "But the risk you placed yourself in—"

"My men and I were shot at least a dozen times each." Dimitri showed him the bullet holes in his clothing. "But we are uninjured," he said, as he pulled away part of the



cloth to show the areas on his flesh beneath. "You would have been slaughtered."

Johnson looked closely at the flesh, seeing only vague blemishes where there should have been tearing holes in the flesh from the bullets. He found their recuperative powers amazing.

"We were rather ... vicious in our dealing with them, a result of the intentional starving. I hope you will suggest to General Stone that perhaps allowing us to feed a little prior to the mission would be beneficial."

Johnson walked over and examined the bodies. They had been hideously torn apart and were extremely pale in coloring. It was obvious that their blood had been removed from the bodies. Johnson had been in numerous scenarios when men had to be killed; however, the sight of the pale and ripped apart bodies gave him a cold chill. It could not be completely attributed to the gruesomeness of the attack: one part was an admiration for the strength of these creatures to overcome the attackers without any help from a weapon or superior firepower—just brute killing rage.

"There are large bales in the adjoining room," Dimitri said.

Johnson looked at him, glad that he would no longer have to look at the bodies.

"We assume these are the drugs you spoke of earlier," Dimitri asserted.

"Yes. Burn them, then let's get the hell out of here."

They proceeded back down the corridor. The lighting had been turned on and there was no need for Johnson to use his night vision device to see. Dimitri walked beside him. They didn't speak until they neared the point they had entered the cavern.

"I would appreciate it if you did not mention to the general what happened," Dimitri said. "It would make him ... suspicious."

Johnson stopped and faced Dimitri. "I won't tell him under one condition," Johnson said.

"And that is?" Dimitri asked.

"The next time we go on a mission, you do not go out of your way to keep me safe."

"I do not understand you, Lieutenant," Dimitri argued. "Why do you have this ... death wish, when you can have us do it for you at no risk?"

"Life is about risk, Dimitri," Johnson said. "If there is no risk involved, then there is no point in life. Now, do we have a deal?"

"I have much to learn about this new world and the people in it," Dimitri said. "You are different than I was—your motivations—your feelings. You risk your life when you do not have to."

"I asked if we have an understanding?" Johnson repeated the question.

"We have an understanding, Lieutenant," Dimitri replied.

"There is to be no word about this op with Commander Reese. It was a training mission, nothing more. Is that understood?"

"I understand perfectly. We would not want to scare off our teacher. But doesn't it make an interesting contrast?"

"What's that?" Johnson asked.

"Commander Reese tries to understand me and my men, while I try and understand you."

"Reese belongs in the past," Johnson said. "He yearns for what once was instead of what he can have today."

"Perhaps, but does he not have the past today with us? It is, how do you say, a perfect symmetry."

"Maybe, but he blinds himself intentionally in order to live his dream," Johnson said.

"Yes, perhaps you are correct in that regard," Dimitri agreed. "But then, don't we all blind ourselves to see what we want?"

Johnson did not respond.

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## Chapter Forty-eight

"We gutted them!" General Stone shouted at the debriefing. "They'll stay on their own side for a while before thinking about coming back. They probably think the Columbians did it! DEA and the Mexican authorities can't say anything because they don't have a clue either. Goddamned! This is fucking perfect!"

Johnson and Scott sat on his left and right respectively, listening to the joyful ranting.

"No problems with the creatures?" he asked Johnson.

"No, sir," Johnson replied. "They performed as well as we anticipated, considering the absence of any heavy weaponry. If there had been, we would have suffered casualties, given the tunnel entrance and the motion sensors."

"Understood, Lieutenant," Stone answered. "That is one of the main issues I want you to focus on with their training. They need to learn the intricacies of modern-day warfare."

"Yes, sir," Johnson answered. "I'll see to it."

"At least we know for sure what capability we have in the creatures," Stone said. "Tell me, Lieutenant, did they seem to enjoy killing them?"

Johnson hesitated for a few seconds before answering. "Yes, sir, I believe they did. They had been starved for an extended period and that contributed significantly to their ferocity. Dimitri asked that you take that under advisement before any future missions. He seems to believe that what you seek would be better obtained if they had not been denied sustenance."

"Dimitri has no idea what I want," Stone said, with a wave of his hand. "What they did was exactly what I want on all missions. In the future, we shall follow the same protocol. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you ensure that Dimitri and his men understand that they are not to mention the operation to Reese?"

"Yes, sir," Johnson said. "We have an understanding."

"Good. Good. Now get to work, Lieutenant. In a few weeks, they get a real taste, no pun intended, of what they are going to be used for."

\* \* \* \*

The schedule for the next couple of weeks became a set routine whereby Dimitri and his men spent their first six hours after waking with Johnson, learning tactics and the art of warfare in the twenty-first century. The vampires were excellent students. In the classroom, they were attentive and grasped concepts quickly and then applied them without any difficulty. They questioned nothing and excelled at anything they were asked to do.

Their demeanors, however, were distinctly different from each other. Andre and Iliga always sat silently and asked no questions unless something was directed specifically toward them. Dimitri remained the dominant member of the team; he asked probing questions of Johnson and consistently had him explain things in depth and provide examples.

After their time with Johnson, the next couple of hours were reserved for feeding and free time. After that period, they ended the night with Reese and their educational period on the new world. Their times together usually ended up in a philosophical debate before they finished for the night and the sun rose.

During this time, the relationship between Reese and Johnson remained cold and neither one spoke to the other unless required. Johnson appeared to be enthusiastic and energetic in his work with the creatures as they held classes, conducted exercises in the field and used mock demos of facilities to put into use what they were learning. The creatures were excellent students and learned exceptionally fast. Johnson could not have been more pleased and in further awe at their abilities.

"Your time is better than yesterday," Johnson said to Dimitri, as he checked his stopwatch. They emerged from the mock set-up they had arranged within the facility.

"Once we learn the proper motion, we constantly improve upon it. It is our way. We always seek to become efficient in what we do. It is a physical and mental quality that we possess." Dimitri explained.

"You never tire, do you?" Johnson asked.

"Not in the manner that you are accustomed to. It is only from a lack of sustenance, not from physical exertion."

"It's fascinating." Johnson said, as he stared at Dimitri. He had seen men come off similar training courses and drop to their knees from the physical exertion. Dimitri was not sweating or even breathing heavy. "If we had more like you, we could end a lot of the problems in the world today."

Dimitri laughed and then said, "I think you would have more problems rather than less, Lieutenant. We have been learning about the history of this new world in which we live. There are too many instances that contradict your assertion."

"Such as?" Johnson asked.

"It becomes apparent that those who do not have something that the other side does

will take extraordinary measures to attain it. If they cannot attain or duplicate it, the solution is to get something that is better than the other side has. This escalation is what gets out of hand and leads to more and more trouble. For example, look at your Cold War. It was a continuous period of two sides building immense military machines to be used against one another. Your history is full of such examples."

"But that's what it is all about," Johnson asserted. "It's always a question of who is stronger and that prevents any attempts if one side knows the other will counter with a superior force. Think of it as a political and military stalemate. It has always been that way and will always be."

"And where will it all end?" Dimitri asked. "How much will be wasted on useless efforts of preparation for a war that never comes?"

"One power maintains its dominance through this superiority and by that dominance, keeps the peace."

"Peace through threat of retaliation—not exactly what I would call a mutual peace. How can people work together for the better good when in reality nobody trusts anyone?"

"You make it sound impossible," Johnson countered. "However, as you must realize through your studies, it works."

"That would be debatable," Dimitri said, with a disbelieving look on his face. "To live under constant fear is like not living at all. Besides, all indications would tend to support the fact that this is nothing different than having a global dictatorship."

Johnson appeared to think this over before he answered. "I am a soldier, not a politician. I carry out the orders I am given and leave policies and procedures to the ambassadors and diplomats."

"But even a soldier has a conscience, does he not? Does he not have thoughts and feelings towards the policy that his masters dictate?"

"If sacrifices must be made along the way to meet the overall objective, then that is acceptable."

"And you believe this?"

"Of course I do," Johnson answered.

"Then you are more dangerous than I and my men are," Dimitri said. "We may be creatures of unfathomable life, but we possess individual thinking and reasoning that governs our own choices. We accept the consequences of our actions. Do you?"

"I do," Johnson said. "I carry out my orders knowing that I am doing the right thing. I have no attack of conscience. I have pledged my life to protecting this country."

"Ah, I am in the presence of a true patriot. That is very noble. So you are unlike

Commander Reese then in that respect."

"How so?" Johnson asked.

"He has reservations of what you are training us to be prepared to do. He, you could say, is having a bad attack of conscience."

"That's his problem, not ours," Johnson said sternly. "We know exactly what we are doing, don't we?"

"Of course," Dimitri answered, eyeing Johnson warily as he observed the shift in his demeanor.

"You will get all the human blood you want and we get the removal of certain elements that do not agree with the position of this country. As the general said, 'perfect symmetry.'"

"Yes, most definitely," Dimitri nodded, maintaining this belief of blood fixation in Johnson's thoughts. His own thoughts were continuously planning and conspiring about how they would be free once again to roam as they chose. However, he had pushed Johnson to his capacity for one night. To do anymore would overload and confuse him further. "I believe that we are finished for this evening then, Lieutenant?"

"Yes," Johnson said. His facial expression seemed conflicted; disappointed and yet relieved. "I'll have them open the door to the yard. I assume you will want to feed before you meet with Commander Reese."

"That is correct," Dimitri agreed. "We cannot go to school on an empty stomach." Dimitri smiled. Johnson looked at him with a questioning and yearning gaze. Dimitri saw the look and decided to draw him in further. He leaned closer to Johnson and said, "You are envious of us, aren't you? Our powers, they attract you?" he asked as his voice sent soothing tones into Johnson's mind.

"Yes ... yes, they do," Johnson said, in an almost dreamlike trance now.

"But to attain such powers, the cost is extremely high. Does this price you must pay not frighten you? Do you not care about your mortal soul?"

"No," Johnson answered immediately. "It seems a small price to pay for what one would gain."

"So willing," Dimitri murmured as he withdrew his influence from Johnson's thoughts. He didn't want to push him this far yet, not yet.

"Perhaps we may talk of this again later," Dimitri said.

"Yes," Johnson agreed. "We shall..."

"I do not wish to be late for Commander Reese. Good evening, Lieutenant." Dimitri turned away, signaling for Andre and Iliga to follow.

Dimitri could sense that his influence on Johnson was just about where he wanted him. But he knew that he must be careful to not push him too far or too fast. He also felt a slight twinge of regret and pity for the man ... he was so alone and what he sought would certainly be his downfall.

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## Chapter Forty-nine

Reese looked up as his three students entered into the lounge area of their living quarters. "Running a little late tonight," he said, as he glanced at his watch and stifled a yawn. As had become their established ritual, Andre and Iliga said nothing and quietly sat down as Dimitri turned toward Reese.

"Lieutenant Johnson and I were discussing some particulars in regards to our training. He is a very enlightening individual."

"Yes, I can imagine," Reese said, trying to keep his sarcasm at bay. "So what were you discussing?" Reese knew Dimitri would not tell him what transpired in their conversations. As always.

"Little matters of the heart, you might say," Dimitri answered and smiled.

At times, Reese could sense the pull of Dimitri's demeanor. Everything was a question or a statement meant to tempt or to lure him in a particular direction of conversation. Even he had to fight it at times, because he knew what Dimitri was trying to do. He wondered if he did the same thing with Johnson. He chose to ignore the bait and remain silent.

"So what is our subject for this evening, Commander Reese?" Dimitri asked.

"Your choice," he said. "We've covered all the basics on history, updated your geography and cultural affairs, and brought you up-to-date on political affairs."

"How about some philosophy?" Dimitri asked. "We speak so little on this topic and it interests me the most."

"You like philosophy because it gives you a lot of leeway to express your views," Reese replied. "It is your doorway between what you were and what you are. You use it to draw us in so you can slam it shut with your point of view."

"Yes ... you know me too well, Commander," Dimitri said. "I can see your point in avoiding it. If you aren't capable of discussing an area, just stay away from it."

"A weak attempt at rhetoric," Reese said. "That's not like you."

"You strike deftly and quickly this evening, Commander," Dimitri said. "I am impressed." Dimitri bowed his head respectfully.

Reese shook his head. "When a direct attack doesn't work, you maneuver from the rear, eh? If not intimidation, you use flattery. You missed your calling. You would



make an excellent politician."

Dimitri smiled but said nothing.

"Okay, I'll give in. You apparently have something very specific on your mind you want to discuss. What is it?"

"I want to discuss the concept of the freedom of choice," Dimitri said, as he kept his eyes fixed on Reese's, probably wanting to see the reaction he had.

"A very broad area," Reese replied.

"A comparison then," Dimitri suggested.

"All right, I'm listening. Go ahead."

"There are many groups in your society that are segmented and fragmented from the rest. Yet they are offered a form of 'social protection' from your government and its many agencies. This protection gives them an unfair advantage over those that do not have the any form of affliction or special condition which warrants similar treatment."

"I'm not sure what you are referring to," Reese said. "Can you give me an example of one of these groups?"

"Let's look at the cultural and societal differences," Dimitri said. "There are laws to protect the religious beliefs of people, the handicapped, minorities, women, terminally ill, gays, AIDS patients and the list goes on and on. Your society adds more of these groupings as time passes. One cannot help but wonder if there will eventually be more of the 'selected' groupings than the main group from which they are formed."

"And?" Reese asked. He didn't know where Dimitri was going with this conversation.

"Does it not make you wonder if perhaps there is no single factor by which to judge humanity?"

"What? Are you saying that there is no normalcy or standard by which to judge people?"

"There is—the one that was created by early men. The mold of what they perceived the normal society to be. But, as time passes, this norm is being slowly erased by the numerous categories society keeps creating."

"I see some of what you say," Reese said. "However, what you see as a degeneration of society one would just say is a better understanding of what comprises society."

"So, what you feel is that society as a whole is becoming more conducive to the

various differences that make up the population of the world?"

"Perhaps," Reese said. "But it depends on how you use this interpretation that makes it a feasible discussion for understanding your point. You obviously have something in mind—what is it?"

"Simply that I can argue from this standpoint that myself and my men are just as worthy of one of these select groups as any of them that already exist."

"Really," Reese said, incredulous. "How interesting—but not possible. There are too many controversies about your existence that contradicts the norm."

"Do not close your mind so easily, Commander," Dimitri said, his voice becoming forceful. "Many of your groups are comprised of those that have the unfortunate circumstance of becoming something different by an act of fate beyond their control. Perhaps they are injured, or born with a birth defect or some form of genetic deficiency that caused their behavior to be against the established norm."

"I will agree to that to a certain extent, as long as you don't take too many liberties with the concept," Reese said.

"See," Dimitri said as he pointed at Reese. "You are setting conditions based upon the established norms. Your prejudice blinds you to accepting any other facts."

"No, I don't think so," Reese said, "but go on—make your point."

"Are we, my men and I, not a victim of circumstance beyond our control?"

"That's a stretch."

"Is it?" Dimitri asked. "In your society, you allow those that have used substances, drugs and alcohol for instance, a chance to redeem themselves. Those that have become ill from many of those choices they have willingly made, you give them a form of dispensation. You also allow those with different sexual attributes to be accepted."

"The issue of will, the self-decision aspect, comes into play with many of those categories you mentioned. That does not apply to you."

"Really? Open your mind, Commander. Look at us. Are we not just guilty of a maligned thought that at the outset may have looked attractive; its failings not so important at the time of our creation? Then, after it was completed, it was too late to change our mind and retrace our steps over the threshold that we crossed."

Reese hesitated for a moment before he spoke. "None of the categories you mentioned kills in order to survive."

"We do not *have* to kill people in order to survive."

"Wait a minute," Reese said. "You yourself said that at times you fed on the less

desirable people that wandered your way, the vagabonds, dregs of society that were cast out."

"Yes, that is true. It is another example on how society has set the conditions of our existence upon us."

"You are claiming that society has made you what you are?"

"To an extent, yes," Dimitri said. "So tell me, Commander, how different is that from man and the select groups he has created?"

"These groups you suggest, they are not killers."

"No, perhaps not directly," Dimitri agreed. "But what of the wars, the carnage of the third world countries and the so-called righteous acts of the major powers? Has not man killed man under the guise of world peace?"

"Unrelated," Reese countered. "Different circumstances."

"Not really," Dimitri countered. "What of your inner cities then? Some of them are considered murder capitals. Yet we offer these killers acceptance if they change their ways."

"There are problems. Our culture has spawned our own creatures," Reese conceded. "But how does all this apply to you and your men?"

"We are no different than all these others," Dimitri said. "We are a product of your own culture just as well as those of your inner cities. We are no different than anyone else in these categories, except that we receive no help, no protection from the government."

"You're really stretching it," Reese said, although he knew his voice sounded slightly less convincing than it had earlier.

"All I am saying is that we deserve what the world has to offer," Dimitri said. "We should be offered a chance to take our position in society like all these other groups have been given an opportunity and not to be used as pawns in a game that man plays against man."

"This is ludicrous," Reese exclaimed. "You're suggesting that society accept vampires as just another part of our society."

"Yes."

"Crazy, but I'll humor you. Tell me, if you were free to go and do whatever you wanted, what would you do?"

Dimitri smiled and spoke softly. "What we have been doing all these years, survive. But survive in our own way, quietly and away from those that would pervert us for their own personal gain." Dimitri paused, and then said, "We may be creatures now,

but part of us were men once and still are; we have a need to feel ... useful."

Reese looked into Dimitri's eyes and for the first time, he thought he saw human eyes and not those of a creature. He also noticed that Andre and Iliga were looking at him now with what appeared to be keen interest. Normally they showed little curiosity in their discussions.

"An interesting point," Reese said, breaking the silence. "You made several assertions that would prompt further discussions and consideration. I would even—"

Reese stopped as he heard someone enter the room. He turned and saw Johnson. By the anxious look upon his face, Reese could tell he had some news.

"Commander," he said coolly to Reese. "I hate to interrupt but I need to speak briefly with Dimitri."

"No problem," Reese said. "We're done for the night and it will be dawn soon so I will let you two discuss what you need. Good night."

As Reese rose to leave, he saw the folder that Johnson carried in his hands. The folder was marked 'TOP SECRET.'

As the door closed, Reese heard Johnson's voice, "We have an assignment. We leave tomorrow at dusk."

*So it begins*, Reese thought.

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## Chapter Fifty

The military aircraft landed on the private runway at SOCOM headquarters in Florida in the dark of the early hours of the morning. A flurry of activity ensued: passenger vehicles met the plane, forklifts and other heavy equipment offloaded the shipping containers; the passengers were escorted to a secure building on the perimeter of the airfield. Within this building, General Stone waited inside a conference room.

Johnson and Dimitri entered the room where he waited. Navy SEALs took their usual positions: two inside of the room and two outside to maintain their double watch on Dimitri, in the event they needed to activate the collar.

"Welcome to SOCOM, gentleman," Stone greeted them. "Please have a seat and we can get started." Johnson and Dimitri sat at the conference table as he opened a folder.

"Our intelligence has located the leaders of several major cocaine distribution networks that route the drugs through Haiti on their way to the United States. These leaders, along with other top level associates, are holed up in Haiti for a limited period of time. This is our moment we have been waiting for, gentleman."

"Local authorities?" Johnson asked.

"Not worth a damn," Stone snorted. "There is almost one hundred percent corruption in all the enforcement agencies there. As soon as the bulk of our forces pulled out, the gates opened and all the scum of the Earth flowed in. All that we have is our intelligence networks left, and those only because we pay more than the opposition. The situation is pathetic on the island, but we can't officially do anything without being accused of internal meddling."

"So that is where we come in?" Dimitri asked. "We shall become the judge, jury and executioner."

"Basically, yes. You," Stone said, indicating Johnson, "will take in the team and eliminate the entire group. We figure that at least three of the targets are the top officials that hold several organizations together." He handed over three black-and-white photographs. "Eliminate them, and the organizations will crumble into internal fighting and probably be taken over by another group. This will become a game of dominoes as we go along: one leads to another until we get to the last one."

"What's the area like where they are?" Johnson asked.

Stone drew out an aerial reconnaissance photograph and laid it on the table in front of them.

"It's outside the city of Monte Christi, along the coast. It's an old fortress that was converted into a large private residence that actually serves as a distribution center for the drugs. Take out the leaders, blow the place to hell and get out. It will be well-guarded, but with the stealth that the team has, you should be able to get in undetected."

"Of course," Dimitri agreed. "We are as quiet as the night."

Stone looked at Dimitri curiously before continuing. "Access from the sea will be the way in and out. We have a converted fishing boat standing by for our use. Take a day and familiarize yourselves with the layout and develop your plan as you travel there. You will be flown through the Bahamas and Puerto Rico, only stopping for fuel and then air-dropped the following night to the ship that will be off the coast, ready to go in. The ship will bring you back to Puerto Rico where the plane will be waiting. All the details are in your package."

"Equipment?" Johnson asked.

"Everything you need can be obtained from our private stock here; all unmarked, unserialized and untraceable. I've already put the equipment together and it is being loaded on your plane as we speak. Take a look at the list and see if there is anything else you need."

"Yes, sir," Johnson acknowledged. "We will—"

"We will need to feed soon," Dimitri interjected. "Have provisions been made for that?"

"You will not feed here," Stone said sharply, then gave him a vicious grin. "You will wait and feed on the targets. It will add to the hunt, will it not, Dimitri?"

Dimitri did not answer.

"Sir, that could be messy and hard to explain," Johnson said.

"My point exactly—the messier, the better." Stone slammed his fist onto the table. "We want to put the fear of God into them. Make them tuck their tails and run home with stories that will make them think twice about coming back. And there will be no explaining because no one is going to claim that the blood was sucked out of the assholes." He paused looking at Johnson and Dimitri. "Who the hell is going to believe any story about vampires?"

Dimitri and Johnson sat quietly.

"Is there a problem with this?" Stone asked, as his gaze focused on Dimitri. "Because if there is, we can activate those collars and end this now."

Dimitri locked his eyes onto Stone's with no emotion in his face and simply said, "There is not a problem, General. It will be done."

"Good, then. I'll see you when you get back. Good hunting and kill every one of the sons of bitches. Spare no one, no matter how much they beg for their life. Don't even think about any prisoners. Is that clearly understood?"

"Yes, sir!" Johnson replied sharply.

Dimitri said nothing, only smiled.

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## Chapter Fifty-one

The four figures came ashore in a raft and made their way off the beach. Their target was less than a mile away. At a quick pace, they would arrive in less than fifteen minutes. The plan had been well-rehearsed and the need to speak would be avoided at all costs. As they set off, traveling off the road and hiding in the sparse shrubbery, they hoped they would not be seen until they were at the small fortress. Each person was dressed the same and carried identical equipment in their black backpacks and watertight bags. Johnson signaled the direction they were to head in and they moved off.

When they arrived at their observing destination, Johnson donned his night vision equipment and surveyed the area. The air reconnaissance photos did not reveal if there were any electronic sensors in place such as early alert devices. Johnson scanned the area for telltale signs of the devices but found none and gave the all-clear sign to his team. As he did, he saw from their subtle movements that they were anxious to move in. They were at a heightened state because they had not fed in three days, a fact that Johnson had not agreed with. But there was nothing he could do about that now except hope that their anxiousness did not lead to mistakes that gave away their position.

The site was guarded by four men on the topmost walls, two per wall on the oddly-shaped structure. The only entrance was guarded by three men who were seated in old wooden chairs outside of the wrought iron gate; the chain and lock around the gate was clearly visible. Andre and Iliga would take the guards on the walls and Dimitri and Johnson would take the gate, and then converge on the building to find their targets.

The main advantage they were banking on was the complacency of the guards on the top of the building. A normal man couldn't climb the slick, straight walls—it was considered impenetrable. However, Dimitri's men would be able to scale it easily.

As soon as Andre and Iliga were off, Dimitri and Johnson made for the gate, using the darkness as cover until they reached the perimeter of light. Now they waited for the distraction from the water to hide their final approach. The fishing boat that brought them in had positioned a small dinghy that would burst into flames shortly, diverting the guard's attention from the land and toward the bay.

Dimitri had insisted they did not need the diversion because they could use their super speed to cross the final distance, but Johnson was not able to move as fast and would be a sitting target without the distraction. It was then suggested that



Johnson wait at the observation position for them to return, but he quickly vetoed this idea. He had orders to accompany the team, as well as his own personal desire to see the team in action firsthand.

The explosion broke the quiet of the night. Johnson and his men glanced in the direction of the horrendous sound to see the flames from the dinghy as it lit up the night. The ignition of the explosion had been activated from the fishing boat. All the guards on the fortress also turned toward the fire, and. Johnson and his men advanced the last hundred yards to the fortress.

Dimitri did not wait for Johnson as he sped toward the gate. The guards had turned as expected to check out the flare of light and as they turned back to the front, they were face to face with Dimitri. He effortlessly slashed two throats with his hands and tore into the remaining man with his fangs almost simultaneously. The last man fell to the ground as Johnson arrived, blood flowing freely from the neck where Dimitri had struck.

Dimitri leaned over one of the bleeding men and drank greedily. Johnson listened to the sickening slurping sound that he made as he drank his fill before letting the body fall to the ground with a quiet thud. Johnson watched intently as Dimitri wiped the blood from his face and licked his fingers, thinking it extremely odd; the thought of eating in the middle of the mission.

*But this was not merely eating, he thought, it was life and strength flowing into their bodies.*

They entered into a small courtyard. Only one section was lit; they assumed that was the location of the three targets. Using his night vision goggles, Johnson was able to determine that the dark areas contained more guards who were asleep. If things went as planned, they would kill them on the way out, leaving no survivors. Just as Stone had instructed them.

Andre and Iliga joined them and Johnson noted similar blood stains on their clothing, which indicated that they too had fed on their prey. Hopefully they would all be focused now on the most important part of the mission, now that their thirst had been quenched ... for the moment.

They approached the area that was lit from the inside and prepared to enter through the door and window. Johnson removed his night vision goggles and slid up to the window and peered inside. He recognized the primary targets sitting around a table, sipping drinks and playing cards; there were three other men that he did not recognize that sat away from the group. They were probably bodyguards.

The room was oddly shaped, Johnson thought, it looked smaller on the inside than it did on the outside. He shrugged it off, attributing it to the age of the building as he made a hand signal to Dimitri that indicated the number six. Dimitri nodded and flashed the signal to Andre and Iliga.

Dimitri indicated to Johnson that he should let them go in first, then he should follow. Johnson shook his head; he knew the three men would not have enough time to recover before he could blanket them with his silenced automatic weapon. He indicated a countdown with his fingers starting at five and working its way to one. When the last digit was gone, they burst into the room.

The look of surprise on the three men sitting at the card table was not what Johnson expected to see. As realization struck them they dived under the large wooden table instead of bolting from the room. Johnson levied his weapon toward them as Dimitri and his men made fast work of the bodyguards. Almost at the same moment, a false wall exploded, revealing the true size of the room and three men that had been concealed there were revealed as their weapons blazed away.

Johnson went for cover but not before being hit several times in the chest. Dimitri moved toward the armed men, who smiled because they assumed they had the superior edge over the attackers. They fired a burst into Dimitri. He, in turn, smiled as he kept moving toward them. Alarm appeared on the gunmen's faces as Dimitri reached them, obviously unharmed. He ripped their flesh with his clawed hands as if slicing through butter with a sharp knife.

"Take the three under the table," Dimitri growled at Andre and Iliga, recognizing there was no longer a need for silence since the gunfire had erupted. "Kill them quickly." He moved toward Johnson, who lay on the ground unmoving.

Johnson tried to speak, but the blood pooled in his mouth making his weak words garbled and barely understandable.

"We'll get you back to the boat," Dimitri said. "Hold on."

"Won't ... make ... it," Johnson croaked.

"The men on the fishing boat have heard the gunfire, they will move in closer to pick us up," Dimitri said. He looked over Johnson's wounds and saw the severity of them. He was losing blood quickly and would probably be dead in a matter of minutes.

"I'll ... be ... dead by ... then," Johnson said, as if he had read Dimitri's thoughts.

"Yes, you will," Dimitri said, seeing no point in lying. "We can't save you ... I'm sorry."

"You ... you can ... can ... let me live," Johnson said. Dimitri watched as the blood flowed from his wounds and pooled on the ground, the smell tantalizing and teasing his senses. If not for his earlier feeding, he would not have been able to control himself.

"You so much want to be like us, don't you?" Dimitri asked, already knowing how Johnson felt about their abilities and how he admired them.

"Yes," Johnson uttered. "Like you."

"Close your eyes," Dimitri said, knowing that Johnson would soon be dead. "It may hurt for a moment but it will pass quickly."

"Thank ... y-o-u," Johnson said softly as he did as Dimitri had asked and closed his eyes. Dimitri gazed upon Johnson's prone body as he placed his hands on Johnson's head and quickly twisted his neck, snapping it. He gently laid the head down on the ground.

"It is better this way," Dimitri whispered. "You have too much anger in your soul and it would be your death again and again. This way it is over, your fate sealed."

Dimitri bent over Johnson's dead body and searched through his pockets for the remote device that controlled the collars. He found it, covered in blood and shattered in the center, the result of a bullet impact. In its damaged condition, the collar release would not operate. He cursed, returned it to the pocket, and then picked up the body, slinging it over his shoulder.

"Andre, Iliga, let's go," Dimitri said as they heard the voices coming closer. "Set the explosives for thirty seconds." They removed the explosives from their packs and placed the clay-like mounds and their timers on the floor.

"Out the window and head for the beach," Dimitri said. "Hurry!"

The three men moved swiftly the way they had come. A few of the hired gunmen, still putting their clothes on, crossed their path and were easily dispatched by Andre and Iliga, who were becoming more adept at killing, Dimitri noticed. In addition, they kept a watchful eye for any explosive weapons that could harm them, but at this point saw only standard guns.

They were out the main gate as the explosions went off, lighting up the sky for miles around them; sending mortar, bricks, and wood in a killing expulsion from its center. They doubted if anyone inside the compound lived through it.

As they rowed back to the fishing boat that waited for them, Dimitri stared at the dead body of Johnson. He didn't feel remorse at not having saved his life by changing him. He knew it would have been a grave mistake in doing so and it would have complicated things immensely in terms of them ever regaining their own freedom.

Johnson hadn't gotten his wish, but Stone had, he thought. There had been plenty of killing and death—on both sides.

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## Chapter Fifty-two

"What the hell happened?" General Stone asked as he sat in the conference room at SOCOM headquarters.

"They had men hidden behind a fake wall," Dimitri said calmly. "We were in the room and committed to the fight before we could do anything. Lieutenant Johnson was in their direct line of fire. Even before I could move to his aid, the shots from the weapons had found him."

"Damn," Stone said reflectively. "He was a good man. A lot like myself, I think." Then in a sudden change of direction, his mood swung to other thoughts. "Hell, you showed them good though, didn't you? Killed every single one of them."

Dimitri remained silent.

Stone continued. "It'll be months before they can reform into any kind of organization, and before that, we will strike again. Keep them down in their own filth of death," he said, and smiled at Dimitri. "I'm not going to send you back to Norfolk yet. There is another spot I want you and your men to take care of. It will be difficult, but I'll assign another officer to take Johnson's place."

"Reese," Dimitri said, breaking his silence. "Commander Reese would be the logical choice."

"He's not an operator," Stone said immediately.

"He does not have to be," Dimitri countered. "That is what I believe went wrong last time. Johnson did not need to be in there with us. He should have waited outside the compound area. We obviously work more efficiently without the human element. You can still maintain communications with us as well as keep tabs on what is happening with your sophisticated tracking devices. By our performance on the mission, we have proven that we can accomplish our tasks more efficiently without having a human watchdog."

"I can see your point to an extent," Stone agreed. "But why Reese?"

"We have a rapport established and he understands our motives and behavior. And we ... trust him. Anyone else you bring in at this time would be new and we would have to start fresh again, and as you have already said, time is short."

"Yes," Stone said. "Time is short and I have to admit your reasoning on Reese and the tactics make sense. But I still don't trust the man."

"He is a military man," Dimitri asserted.

"Not like us," Stone said, as he pointed from himself to Dimitri. "We understand killing. He tried to find a way around it."

"If forced—"

"Yes," Stone interjected. "I know if he were pushed, he would probably kill if he had to—but he thinks about it too damn much."

"He has a conscience," Dimitri said.

"He is a fool. He tries to rationalize everything. He believes in cause and effect rather than being preemptive in his thinking. In the end he would leave things to a diplomatic rather than a military solution."

"I think you underestimate him," Dimitri said casually.

"Perhaps, but what if he refuses to go along with you and the mission?"

"He won't," Dimitri replied. "He will do whatever he has to in order to be able to continue to study my men and I. That is what he wants."

"You seem to understand his motivations pretty well."

"Commander Reese is driven by his own motivations as you are driven by yours," Dimitri said.

"I see," Stone said, as he looked warily at Dimitri. "You seem to be thinking with a higher level of clarity than usual."

"It's the benefit of the human blood. It heightens the awareness of our minds and makes thinking sharper."

"Hmm," Stone said in a musing tone of voice. "Does that mean I shouldn't let you have too much of this blood then? Perhaps you will outsmart me?"

"Do you want your missions accomplished efficiently?" Dimitri asked as he avoided the other half of the question Stone had posed.

"Of course I do," Stone said as he smiled. "But if you get too sharp of mind, you might try and trick me."

Dimitri smiled back and gently touched the collar he wore. "As long you have the power to unleash the fluid in these collars, you cannot be tricked."

"We have an understanding then."

"Oh, yes," Dimitri said. "We have an understanding. Keeping us fed with the human blood will keep us at our optimum killing efficiency and it is a better alternative to death, a much better arrangement."

"Good," Stone said. "The next mission goes in two days."

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## Chapter Fifty-three

Reese arrived in SOCOM and was immediately taken to the area where the team was being kept—at the far end of the secure runway area. He found himself in the conference room waiting for General Stone, wondering what could have happened that had him summoned here on such short notice.

Stone entered the room, Reese stood and shook hands with the man and sat back down.

"Commander, we have had an unfortunate event. Johnson has been killed and I need you to go with the team on a mission. Can you handle that?"

"Killed how?" Reese asked, shocked at the news of Johnson's death. He immediately thought that Dimitri or one of the others had perhaps tried to escape. "It wasn't the vampires, was it? What happened?"

"No. It was gunfire from those low life drug-smuggling scum. There was a false wall or something, ask Dimitri, he can provide you all the details on what happened."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Reese said, and meant it. He had liked Johnson in a way, even though he was a bit too gung-ho for him. However, ever since he became involved with the creatures, he seemed to change somewhat, almost as if he wanted ... Reese searched for the meaning of his own thoughts. Finally it came to him. Johnson had wanted to be one of them. Yes ... but if that was the case, then why didn't Dimitri save his life when—

"I'll be blunt with you, Reese," Stone said, interrupting his thoughts. "You're a smart guy and you can't tell me you don't really comprehend what is happening here. Dimitri has asked that you take Johnson's place. What I need from you is your promise to cooperate fully and completely before I can explain the mission and we don't have a lot of time. If you can't commit to this, then you're finished here and you will be immediately sent back to your previous assignment. Any hopes you might have of being around these creatures will be ended."

Reese was stunned at the heartlessness of Stone and his easy dismissal of the death of Johnson. He was being pushed into a corner to either do what he was being asked, or he would be shoved out of the picture completely. However, he wondered if Stone was bluffing him about his removal. Dimitri and his men appreciated him and he found it hard to believe that they would just agree to an end of their educational aspect of their lives. He also was the only one with the most complete background to work on the assignment.

"What is the mission about?" Reese asked, deciding to see if he could get Stone to tell him anything else.

"One moment, Commander," Stone said as he picked up the phone and dialed. "Scott, come in here."

Seconds later, Scott entered the room accompanied by one of the Marine guards Reese recognized as one of the two that was on duty outside of the door. Scott's presence along with the Marine guard was not an encouraging site.

General Stone turned toward Reese. "I can't tell you anything specific before you give me your word. However, I can tell you that the mission is a vital part of protecting the United States from a real threat. If you say you can't operate under that condition, Commander Scott and this Marine will escort you out of here right now. So—are you in or out, Commander?"

"What exactly am I going to do?" Reese asked. "I'm not an—"

"Never mind that right now," Stone said firmly, the irritation quite apparent in his voice. "Are you in or out?"

Reese didn't think Stone was bluffing any longer. He looked toward Commander Scott to see if there was any look on his face that would tell him anything, but Scott's eyes were focused upon the general.

"I'm in," Reese said. Whatever Stone had in mind was secondary to his own commitment to studying these creatures.

"Good—good," Stone said. He patted Reese on the shoulder. "You made the right decision." He then turned toward Scott. "Thank you, Commander, that's all."

"Yes, sir," Scott said. He and the Marine saluted, turned and exited the room.

"Now, let's get to the specifics," Stone said. "You are there to purely keep an eye on our friends. Just make sure that they do what they are there for."

"This is a reconnaissance mission, correct?" Reese asked.

Stone looked at Reese with a disbelieving look on his face. "Commander, you never really believed that bullshit story, did you? Even you aren't that stupid."

"No, I guess not," Reese said. "I guess I convinced myself otherwise to get what I wanted. Apparently Dimitri and I have more in common than I thought."

"We're all alike in certain ways, Reese. Our basic motivations are what drive us."

"For once, General, you and I are in perfect agreement."

"Look, Reese, Dimitri and his men are natural killers. Once you face that fact and accept it—everything will get much easier for you. Dimitri talks his philosophical



bullshit, but that's all it is. He uses us as much as we use him and his friends."

"So you want me to just turn them loose and let them do their thing," Reese said dejectedly.

"Exactly. You don't have to get your hands dirty in the actual op. The team will go in and handle the particulars; you will monitor their progress from a remote site and guide them in and out. The target is a drug lord in a coastal town on Jamaica."

"Sounds simple enough," Reese said. His voice came out as dull and lifeless.

"Good, then we're all settled. You'll be leaving in the next couple of hours. Here is your briefing package," he said, as he handed Reese a large sealed envelope.

"Dimitri and his men have them already."

"Transportation?"

"Ship. The special operations patrol craft USS Cyclone is at dock awaiting your arrival. The majority of the crew is from the facility back in Norfolk so they are familiar with the special requirements. You load tonight and get underway immediately. Any other questions?"

"No, sir," Reese answered, even though he had many questions. Problem was, they were mostly for himself and what he was doing. "I'll join the team and make preparations."

"The operation name is called Red Blood," Stone added. "I'll see you when you get back. Good luck and happy hunting, Commander."

Reese didn't respond to Stone's tidings of success. He turned and left the room with the briefing package, which he was wringing tightly in his hands.

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## Chapter Fifty-four

Reese and the three members of his team disembarked under the cover of darkness on the western side of the island of Jamaica. The deserted beach was known as Bloody Bay; the name from the island's past when the bay was a stop for whalers to clean their catches, and the blood tainted the water red.

Reese remembered laughing at the irony when he learned of the origin of the bay's name and thinking about the mission he was to undertake. Nevertheless, he felt a blanket of fear settle over him at the thought of the reappearance of the blood-tainted waters; stained now with human blood because of what he was about to do. Death had become the monkey on his back which he could not escape from.

*Go—go—go!*

All four men leapt from the raft. They were all dressed in black, the exposed areas of skin darkened. Reese watched as his team dragged the raft ashore and hid it amongst the shore brush. Two days ago, he had studied the pictures from the reconnaissance flight that had shown the beach debris as well as the volcanic rock that comprised most of the shoreline which would serve as adequate cover for their approach. No one spoke as they unloaded their waterproof bags and prepared to move out.

Reese adjusted his night vision goggles, which reminded him how the vampires saw with a frightening clarity where others could not. At times, Reese imagined they even saw into the darkest depths of the human soul.

*Was it a gift or only a stark reminder of what they could never possess? Stop it, John. Not now! Focus!*

Reese moved toward the silent group and used hand signals to indicate the direction of travel they were to take. Each man nodded in acknowledgement. Even in the green illumination from his night vision goggles, Reese saw very little of their facial features, especially their eyes. Their eyes were covered by a specially designed eye device which did not enhance their vision but concealed them from detection. Reese was glad he couldn't see their gazes, because if he could, he would see evidence of the hunger that resided within them, a hunger that if not controlled could get him killed. Reese signaled the team and started forward; they moved quickly and quietly behind him.

A few kilometers later, the landscape changed from the deserted shoreline and typical palm trees that languished in the warm tropical air to the outskirts of a small tourist resort. Sand gave way to concrete and stone to accommodate those who

paid exorbitant amounts to vacation on the island. Reese observed his team as they lifted their heads to confirm with their keen senses the smell of civilization. Knowing their capabilities, instead of the clean saltwater scent that filled his nostrils, they smelled the perfume of human bodies and the abundance of blood energy that flowed within those bodies.

*They're working up an appetite; basking in the aroma of a long deprived and sought after meal that was to be served...*

All of this was a precursor of what was to come and Reese did not want to think about that. He turned his gaze from the men, knowing that he had to remain focused on the mission and not question his own morality at this moment. He removed a map and in the red glow of a small light he studied it, comparing landmarks in his sight to those on the chart. They were near the objective now.

The others gathered around him. With his hand motions, he indicated their current location and their next direction. The target was less than a kilometer away. Again they moved out, staying within the shadows, avoiding any ambient light from the resorts and the million dollar homes that were scattered around the area. Reese looked at his illuminated watch and glanced at the black horizon. He knew that everything must go according to plan if they were to make it back in time. The three men looked at him in a way he thought reflected concern, which he dispelled with a wave of his black-gloved hand. He hoped that time would also not become an enemy as he motioned for the men to follow him as he moved out.

Reese glanced at his watch. There had been no way to resolve the time of the incursion. Their sources confirmed the target would only be here one night before returning to the depths of the Colombian rainforests, and away from surveillance. To further complicate matters, Reese and his team's departure had been delayed until the moon had set. Complete darkness was essential to their success.

*We can do this. We can survive if we stay focused on the mission and don't run into any problems ... I hope.*

In minutes, a three-story building loomed out of the darkness, rising up from the volcanic hill just east of the bay where they had landed. Through his night vision goggles, Reese observed the features of the structure. A magnificent stairwell led to a large open veranda overlooking the bay, then continued upward for another two stories. Massive stone pillars curved into archways. The home, once the center of a large plantation, now had another use: as the headquarters for one of the largest drug-smuggling operations that received and transshipped cocaine from South America to the United States. This was where they would find their target.

As they approached the building, Reese observed the heavily-armed guards strategically placed to keep the entire area under surveillance. Not only was the area surrounding the mansion well-guarded, but it was void of any places to hide. Reese and his group stopped at the last piece of cover offered by the landscape, a

grouping of shrubs massed with a grove of palm trees. He removed his night vision goggles, placing them back into the pouch on his belt, and then motioned to his men to indicate their assignments. His last signal indicated he would wait here until they neutralized the defenses and signaled all clear.

As Reese finished his instructions, he watched as the hooded men removed their goggles. He braced himself for what he knew he would see. Although he had seen their eyes many times before the effect was always the same; it was like watching a door opening up to reveal the darkest depths of hell.

*So it begins; they're hungry and ready to feed...*

Reese quelled his fears and, for a moment, contemplated canceling the mission, but the thought left him. He looked away from the gaze of the men who still remained a mystery. But mystery or not, it was too late, they had passed the point of no return.

The three men of the team looked at each other and then raised their black-masked faces to the air as if smelling the scent of the foul beast they hunted. With their eye devices removed, their eyes glowed with the awful red hunger; the realization of found prey after a long hunt and that the kill was near at hand.

*They're ready...*

Reese watched as they prepared to go to what would surely be their deaths ... if they were mortal men. But he was the only mortal here, the weak link. His presence was almost a hindrance, but necessary to ensure the team followed orders.

Reese gave the “go” signal. The rest of his team vanished in a blur. He attempted to watch their advance using his binoculars. He caught glimpses of shadows and small distortions of light moving upon the compound from different angles; he knew that someone who had not been trained in what to look for would not see the momentary shifting of light.

Reese watched as his team soundlessly immobilized the first set of guards. The creatures leaped over barbed wire fences as if they were mere marionettes on strings simply jerked upward, as if not subject to the laws of gravity. In areas booby-trapped with devices designed to explode from weight disturbances or from detected body heat, they failed to respond to the men because there was no detectable body heat or they hovered inches above the ground as they made their way toward the mansion. Locked gates and doors were opened without any effort due to their extraordinary strength; they simply twisted the lock and chains until they snapped as if they were made of paper rather than steel. Within a matter of minutes they had conquered the presumed impenetrable defenses that would have stopped even the most capable military force.

*Human military force...*

As Reese watched the team arrive at the entrance of the building, he saw Dimitri give

the “wait” hand signal to Andre and Illiga. Reese prepared to move onto the next phase of the mission. He removed his Kevlar vest, keeping only his web belt. The attached pouches held only two items: a remote control and a 9mm handgun with silencer. By the time he finished and looked up, Dimitri had returned and signaled his readiness for Reese to go in.

Dimitri's gaze drifted up from the belt to Reese's face. Reese detected urgency in his expression instead of the usual calm. Dimitri the philosopher, as Reese thought of him, was seldom agitated. The only time Reese saw him in such a state was when General Stone starved the team prior to the mission. The general found it amusing, but Reese knew that it only created more of an opportunity for something to go wrong by having the creatures kill prematurely in order to....

*No ... don't think about that now!*

Even Johnson had warned the general of the danger of starving the creatures. Reese had liked Johnson, but he saw what was happening to him and thought that perhaps he was better off dead rather than fulfilling his desire to become like Dimitri and his men.

*There was no more time.*

Knowing that the next phase would be crucial to the success of the mission, Reese signaled he was ready. Dimitri escorted him past the downed guards. Reese looked upon the dead men; they appeared to be in a peaceful sleep but Reese knew that the reason they looked that way was because they had never seen their death coming. Their necks were snapped quickly and efficiently. They had been lucky. Reese had seen the results of when Dimitri and his men taunted their prey. They looked anything but peaceful; their faces were distorted in such expressions of horror that Reese thought they no longer looked human.

Approaching the mined and the barbed-wire areas, Dimitri lifted Reese off the ground without difficulty. Although Reese was probably the only person who understood these creatures, he still marveled at their abilities. He was transported safely and deposited at the entrance where Andre and Illiga waited. Reese nodded thanks to Dimitri, who did not respond to the gesture. Reese motioned for them to follow him.

The interior defenses were minimal, considering the impenetrability of the home, and consisted of a few posted guards who were easily circumvented. According to their intelligence source, (in this case the housekeeper, whose information had been bought with taxpayer's dollars) the target would be in the study. Reese stopped his team when he spotted a pair of guards stationed outside of the door. The guards were engaged in some type of card game, their attention focused on the flimsy card table instead of the corridor. Reese knew there was no other means of entry into the room. He signaled to Dimitri to immobilize the guards.

Dimitri gave no visible signal to the other members; however, seconds later the

guards were downed by the creatures before they had even realized that they were in danger. They weren't killed, but only paralyzed so that they could not speak or move. Their eyes were wide open in shock and disbelief as they lay on the cold marble floor in twisted horror, watching their attackers. But they weren't alone in their visible horror. Reese also knew what had been set into motion and what the inevitable outcome would be.

*There will be no stopping them...*

Reese tried to hide his revulsion, but he knew taking down the guards had excited the team members in an almost erotic way, because it added to the building anticipation of the promised feeding. Reese gave the hand signal to Dimitri to post one of his team with the two incapacitated guards while they entered the room. He watched as Dimitri signaled his order to Illiga with his hands and then added what could be done with the guards. Reese wished he didn't know what Dimitri had in mind for the men. The signal acknowledged and understood, Reese removed his weapon from its holster and the three entered the room.

The target lounged on the sofa, flanked by two young naked women who vied for his attention and distracted him from their entrance. Reese's intensive training took charge before his emotions could register the horror about to be committed. He signaled to Dimitri and Andre to complete their assignment.

*Now comes the tough part, the watching...*

Reese was an observer with his own personal view into hell.

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## Chapter Fifty-five

Reese watched as Dimitri and Andre slowly approached the women. He knew they did not want to rush the moment, but to savor it. One of the women caught their movement and looked in their direction; for several seconds she stared, her mesmerized gaze watching the men dressed in black approach. As her eyes widened in surprise, Reese caught a blur of motion as Andre was upon the women. In the next few seconds everything happened at a speed that would have confused anyone else as to what actually happened in that room. Yet to Reese, it felt like a lifetime.

Andre separated the women from their target, keeping a chokehold on both of them to keep them quiet. The recipient of the women's favors was a male named Carlos, a notorious drug overlord of the Colombian cartel. He peered at the three men who had somehow gained access to his chambers, his facial features contorted in amazement.

"How did you get in here?" he demanded in a thick Spanish accent. *"Protectores! Prisa!"*

He attempted to rise, but his pants around his knees only allowed him to stagger back like a drunken man. As his chest rose in obvious preparation to scream again, Dimitri was upon him and effortlessly backhanded him. Carlos' body lifted off of the floor and he flew for several feet before crashing back onto the floor.

Dimitri's hand was covered with Carlos' blood from where he had struck him. He raised it to his face and sniffed at it curiously. Reese's mind associated the scene with that of a wine connoisseur checking out the vintage of a fine wine. Even though Dimitri was still wearing his black ski mask, Reese could tell by the movement of the fabric that his lips had formed into a smile across his face. The thought of that smile caused a sickening wave of nausea to wash through his stomach.

Reese turned away from Dimitri and Andre and the game of cat-and-mouse they played. He checked his watch, and then looked out the large window located behind the sofa. Turning back, he gestured by hand signal to Dimitri and Andre that they were out of time.

*Do it now and may all of us be damned...*

Without warning and in perfect unison, Dimitri used one hand to remove his mask, and his other to remove Andre's, revealing their faces and the large metal collars around their necks. Their features reflected a strong Slavic appearance, the dark hair and eyes set into faces that were strong, but wrinkled from the ravages of the rough

environment of the Balkans. However, when they opened their mouths, the revealed fangs removed any likeness to humans.

A part of Reese wanted to shout: *Don't do it! Just kill Carlos and get out of here.* He knew they didn't have time to waste if they were going to get out. But he also knew any attempts to stop Andre and Dimitri would be to no avail. They had been purposely deprived of nourishment for this mission and they had to feed in order to survive. Reese's hand curled around the device in the pouch that controlled the collars that the team wore, but he released his grip on it, letting his hand fall to his side as his military training commandeered his actions.

*We are still safe...*

Intelligence had confirmed that the room was soundproof and the alarms were silent. If he was going to get away, he needed all of the team to do it. His only choice was to watch the carnage and hope it was over quickly.

As if sensing Reese's urgency, Andre, who held the two women, bit into the neck of one, slashing the flesh in a wild frenzy, and drinking deeply. The other woman struggled to cry out as she watched the gruesome act, but his paralyzing hold was too powerful, leaving her only the choice of closing her eyes. Finished with the one, he released his hold and she slumped to the floor. Then he turned toward the other and killed her as he fed off her life-sustaining blood..

Carlos, still dazed from his fall, looked on in horror as the creature licked and sucked the fluid from his former paramours. Dimitri approached him, baring his large fangs. He lifted him off the ground, gashing the man's neck with a long sharp claw which had arisen from what had earlier appeared as a normal hand. He greedily drank the blood that flowed from the gaping wound.

Reese tried to block out the sounds, but the slurping of blood and the tearing of flesh echoed in his mind. He pushed aside his feelings of disgust. If they were going to survive, they had to get out of here.

"Dimitri, Andre, we have to go now!" Reese whispered as loud as he dare. "Dawn is coming!"

Both Dimitri and Andre looked up, their faces covered with blood and pieces of flesh.

"Finish it as instructed!" Reese demanded. "Now!"

Andre and Dimitri removed knives from the sheaths on their belts and slit what remained of their victims' throats to make it appear as a typical murder of someone who had crossed another drug cartel, the universal sign of a traitor's punishment. Putting on their dark masks, they exited the room.

Reese, stepping out into the corridor first, saw that Illiga had carried out the same procedure on the two guards. His face was covered with blood, and his cheeks



flushed with a glow that radiated life.

"Put your hood on," Reese whispered.

Illiga looked toward Dimitri for a brief instant, as if seeking confirmation, and then replaced his hood.

Reese looked at the three of them. Blood still dripped from the opening in the masks where their mouth was. The blood streaked their necks, and wetted their clothing. Reese's gaze centered on Dimitri, demanding an explanation.

"Why the women?" Reese asked, in a soft but demanding voice.

Dimitri's expression indicated that no explanation was required, but still he answered. "Casualties of war," he said in a calm and rational voice, his earlier agitation satiated by the blood he had taken.

Andre and Illiga nodded their agreement.

"The mission is accomplished, Commander Reese," Dimitri continued. His voice remained calm, without any hint of remorse.

"You pompous bastard," Reese said, as he lowered his head while shaking it slowly.

"You wish to speak of hypocrisy now?" Dimitri asked.

"You always twist it around, don't you?" Reese said. "Your philosophy always suits the occasion." Reese walked away from Dimitri and the others. Should he condemn himself for the acts of cruelty he'd witnessed? He had ignored the signs and that made him an accomplice to the actual events. The shock and disbelief was about to overcome him, but he knew this was not the time or the place for that. But something had to be done. After a few moments, he looked at the team and said, "Let's get back to the beach."

In complete silence, they made their way back to the beach. The oncoming dawn spelled death to the creatures as well as Reese if he were caught. The guards at the home would have been replaced by now and the carnage discovered. Once the alarm was sounded, the search would begin.

As they arrived at the beach, they uncovered the zodiac raft and placed it into the water. As they paddled toward the gray military ship that waited for them, the first signs of a brightening sky showed in the east. The dawn was also accompanied by the sounds of vehicles, their engines roaring, as they tore through the sand on the beach in pursuit.

"Perhaps we are not going to make it," said Dimitri. "We each have our own enemy coming for us. The sun and its holy light for my men and I, and for you, those that your General Stone seeks to kill. Symmetry once again."

"Shut the hell up and row, you son-of-a-bitch!" Reese shouted at him. "If you love

life as much as you say you do, then paddle! Or do you want to end it? Have you run out of your hypocrisy and philosophy all at once? Have you had enough of this madness?"

Dimitri said nothing as he continued to paddle.

"No," Reese continued. "That would be too simple for you, wouldn't it? You like it when things are complicated. It gives you something to contemplate over all that time you have ... which you keep reminding me of. Well, damn it, I submit to you that time is running out—for both of us."

Reese turned from Dimitri and waved his arms at the men standing on the bridge of the ship. "Bring the ship closer and turn it to block the sunlight! Hurry!" he yelled.

The patrol craft moved closer, turning the silhouette of the ship toward the east attempting to block the early morning light. The glaring white letters PC-1 emblazoned on the forward part of her hull appeared ghostly in the pre-dawn light as sporadic gunfire erupted from the beach and fell harmlessly short of their intended target.

"It appears we may live for a while longer," Dimitri said as shade from the ship's superstructure bathed them in dark gray. "We live to debate another time, Commander."

"It appears that way," said Reese. "But this must end; we must talk about this madness—"

Reese stopped speaking because the raft was now alongside the ship and the ship's company was ready to get them on board quickly. He remained in the zodiac raft as the three members of his team scrambled onto the ship and hurried below deck. Finally, Reese came on board as crewmembers pulled in the raft. The ship turned away from the coast and headed out to sea.

The young commander of the ship, a naval lieutenant, approached Reese.

"Operation Red Blood accomplished, Commander?" he asked in a tone that reeked of superiority. Reese knew that the lieutenant had not been overjoyed with the assignment and the fact that Reese had been assigned operational control only made matters worse. He had an attitude that Reese was not in the mood for, especially at this moment.

Reese turned toward the lieutenant as he pulled the black mask off of his face.

"Never mind about my mission, Lieutenant," he barked. "Just get us back to base as soon as possible, and remember, the area where my men are at is not to be entered by anyone except the Navy SEALs in my unit. Got that?"

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant answered, surprised by Reese's assertive and unexpected abruptness.

Reese watched as the lieutenant returned to the bridge of the USS Cyclone. He knew the man would waste no time in giving the order to return to base to the officer of the deck so that they could put some distance between themselves and the island.

Reese looked at the black hood he held in his hand. There were dark blotches on it—apparent blood splatter from the earlier kills by the vampires. He had not seen it earlier and it served as a harsh reminder that no matter how far he tried to distance himself from the killing, he couldn't. He felt his stomach react uncomfortably. It made him think about the distinctly different perspectives that he and Dimitri had on so many things. Reese tossed the ruined hood over the ship's side and into the wake of the patrol craft as it picked up speed. As he watched the water, he drifted off into his thoughts.

*How the hell had it come to all this...*

*[PAGEBREAK]*

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## Chapter Fifty-six

The mission had been completed. Dimitri and his men were safely below decks and Reese remained on deck of the USS Cyclone. As the sun began its ascent into the sky, the redness of the sunrise reminding him of the color of blood and the way in which Dimitri and his men had killed the drug lord, his two women and many of the guards only hours ago. As he thought about what had just been done, he vomited over the side of the ship.

As he tried to regain his composure, Reese realized the time for thinking was done. He had to do something. What General Stone was doing was nothing like what would be described as a lawful order from a superior officer. At the same time, Reese knew he wasn't being naïve about the elimination of men who plied the drug trades. It wasn't the deaths of the drug dealers that bothered him, but that they had been killed without the use of the judicial system that bothered him more. He was no fool and knew the system was flawed, but Stone had allowed himself to decide the fate of who lived and died. And at what point would that reasoning be applied to other less-desirable people? Where would it all end?

And what about the creatures? They were now playing the role of executioner for Stone in order to survive. And his own role, didn't that make him responsible as well? Had he not played an important role in devising and implementing the attack? Was that right? Could he live for the rest of his life knowing that it was he who had been the catalyst? All he had ever wanted was to study the creatures, the myth and legends in physical form right in front of him, a dream of a lifetime come true but twisted for Stone's perverse crusade.

*There had to be a way out of this.*

What was he thinking? Was he even considering the thought of turning these creatures loose? What was the other choice? To kill them? However, if he chose any of these options, he knew Stone would show him no mercy. Reese would meet with an accident before he even reached any kind of legal proceeding against him. If Stone could do all of this without being detected by any government agency or other aspect of the military, getting rid of one lowly commander wouldn't be any big problem. Accidents happen, and at the disposal of Stone, Reese thought as he remembered the story that had been contrived to cover the deaths of the SEALs who had been killed in the capture operation.

The option of turning the creatures loose was not entirely without consequence either. What would they do? Would they kill indiscriminately as they had been taught to do so by Stone, or would they resort back to their cattle? Where would they live? This was not the Balkans. Reese rubbed his forehead in frustration. He had two days to decide what to do; that was how long it would take to get back to the base in Little Creek.

He went below deck to check on the creatures. As usual, there was a guard posted outside of the entrance to their quarters, the remote activation device securely attached to the belt. It was identical to the one that Reese had in his possession; the two-man rule was always followed.

"Everything secure?" Reese asked.

"Yes, sir," the young Navy SEAL replied.

"Good," Reese said, the weariness in his voice apparent. "I'm going to get some sleep. Wake me if you need anything."

"Yes, sir."

Reese turned and went to his stateroom. He lay on his rack, listening to the sound of the ship's engines and feeling the soothing motion of the ship as it cut through the smooth Caribbean waters. He closed his eyes and drifted off into a troubled sleep.

Reese opened his eyes and found himself sitting in a small room. In the chair across from him sat Lieutenant Johnson. He was dressed in his camouflage clothing that he wore on his last fatal mission. He appeared normal in all respects but one; in his chest, there were three holes in his uniform where the large round bullets had entered into him, leaving a hole about three inches in diameter for each one.

"What the hell..." Reese muttered.

"Commander," Johnson said, in the emotionless greeting tone Reese remembered.

"You're dead ... you were killed on the mission!" Reese exclaimed. "This is a dream..."

"Yes, sir, I was killed," Johnson replied.

"Then what is ... this?"

"This is to answer your question—he wouldn't do it," Johnson said.

"What? Who wouldn't?" Reese asked.

"He didn't take me."

"Who—what are you talking about?"

"Dimitri didn't make me into a vampire. I asked him to—I begged him to, but he refused to do it."

"Why did you—"

"I wanted to be one of them. Since the first time I saw them, I wanted it. I think you knew that but you didn't say anything, perhaps because you had your own obsession with them."

"Why wouldn't he do it?" Reese asked.

"He said it was better this way."

"What did he mean?" Reese asked.

"Putting an end to it—all of it. But then, I'm just telling you what you already know."

"But how to end all of this is the question?"

"Give the general what he understands—death. You must leave no room for question or doubt," Johnson said. "No room," he repeated.

Then everything faded out.

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## Chapter Fifty-seven

It was almost 7 PM when Reese awoke with the image of Johnson still fresh in his mind. He knew the dream was not any kind of crossing over or visitation from the dead; it was simply his mind working through the issues in its own way. However, the image of Johnson had been somewhat nerve-wracking and its effect had left a profound feeling within him. Yet he had a good idea of purpose and he felt both exhilarated and scared about what he was planning.

He imagined the sun was just going down; Dimitri and his men would also just be waking. Reese thought how he had adjusted so much to their time schedule and nocturnal habits. He also knew that their working together had an even deeper effect upon each other, one that was about to change one way or another.

Reese hopped out of his rack and quickly showered. He then made his way to the small wardroom galley, where he had some coffee and ate some leftovers from dinner which were destined for those who were to come on duty at midnight.

After several cups of coffee, he felt ready to see Dimitri. Leaving the wardroom, he made his way to the creatures' quarters, the desire to talk with them increasing as he got closer to them. He approached the hatch for their quarters and was greeted by the guards on duty.

"Sir," one of them, said as they both came to attention.

"Are they awake?" Reese asked.

"Yes, sir. They just asked to see you a few minutes ago."

"Very well," Reese said. "Let's see what they want."

The hatch was un-dogged and Reese entered into their quarters where he found Dimitri and his men sitting around a small table, obviously engrossed in some kind of discussion.

"Am I interrupting?" Reese asked.

"No, come in, please," Dimitri said.

Reese entered the small area and sat in a chair that faced the three of them. Their faces appeared troubled; Reese wondered if perhaps the same issues that plagued him troubled them, too.

"I see," Reese began, "that maybe you have been talking about the same subject I

have been thinking about."

"And what might that be?" Dimitri asked, as his eyebrows rose.

"Putting an end to this," Reese said simply. There was no time for any banter or philosophical issues. They had to get right to the point of the matter.

"Interesting thoughts, Commander. I would like to hear your point of view on the matter."

"You will, but first I have another question for you," Reese said.

Dimitri looked toward Andre and Iliga, who rose from their chairs and moved away from the table. Dimitri returned his gaze to Reese, as if inviting him to proceed with his question.

"Before Johnson died, did he ask to become one of you?"

"Yes," Dimitri answered, without hesitating.

"But you obviously did not change him. Why?"

"There is enough pain in this world. I shall not contribute anymore to it. Johnson was filled with anger from his past and if he were changed, he would have continued on that path. I decided a long time ago that if men are supposed to die at a certain time, then that is the way it shall be. I am not God, nor do I wish to play the role. What happened to my men and I was also fate in some way. I accept that and the role it has placed me in. I shall continue to live as long as I can; I do not wish to die, however I shall not make another vampire."

"So you're telling me you have some moralistic code you live by?" Reese asked.

"I have been telling you that all along," Dimitri replied. "Our philosophical debates have not been whimsical by any means. We are not creatures that live without reason, as the general would have you believe."

"I do not agree with what you are being used for," Reese said. "I was blinded by my own selfish desires to learn about you. I was not even aware until this mission what you were actually doing ... I assumed you were just spying on the enemy."

"The general has plans for a New World," Dimitri said. "Everything will work a certain way-his way."

"Those are his plans, not mine or even the military's, for all I know. He is working totally on his own." Reese paused, pondering the major question in his mind—would his idea work?

"You want to be able to live with the decision you make," Dimitri said, as if sensing his thoughts.

"Yes," Reese answered. "Suppose you were released, then what?"

"We would go home," Dimitri said, without much thought. "This is a new world which wants to have everything explained. In Europe, there are places that would ignore our existence, as they have all these years."

"I don't know. There is another choice."

"Death?" Dimitri asked. "You must understand that we are not considering that option."

"But if you kill—"

"Why is this such a difficult concept for you to comprehend?" Dimitri said, interrupting him. "My kind has been doing this for all these years. Have you not thought that perhaps it is part of the complete cycle of this planet? Can you not believe that creatures such as ourselves do in fact have a place in civilization, as much as anyone or anything else?"

"What do you mean?" Reese asked.

"Your Hollywood has painted us as the evil creatures that kill and destroy life. Creatures that are of the dark. We hide from the light of God and truth because we are from hell itself." He paused. "But what everyone misses is the one common factor that transcends all these years."

"And that is?"

"That we have been here since the beginning of time. You yourself have studied us through the literature that began as early as man's ability to write them down." Dimitri paused for a few seconds, then said, "You still don't see it do you? What I suggest is that perhaps we are one of God's creatures, just as yourself."

"What? That's preposterous," Reese replied.

"Is it now?" Dimitri asked. "Are you going to tell me that those men we killed, judged evil by numerous aspects of civilized society, are not God's creatures?"

"Of course, all of man is," Reese said.

"What of the animals that kill in the wild, sometimes they kill humans, too. Are these not creatures of God?"

"Yes."

"Then why is it so hard to comprehend that we ourselves are creatures of God, put here on this Earth to play a role in the scheme of things, just as man does. We have feelings just as you do. Do we not hunger, do we not lust as you do? Do we not seek out friendship? We love, we hurt, we are happy, we are sad. Are these not feelings that you also possess?"



"No, I don't believe all that. I can't. What of the stories—the myths and legends that tell us of your destructiveness and wanton murder?"

"They are what they are. Fabrications of the period of time that they were written in, to entertain and amuse those that wrote them. Things that were not understood or explained by ordinary means were subjugated to the realm of the supernatural and became your myths and legends. Were not people burned at the stake for saying or doing things that were contradictory to what was commonly called the truth or doctrine of the day?" Dimitri asked, but answered his own question before Reese did. "Of course they were. So here we are; creatures that live not in accordance with the norm of the period, would we not be branded the evil denizens of hell?"

"I suppose it's possible," Reese conceded.

"I cannot show you proof of what I am asserting, but even in your society today, prejudices still exists against those that are different in one way or another. It may not be in the depth of what it had once been, but it is still there."

"That's true," Reese said. "But what you suggest is still a far stretch."

"You want proof, I have none to offer, only my beliefs of the world and the creature's within it. But then I ask you, is not religion itself only a theory? Can you show me proof that God even exists?"

"No," Reese said. "I cannot."

"So you ask me what we would do if we were released? We would go on with our lives, as we have been doing before we were discovered. Because it is the things we do that make us what we are, and perhaps that is what we were meant to do all along," Dimitri said with conviction. "You removed us from where we belong, but was that fate? Who knows." Dimitri shook his head. "But the one thing that remains is that we have been on this planet as long as man has been, whether placed here or created by one of the creatures that God also put on this Earth. If there is logic to what happens in the world, the natural assumption dictates that we fill some role that we were destined to whether right or wrong."

They sat in silence for a few moments.

Reese had come here to give Dimitri the opportunity to explain his own thoughts in the matter and he had. The question that remained was could Reese live with what he knew had to be done. He looked into the eyes of the vampire with feelings of admiration and fear. There was a certain undeniable logic to his argument that Reese could not deny. Baring all religious aspects from the discussion, for they were always the most controversial and biased, everything else pointed toward the conclusion that Dimitri had argued, with the exception of perhaps one point.

Mankind had overwhelming and consistently used the media of literature and film to portray these creatures in a certain light dependent upon the social climate of the

society. What Reese wondered was why had the vampires been used, instead of some other form of expression? Why had they become timeless over the centuries? Was there some other driving motive of the use of these creatures he didn't understand? Or was it, to use Dimitri's term, their fate? Was it God's will that they be the figure used to portray the good and bad in society?

"Dimitri," Reese said. "Answer me one question."

"What?"

"What is the goal of your existence?"

"Goal?" Dimitri asked.

"Yes. What do you see as your prime motivation to live?" clarified Reese.

Dimitri looked upon Reese, his eyes unmoving. "Like every other man, to find our purpose in the grand scheme of life."

Reese smiled. "Yes. We are alike in many ways, aren't we? We all must have purpose, our own destiny to fulfill."

"And yours?" Dimitri asked. "What is your purpose? What do you want?"

"What I want and what I must do are two completely different things. I guess there is a difference after all in the way we look at things."

"How so?" Dimitri asked.

"You have time to wait for things to happen. On the other hand, we mortals do not have that luxury. We must decide among the existing possibilities for the greater good."

"Commander," Dimitri said. "For the first time since we have met and talked, I do not understand what you are trying to say. Perhaps it is something that our length of life no longer permits me to understand?"

"Perhaps," Reese agreed. "But now is not the time for such discussion. I have a plan I want to talk with you about but it will require that you trust me implicitly. Can you do that?"

"Our lives are in your hands," Dimitri said simply.

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## Chapter Fifty-eight

The USS Cyclone was two hours from entering port at the Naval Amphibious Base Little Creek, under the darkness of a moonless night. As Reese walked onto the bridge of the ship he allowed his eyes to adjust to the darkness and the glowing red lights of the equipment. As his vision improved, he saw the young lieutenant, the ship's commanding officer, looking through a pair of night vision binoculars, scanning the ocean for any other craft.

There were several other crewmembers at the various watch stations, busy beginning to make the required preparations for entering port. He heard several of the low-key conversations going on, which consisted of the usual banter of returning home. As was the usual custom, the crew was anxious to get home again to see family and loved ones. Reese slowly approached the lieutenant.

"Almost home?" Reese asked.

"Yes, sir," he answered. "Less than two hours. The current is with us, so we should—"

"What the—" screamed one of the petty officers on watch.

Both men turned in the direction of the petty officer, just in time to see three dark figures exploding onto the bridge, brandishing weapons. They knocked down anyone who approached them. The boatswain mate on watch dove for the ship's announcing system to call a security alert; however, one of the men took him out with the butt of a weapon before he could get to the microphone.

Reese stared in disbelief at Dimitri and his two men as they quickly took control of the bridge.

"What are you doing?" Reese shouted. "You will die for this!"

"Only if you are alive to press that button on the device you carry on your belt," Dimitri said, as he held up another similar device in his hand.

"Where did you get that?" Reese asked, his voice both questioning and nervous in its tone. "It won't do you any good—"

"The two guards guarding us below had a slight accident," Dimitri said calmly. "If you do not wish to have the same fate, I suggest you do as I say."

Reese did not answer, but his hand slowly moved toward the device on his belt.

"I didn't think so," Dimitri said as he moved forward in a blur of movement and removed the device from Reese's belt. In the same instant, Dimitri reached up toward Reese's head and grabbed a handful of hair. Removing a knife from its sheath, he sliced the handful of hair from Reese's head. He then wrapped the hair around the sensing device of the remote control.

"DNA is a wonderful thing," Dimitri said. "It's everywhere on the human body, even in hair. The remote control device is happy, see," he said, as he held up the device taken from the guards below. It too had hair wrapped around the sensor area, just like the one taken from Reese.

"Son of a bitch!" Reese exclaimed. "It doesn't matter. Where will you go? You can't hide from us! You filth—"

Dimitri backhanded Reese, knocking him off his feet and sending him sliding across the floor of the bridge.

"That was for capturing us. I won't kill you because that would be too easy. We want you to keep looking over your shoulder for us, because we will come for you later. You just won't know when."

Dimitri then turned toward the other two figures. "Put the raft in the water," he said. The two moved silently off the bridge and headed aft to do so.

"Your crew is unharmed," Dimitri said to the lieutenant. "We did not kill anyone ... yet. We will leave peaceful as long as you do not interfere with us."

"And where will you go?" Reese asked. He still sat on the floor, the lieutenant alongside him, trying to assist him to stand. Reese wiped at the blood that flowed from his lip where Dimitri had hit him.

"That is none of your concern," Dimitri said.

"You will be hunted down and killed."

"Maybe, but I don't think so. What is General Stone going to tell everyone? That there are vampires on the loose?" he laughed. "I don't think so."

"But you..." Reese started.

"I'd love to talk some more, but I really must be going now." Dimitri walked over to the communications console and slammed his hand into the equipment several times, watching the sparks from bursting CRT screens erupt, ensuring that it was unworkable. He turned toward the lieutenant. "If anyone follows us, we will kill them." Then he turned toward Reese. "Until we meet again, Commander." Dimitri smiled and then disappeared from the bridge.

"Help me up," Reese said. "I have to get to my quarters!" The lieutenant helped Reese up to his feet.

"What do you want us to do?" he asked.

"Nothing. Do not do anything until I get back!"

"But they are getting away!"

"Do nothing, Lieutenant!" Reese screamed. "I am in operational control of these creatures! Just track their movement."

"Yes, sir!" the lieutenant acknowledged, his voice sounding unwilling to Reese's order.

Reese dashed off the bridge. Less than a minute later, he returned to the bridge. In his hand, he held another remote control device, similar to the one on his belt that Dimitri had removed from him.

"Where are they?" Reese asked.

The lieutenant standing next to the radar screen spoke. "About 200 yards to the east." Turning away from the screen, the lieutenant saw the device in Reese's hand. "What's that?" he asked.

Reese smiled. "It's another device that Dimitri did not know about. We had it made just in case—in the event something like this would happen. I need all of this recorded in the ship's log," Reese said. "There will no doubt be an investigation into this and we have to make sure of all of the facts."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant answered. "Boatswain's mate!"

"Sir," the petty officer answered.

"Ensure this is all logged with appropriate times."

"Yes, sir."

"Lieutenant," Reese said. "Do you agree that we have lost positive control of the members of my team?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you agree that there is no other recourse but to eradicate them?"

The lieutenant hesitated.

Reese said firmly, "The longer we wait, the more we risk them getting out of range of this device."

"Yes, sir, I agree that there is no other recourse," the lieutenant answered. "Logged and noted in the ship's log."

Reese pressed the illuminated button on the device. The small LED bulb flashed

from green to red.

"That's it," Reese said, as he tossed the device on the floor. "As soon as some of your crew is revived, we can collect the raft."

"And bodies?" the lieutenant asked.

"There won't be any bodies," Reese said calmly. "Just a raft with some ash remains."

"Sir?"

"Never mind, Lieutenant. The less you know the better. I'm going to my quarters." Reese turned to leave the bridge, but stopped and looked back at the confused lieutenant. "If I were you, I would start preparing for the debriefing from hell. There is going to be one pissed-off four-star general that's going to want someone's ass, probably mine. You won't want to piss him off, so make sure that the log reflects everything."

"Yes, sir."

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## Chapter Fifty-nine

"Such a waste," Stone said to Reese, Barkley and Scott as they sat around the conference table at the facility in Little Creek. Everyone had a copy of the ship's log, which delineated in excruciating detail the events that had transpired on the bridge of the USS Cyclone hours ago.

"What I can't understand is why?" Scott asked. "Why did they do it if they knew it would be their deaths?"

"They didn't know about the third device on board the ship," Reese said. "They assumed that two was all there was and that they had eliminated that threat by using the hair to maintain the DNA integrity of the device."

"But wasn't there an anti-tampering device built into the collars?" Stone asked.

"Yes, sir, there was," Reese answered. "I believe they knew that if they were out of range long enough, the elixir would lose effectiveness and when it did, it wouldn't matter anymore if they were injected or not."

"It's over," Stone said. "Damn it, here we had the perfect opportunity to change the world, and now it's gone." He turned toward Reese. "Any chance of finding any more of these creatures?"

"Who knows?" Reese said. "There are probably more out there, but they are very good at not being found. You would have to devote a lot of assets to trying to locate others—if they exist."

"No. We can't afford to attract any more attention," Stone said. "I already have a lot of explaining to do as it is. But at least two missions were accomplished." He looked at Reese and Barkley and said, "You will be returned to your original units with a reminder that all of this is top secret and not to be discussed with anyone until it is, if ever, declassified."

They nodded in understanding.

"Then that's it, gentleman," Stone said as he rose. "You are dismissed."

As they walked out of the room, Reese couldn't help feeling uneasy. The ease by which Stone had accepted the loss of the creatures was not as he had expected. Perhaps he had become more rational about them and his ideas for the future. Reese had a hard time swallowing that line of thinking, but for the moment, there was no reason to think anything else. *It was over.*

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As Reese and Barkley closed the door behind them, Stone turned to Scott. "Is the backup plan proceeding?"

Scott's demeanor became cautious. "We're not sure, sir. The two bodies you had me bring back from Kosovo have remained in some sort of coma or sleep."

"What does that mean?" Stone said, with an edge to his voice. "I'm not in a very good mood right now, Commander. More bad news *is not* what I am in the mood for."

"Sir, we can't explain—"

"Commander," Stone said, raising his hand to silence Scott. "When I told you to bring back the bodies of Idriz Laupki's two dead daughters when this all began, I gave specific orders on what I wanted done with them. Didn't I give you a list of things?"

"Yes, sir, you did," Scott replied.

"Was not one of the things you were supposed to learn was how to revive them?"

"Yes, sir, it was. However, in all the recorded conversations we have of Dimitri and Reese, the subject was not addressed."

"Why not?" Stone asked, the anger clearly evident in his voice.

"We don't know, sir. For some reason, this subject was clearly avoided."

"They probably knew their conversations were being recorded and didn't want to give away details that we could use," Stone said in disgust. "That damn Reese, he thought he was above all this with his moralistic bullshit."

"Sir, perhaps we should bring him in on this—"

"Hell, no!" Stone shouted. "That's the last thing we want to do. You saw the way he reacted with using grown men. How do you think he would feel if he knew we had two small girls? He would bounce off the bulkheads screaming how inhuman what we are doing is!"

"But sir, he may be the only one who can assist us," Stone offered.

"That might be true, but there must be other types we can go to. He can't be the only vampire authority. Christ, can't our own people tell us anything?"

"They're not sure what is happening to them, but we do know what is not happening."

"Scott," Stone said. "Stop talking like a fucking idiot. What the hell do you mean?"

"The doctors we have on this can't tell specifically what is happening to the two



bodies, but what they *do* know is that their bodies are not decaying either. So something is or has happened to cause this."

"Don't they have any idea on how to bring them to consciousness?" Stone asked.

"They are pursuing many different approaches, but none have been successful. They think that perhaps the process was not completed and—"

"I don't care what they think!" Stone shouted. "All I want is results. I have a mission I am going to finish and I will have them. Do you hear me? I will have them alive and conscious."

"But, sir—"

"Shut up and listen! These doctors are probably too smart for their own good. How have they tried to revive them?"

"They have used drugs to try and restart their bodily functions. Then they tried to stimulate their hearts with electricity to—"

"They look to modern medicine for answers to century-old questions. These dumb asses can't stop thinking in terms of a normal living being. These two girls are no longer living beings so the traditional approach does not apply. Tell them to give them a transfusion."

"A transfusion?" Scott asked. "But if they aren't—"

"Yes, a goddamned fucking blood transfusion!" Stone screamed.

"No, sir, I don't believe they have tried that."

"Idiots! Then get them to do it now. These creatures live on blood they ingest—even I know that. These doctors are wasting time in trying to restart organs that they no longer require. Of course, it's not going to work. Tell them not to give them that frozen shit either. I want them to give them blood directly from a living human being."

"But who—"

"I don't give a rat's ass where or who they get it from," Stone said. "Just do it!"

"Yes, sir. I'll see to it."

"If it works, get them moved to the secure compound at the amphibious base. We might as well get our money's worth out of it."

"Sir, with this congressional attention, do you think that this is a good idea—"

"I don't give a shit about the pencil neck assholes—just do it!"

"Yes, sir. But there is one thing you should be aware of."

"What's that?"

"We've been getting some inquiries through the Joint Chiefs from some of the spooks."

That piqued Stone's interest. "Which one was it? CIA?" he asked.

"JCS wouldn't say," Scott answered.

"Wouldn't say or didn't know?" Stone asked.

"I don't know."

"What are they aware of?" Stone asked.

"We had to get spook involvement when we had the shipment back to the States of the two bodies. Apparently whichever agency was involved, traced them to SOCOM, and it raised a lot of eyebrows and now the questions are flying of why we brought back non-US citizen bodies at such a priority."

"Then they don't know shit. Just more overpaid civil servants who don't know their ass from a hole in the ground. Don't worry about it. If they have any questions, they can come to me and I will deal with them."

\* \* \* \*

Reese and Barkley gathered their things from their quarters and were awaiting the duty van to take them back to their vehicles. As they waited, they talked of different things to pass the time.

"Back to Kosovo for you?" Reese asked.

"No, the general was able to get me orders back stateside. I guess it was a form of payback. You?" he asked Reese.

"Back to my desk job right here, business as usual. I'll finish out the last couple months of my tour and then retire. Time to move on to something new."

"That's great," Barkley said cheerfully. "Congratulations. What a note to end a career on. Wasn't this whole thing bizarre? Right down to the cliffhanging ending. Yeah, interesting..."

Reese heard the hesitancy in Barkley's voice.

"What's wrong, Sam?" Reese asked.

"Something's bugging me."

"What's that?"

Barkley looked at Reese and said in a serious tone, "Don't get me wrong, I'm not insinuating anything, John, but when did you have the extra remote device

made—the one that you used to activate the collars? I thought I had all the spares with me in medical."

"You must have missed that one," Reese said. "I have been known to have sticky fingers at times."

Barkley looked at Reese with a questioning look, but then smiled. "You Navy guys are all the same, aren't you?"

"How's that?" Reese asked.

"Thieves at heart," he said and laughed. Reese laughed along with him.

"Damn, you figured me out," Reese said and clapped him on the back. He then turned away from Barkley and let out a sigh of relief.

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## Chapter Sixty

Several months later, John Reese, recently retired commander from the U.S. Navy, was looking through the evening addition of the *Virginian Pilot* and stopped when he read the heading of an article: *Abrupt Decline of Crime in the Norfolk Ocean View Area*. As he read further, the article explained that the once crime-ridden areas of Ocean View had become devoid of hardened criminal elements that had used the area as a source for numerous criminal activities. Tourism was on a healthy recovery not seen for the past twenty years. Developers were lining up to invest in the area once considered the armpit of Virginia.

This amazing turnaround of one of the most notorious areas of Norfolk was directly accredited to the police force, who commented, "The hard work of the vice branch has made significant contributions to the dramatic change. The dedicated men and women of the police force have taken back their city."

Further in the article, buried at the very end, there was an anonymous comment from a member of the force that claimed that the reduction of the crime was a result of a mysterious disappearance of the crime element and not from the direct actions of the police force.

There was no comment from the police force on the remarks and they were attributed to a disgruntled employee looking to make trouble by insinuating something else had caused the decline.

Reese put down the paper as he glanced toward the window. It was almost sunset and he thought he should probably get some rest. It was going to be a long night as he planned to go out and search for the nightmare of his own dreams that he had unleashed upon the city of Norfolk.

\* \* \* \*

It was close to midnight as Reese sat at a table in the bar called The Mad Sailor, the fourth bar he had been in this evening. It was one of several bars along the strip, an area adjacent to the Naval Station, which made it an opportune environment for drug dealers, prostitutes and assorted others to attempt to make sales to the thousands of sailors that claimed Norfolk as their home.

"What can I get you?" the waitress asked, as she placed the napkin on the table.

"How about a beer?" Reese said.

"What kind?"

"Whatever you have on tap will be fine."

The waitress hurried off to fill his order. Reese scanned the small crowd of people. He assumed it would have been more crowded for a Friday night, but not having been here before, he wasn't really sure what to expect.

"Here you go," the waitress said, placing the beer on napkin. "Two bucks."

Reese gave her a five. "Keep it."

"Thanks," she said, as she gave him a friendly smile.

"Is this what you would call a normal crowd for a Friday night?" he asked.

"It was crowded earlier, during the happy hour. But the past few weeks, it has been quiet."

"Why?" Reese asked.

"I wouldn't want to say ... but we had some bad kind of people hanging around, if you know what I mean."

"Like?"

"Oh the usual, druggies, prostitutes, drunks—you know."

"So what happened?"

"They all just ... went away."

"Disappeared?"

She leaned closer to him and spoke in a lower voice as to not be overheard. "I think the cops have some kind of thing going on. Like forgetting about due process and just rounding the bad guys up and taking them away like to another town or ... something to get rid of them."

"I think I read about that in the paper just today," Reese said.

"You believe what you read in the paper?" She laughed. "You're a—"

"Sally," the bartender called the waitress.

"Got to get to work. Nice talking to you. Maybe I'll see you around?"

"You never know. Thanks."

Reese watched as she walked away. She was kind of cute, he thought. Maybe he would—

"Mind if I join you?"

Reese jumped at the voice. His shock was not from the surprise of hearing a voice, but that he immediately recognized it. His own reaction confused him and made him think that perhaps he had made a mistake by coming to this bar.

"Mind if I join you?" the voice asked again.

Reese turned in the direction the voice had come from. His eyes came to rest upon who he had sought, the vampire Dimitri.

Reese's first reaction was that the civilian clothes Dimitri wore were a change for the vampire. Reese had usually seen him dressed in the camouflage uniforms the Navy SEALs had issued them. Now he wore jeans, a sweatshirt and bright white New Balance running shoes. Even in the dim light of the bar, he could make out the vampire's prominent Slavic features that even his vampirism could not change. The dark black hair, the hawk-like nose and the dark eyes on either side.

*He would blend into a crowd and never be noticed—how convenient for a killer.*

"Have a seat. I've been looking for you," Reese said, trying to keep the calm in his voice.

"I know." Dimitri said, as he sat in the chair next to Reese. "We are more alike in our ways of thinking than you can imagine, or should I say, than you want to believe. We are not very different."

"So, how have you been?" Reese asked, ignoring his statement of their similarities.

"Adapting," Dimitri said, as if one word would suffice what Reese wanted to know. He smiled, showing his perfect white teeth.

"So it appears. I read an interesting article in the paper today. Seems the criminal element in Norfolk is suffering from an amazing attrition rate lately."

Dimitri smiled. "Yes, I saw it too. The wonders of the free press."

"You find it amusing?" Reese felt his anger flare. *What evil have I loosed? What have I done?*

"Yes. It is as you say, amusing in a way—from my perspective. I am over one hundred years old and the one thing that never changes is the mortal perception of things."

"What do you mean?"

"Even when you get what you seek, you still find a problem with it. We have transformed this city in a few months. We have made it safer, tourism is on the rise and everyone is happy."

"Not everyone. What about your victims?"

"They are just that ... victims. Victims of a society that has cast them away. I don't think the general public would agree with your position, at least not openly. They have their streets back again. They can go out and walk in safety without fear of being preyed upon. The undesirable element has been removed. As you say, the cleaner the better."

"I didn't let you escape so that you could come into where I live and kill people."

"What did you expect would happen?" Dimitri said, slightly raising his voice. "We must survive, just as we would have if we were back home in Kosovo. Need I remind you that it was your military, with your assistance, that brought us here? We did not come on our own. Your military sought to use us to kill your enemies—these drug cartels. You, unlike them, saw this for what it was—slavery. You freed us from our incarceration, for which we are grateful. But you knew what would happen in the end. As my kind has done for thousands of years, we prey on what society throws our way."

"Yes," Reese answered. *Dimitri's logic and rhetoric is so convincing. It was slavery and it was wrong. General Stone intended to continue these creatures without any concern for them as to their own existence.* "I knew it. But—"

"No, my friend. Do not try and argue your conscience. You punish yourself for nothing. You know all the facts about us; you who have studied my kind and know that we occupy a place in society. We live as we have always lived throughout all these centuries. Our existence will go on. The only thing that has changed is our location."

"You make it sound ... so simple, so matter-of-fact like."

"It is. Are you so naïve to think that my kind does not exist here already?"

"What do you mean by here?"

"Do you believe that we would limit ourselves to only the Balkan region? My kind has been in this country for centuries. You know of your literature and film, your *Interview with a Vampire*."

"Yes."

"It is not far from the truth. It has the over-glorification that Hollywood does to these things, but there are some truths in between the ... how do you say ... the bullshit."

"But how have they gone unnoticed?"

"Ah ... you seek more information for your book?"

"Well ... I..."

"Your quest for knowledge is admirable. However, I will not relinquish it to you. I won't take the thrill of discovery from your grasp. That is what keeps us alive, both

mortal and immortal—the thrill of learning new things. If it was easy, there would be no reason to go would there?"

"No I guess not," Reese said. He couldn't help but feel admiration for this creature; to have lived so long and seen so much. He knows us better than we know ourselves. "So what's next for you, Andre and Illiga? If as you claim, most of the bad people—the society castaways, as you put it, have been taken care of, what will you do? Resort back to cattle and livestock?"

"As I said, we are adapting to our new environment. The article in the paper means someone has taken notice. The police will of course believe they are responsible for a lot of the cleaning up, but eventually someone will disprove it and another explanation will be sought. It is time for us to move on before it gets to that point."

"But how? You need money here, it's not like it was in the back country of the Balkans."

"We have money. Part of our adaptation has included creating bank accounts, the spoils of some of our clients. Money has always been the solution to many of our problems. Regardless of the century, we have used it to buy our secrecy. Everyone has a price. We have already begun investing in real estate all around the country."

"Well, you certainly have become wise to our ways. So where are you going?"

"Somewhere," Dimitri said. "We have one more issue we need to take care of before we move."

"What's that?"

"It's best you don't know," Dimitri said sternly. His calm facial expression changed to a serious and perplexed look of deep thought.

Reese caught a momentary glimpse of the red glow in Dimitri's eyes as he thought about whatever the issue was he needed to resolve. He had seen that look to many times before: that red glow of their eyes before the kill.

"And what shall you do?" Dimitri asked, returning to his normal calm and casual demeanor.

"Me?" Reese asked. "I have a book to finish."

"Ah ... that is good, your quest for knowledge. This book, it is about things that most people do not believe?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"It is your passion ... or as you say, in your blood." Dimitri smiled. "You seek to prove what many do not believe because you believe that people created these things for a reason, and in many cases it is based on truth of some sort."



"That's correct," Reese agreed. "The book deals with myth and folklore. I hope it will be used in a class as the textbook. Young people need to know of these things."

"These things you refer to, do you not mean human nature?"

"People do things for a reason," Reese began. "When we examine those reasons, we learn to understand people, their motivations for creating the legends. Whether out of fear, social turmoil, climatic changes or dozens of other reasons, people react to these changes."

"And how would you describe vampirism?" asked Dimitri.

"What all of mankind has always feared ... the penalty of living an evil life and the consequences that it brings, while for others, the escape of death for life immortal by the loss of one's soul; a double edged sword that can cut you either way."

"Interesting. I should like to read your book. I am curious to see how you portray me and my—how would you say, perhaps my outlook on life."

"Will I see you again?" Reese asked, ignoring Dimitri's statement.

"Perhaps," Dimitri said, as he rose from the table. "However, if we should meet again, let us hope it is under better conditions than when we first met in my country. I remember the soldiers with their machetes posed to remove my head as well as their sprayers of the elixir poison, and of course, the collars."

"I remember," Reese said. "They were following my guidelines."

"You redeemed yourself when you set us free and for that we are grateful. However, I and the others have agreed that if we ever find ourselves threatened with capture again, we will fight to the death, no matter what the cost. I assure you, we will kill anyone who tries to enslave us further than we already are."

"I understand," Reese said, acknowledging the threat.

"We will meet again," Dimitri said. "Our paths are destined to cross each other. Until that time then."

Dimitri walked slowly from the table he and Reese had shared and disappeared into the night.

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## Chapter Sixty-one

It was almost midnight when General Stone walked into his apartment in MacDill, Florida. When he shut the door, he slammed it a little harder than he normally would have, considering the hour and being conscious of his neighbors. However, tonight he didn't care who he disturbed because it had been a bad day. In his thirty-three years in the military, he couldn't remember ever feeling this way—unappreciated for his service to his country.

He unbuttoned his dress uniform jacket and draped it over the dining room chair. His eyes looked at the rows of decorations on his jacket and he felt a longing for the days when he had earned them. The real medals—not the bullshit medals they gave out today, but the ones earned for combat and real courage. Forcing his eyes to look away, he immediately went to his bar and grabbed the bottle of Scotch and filled a glass almost to the top.

"Damn fools," he muttered and then drank deeply. "Civilians. They don't have a fucking clue how to win a war."

He walked back into the living room and sat down in his leather chair. He tried to not think about it, but the events of the day kept resurfacing in his thoughts, keeping the fire of his anger and frustration well stoked and burning hot. In particular, the pencil-necked accountant or whatever the hell he was from the General Services Administration who wanted to know where all the money had gone. Stone gave him a one-word answer to most of his questions: classified. This infuriated the little man even more and he kept pressing. Stone kept answering: classified.

If any error had been made on Stone's part, it was his treatment of the little man. He had things he could have told him that would have satisfied him and his little Congressional committee; they did it all the time. Cover stories to explain the expenditures of money to keep the government weenies happy. It had been going on for years and years—you told people what they wanted to hear and they went away happy—the wheels of democracy kept on turning. Life is good.

Stone had been prepared with all the false stories to tell the little man. But the little man wanted to feel important for some reason and spout his philosophical bullshit to make a point. Stone saw this happening and tried his usual soothing lies upon him. But it hadn't worked. The little man just went on and on. Stone sat and listened to the little man with the neatly trimmed and polished fingernails, the hands that appeared to be as smooth as a woman's, the slight lisp in his voice and wearing a suit that even Stone couldn't afford. Finally the little man said the magical words—the few words

that could get right to the heart of a man like Stone; a man that had devoted his life to serving his country by killing the bad guy—the only real true diplomacy on the face of the earth. He remembered the words the little man said...

*"There isn't a place for old warriors like you anymore ... the military is an obsolete arm of a dying body from an age where men were uncivilized."*

Stone remembered smiling at the little man—just before lunging across his desk and grabbing him by the lapels of his expensive suit jacket and screaming at the little man. “You stupid son-of-a-bitch! What the hell do you know about me or what I do for my country? I’ll tell you what you know—not a goddamned thing that’s what! You masturbate at home or in whatever sleazebag bar you go to in the safety and security that I provide. Or is it when you’re riding some other man and doing some rump wrangling that you sing God Bless America!” Stone smiled as the little man in his grasp turned white with fear. When the smell of urine reached his nostrils, the fact that the little man had just peed in his expensive designer suit, Stone felt fulfilled. “Just what I thought—you candy-assed prick. If only you had a fucking clue of the things I have done and what I will keep on doing to keep my country safe from the bastards in the rest of this world—you probably wouldn’t be able to sleep—even when you were spooning with your boyfriend.”

Commander Scott had rushed into the room upon hearing the commotion and untangled Stone's hands from the accountant's lapel collars. After some soothing by Scott and the offer of some clean pants to the little man as well as his promise to stay in the room; the meeting continued, but with Stone only replying in a single word, “Classified.”

Less than an hour after the meeting had finished, the phone calls began, each one ascending in the chain of command; the last one from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, summoning Stone to his office in Washington for an explanation of what the hell he thought he was doing by abusing someone with Congressional authority over funding. As the anger and realization of what he had done settled in upon Stone, he knew he had finally gone too far.

He got up, poured himself another drink and drank deeply. He was in between gulps when he heard the sound of the light being turned off behind him. As he turned in that direction, he was grabbed and thrown to the floor. The glass of Scotch flew and shattered against the wall. Stone hit the floor hard and rolled several feet before coming to a stop. He tried to get his bearings. The only light in the room was the filtered light from the street lamps, which plastered everything in a dark gray. As he looked in the direction of the attacker, he could make out a dark figure but could not discern any features.

"Who are you?" he asked as he tried to get back on his feet. Between the surprise of the attack and the Scotch he had consumed, Stone stood slowly but was quickly regaining his senses as he prepared to fight. The adrenaline and excitement was coursing through his veins and pushing the alcohol aside. Stone couldn't help but

feel a smile creep across his lips. The idea of fighting someone, perhaps killing someone, was very appealing to him right now.

The figure said nothing. In the dim light, Stone thought that his attacker moved its arm as if reaching for something from a bag it carried. Then the arm swung in an arc and Stone heard something land at his feet. Without taking his eyes from the gray figure, he knelt down and picked it up. When he had it in his hand, he looked down at it and recognized it immediately. It was one of the collars that had been designed by Commander John Reese to control the vampires.

"Where did you get this?" he spoke. "This is—"

Before Stone could finish his sentence, the figure in front of him blurred in movement and he felt a wince of pain on the side of his neck. He reached up and touched the spot on his neck. His fingers felt the area of skin that had been ripped open in a long gash. He drew his hand away from the moist sticky feeling. When he looked at his hand in the grayish light, he saw it was covered with the dark liquid which he assumed was his own blood. He looked in front of him and saw the figure was back to its original position. He smiled as he tossed the collar device back at the figure.

"Nice move. Pretty fast, aren't you? Score one for the bad guy," Stone said in a calm voice. "Are you going to tell me where you got that collar from?"

Silence.

"That's okay. Don't bother." Stone decided he would try and lull his attacker into making a mistake by talking for a while before he made his attack. "I see what's happening here. I ruffled some feathers today, didn't I? Becoming too much of a risk for some people. Time to get rid of the old war horse, is it?"

Silence.

"Why don't you speak? You're going to kill me anyway, so what does it matter? I'm just an old man living in an age that no longer needs my profession. Is there no pity in this world? Is there no compassion?" As the last syllable rolled off of his tongue, he charged at the figure.

Stone was a fit man for his age. He worked out every day and was in better shape than most of the men half his age. He was quick on his feet and had maintained and even embellished upon the skills he had learned as an Army ranger; especially his skills on how to kill quickly.

As in most life and death situations, one sees things more clearly because of the adrenaline high that accompanies it. One's own actions also seem to slow down to a crawl. Stone experienced this as he charged the figure. He did what any smart and well-trained attacker would do; he prepared for the figure to break to either side to avoid his attack. But the figure didn't move. With each step Stone took, he expected

the break, but it never came. Instead, the figure met Stone head on.

Stone weighed two hundred ten pounds and was moving with good momentum at the figure. He fully expected to topple his attacker and gain the advantage. But when he was within arms reach of the figure, he was brought to an abrupt stop by the attacker's outstretched arms, which felt like steel girders. He tried to bat the arms that grasped him by his shoulders, but they didn't budge. Stone's immediate and reflexive defensive action kicked in. He used his legs to try and kick out and even break his attacker's legs. This too was ineffective. Stone fought to keep his fear at bay, but he knew it was time for last-ditch efforts.

Stone drew back his head and brought it forward in an attempt to head butt his attacker, hoping that he would not knock himself unconscious. He felt a solid hit with his head and was able to fight off the sensation to pass out from the blow. He felt confident that the blow had been sufficient and for a brief instant he thought he would be successful. But his attacker's grip didn't falter. That was when Stone knew he would most likely die in the next few moments if he didn't break free.

Turning his head toward one of the arms of his attacker, he jerked his head toward the arm and bit into it with all the strength he could muster. He knew what blood tasted like: he had successfully tried this maneuver in hand-to-hand combat training in his younger days. Blood has a very distinct taste to it: coppery, yet almost sweet, but still the human psyche requires some sort of preparation to the unnatural act of tasting it. He prepared himself as he bit down harder and harder. But when his mind registered the taste, it was nothing like he remembered. The taste that entered his mind was of such a rotten and putrid state that he was forced to release the grip of his teeth on the flesh and spit the blood out. He spat and spat, but the taste wouldn't go away.

The attacker remained silent. One single thought went through Stone's mind. *I'm going to die.* With that realization, he no longer cared about anything else but to see the face of his executioner. It was a morbid act which he did not understand, but the motivation was clear. He stood only arms length away, yet the darkness that shrouded the figure in front of him still prevented him from getting a good look at his attacker's face. "Who are you? What are you?"

Silence again. The attacker raised one arm and removed something from its face. As the shadow of the attacker's arm passed over its face, Stone saw the red glow of its eyes: his attacker had been wearing something over its eyes to hide the glow of them. Just like ... Stone couldn't help but laugh at the realization of what it was that he was facing.

"You!" Stone cried, the spittle flying from his lips. "You—that Navy son-of-a-bitch lied when he said you were all dead. I should have guessed. He was a soft-hearted bastard. He thought I was abusing your kind. HA! You are meant for only one thing and you know it. You're a killer. A perfect killing machine. All you care about is death because without it—you will not survive. I gave you a purpose—to kill the

dregs of society that poison the free world with their drugs. So what does he do? Stupid shit Navy Commander John  *fucking*  Reese sets you loose to kill ... me. Why? Does it give you pleasure to kill the one that enslaved you. Do you have feelings? This is so damn funny ... shit ... that it should be your kind. I made you what you are! You think getting rid of me will end it? You're in for a rude awakening my friend. There are more of you where you came from—remember that.  *It's already begun. I've outfoxed everyone!*  Make sure you tell Reese that. Yeah ... tell him and let's see how long he lasts this time. They will use your kind as well. You'll see ... you'll see."

Stone stared into the eyes of his attacker. "What the hell are you waiting for? Just do it, damn it! You stupid son of a bitch! Have some respect for a servant of this country. I love my country and I shall die knowing that I did the right thing even if it included an unholy aberration such as the likes of y—"

Everything suddenly went dark for Stone. The last conscious thought he had was a numbing, yet calming sensation on his neck, and the smell of something familiar. At first his mind told him it was what he had expected earlier, the smell of blood—but to Stone, it smelled like perfume. He smiled as he drifted toward death.

\* \* \* \*

Stone's attacker let his body fall to the floor. It was almost done. Following the instructions that had been given, the attacker picked up the collar and fastened it tightly around Stone's neck. Looking at the man with the collar caused a momentary smile to appear on the attacker's face.

*We all have our burdens to bear, don't we? Your God bears the sins of the world on a cross, you bear the responsibility of a patriot by wearing a collar.*

The smile was quickly replaced with a more determined look as it pondered what Stone had said.

*There were others? What did this mean? And who was this other man that knew of it—this Navy Commander John Reese?*

No time for questions—not now. But these questions would be revisited later because they intrigued the attacker. There was something else yet to be done before the evening was over. General Stone's assistant, Commander Scott, also required a visit this evening to complete the puzzle and remove the obstacles.

*There will be others ... there always are. Some call them patriots, some call them threats. Was there really a difference? Perhaps...*

She finished what she had come to do.

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## Chapter Sixty-two

"Reese. John Reese. How the hell are you?" the voice said on the telephone.

"Barkley? Is that you?" Reese asked, as he switched the phone to his other ear. "You son-of-a-bitch, it's good to hear from you!"

Reese pictured Barkley in his mind and he felt himself smile. Barkley was good people.

"Yeah, it's me," Barkley said. "I'm working on the Army medical staff at the Pentagon. I'm in Norfolk on some business and I heard some news and thought about you, so I figured I'd give you a call. How long has it been?"

"Hell, it's been about a few months. What news?" Reese asked.

"You didn't hear about General Stone? It was in all the news, on television, the whole bit."

"No. I've been busy working on my book, kind of wrapped up in it. So what are you talking about?"

"He's dead. General Stone is dead."

"Dead? What happened?" Reese asked.

"They found him in his home yesterday."

"I figured a man like that would never die. Too damn stubborn."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Barkley agreed.

"What did he die from?" Reese asked.

"Are you sitting down? You're not going to believe this?"

"Come on. Tell me."

"Someone drained all the blood out of him."

"What?" Reese sat down. *No, this couldn't be happening. Why would they go after him?*

"You heard me. The blood was drained from his body."

"You mean like vampires?"

"Well, that's what it was made to look like."

"What do you mean made to look like?"

"The killer tried to make it look that way, but they found his blood in bottles at the killers' home."

"Damn!" Reese said. He found himself relaxing a little.

"You haven't heard the best part yet," Barkley teased.

"What?"

"They believe the killer was Commander Scott. They found his fingerprints at the general's home, so they went to his home to question him. They found the blood and Scott was dead too. He killed himself."

"Jesus Christ."

"Yeah, I understand the shit is really going to hit the fan."

"Don't tell me there's more?"

"You bet. Defense Investigative Agents are also pursuing that this may have been a hit sanctioned by the drug cartels. Even though they found Scott's suicide note saying that he had killed Stone and then himself, supposedly there are a lot of inconsistencies that debunk the suicide aspect."

"Was there any reason given in the note?"

"Just that he couldn't live what he and Stone had done on their last operation."

"Uh-oh. Was anything mentioned about the vamp—"

"How about we do lunch?" Barkley asked, cutting Reese off abruptly.

Reese knew Barkley had intentionally cut him off before he said anything about the team. "Sure. How about you come on over?"

"Be there in ten minutes."

As Reese waited for Barkley to arrive, he remembered the debriefing they had received when they disbanded the support team for the vampires. All matters related to their operations were classified as Top Secret. If divulged before the declassification period, they would be subject to arrest and possibly tried for treason. They all signed affidavits stipulating their understanding and abiding to these rules.

Reese remembered another man that was there in a black nondescript suit. He was not introduced and said nothing during the entire debriefing, but it was the *way* he looked at them; a look that Reese would always remember...



*You can't run and you can't hide, fuck up and being tried for treason would be the least of your worries. And I will come for you. Remember that.*

The man was what they referred to as a “spook” in the intelligence community. He was the one that would come for you if you did something foolish with classified information. He was there as a subtle reminder to anyone that the government understood that just signing a piece of paper was sometimes not enough to keep someone from talking about what they were not supposed to.

The doorbell rang, bringing Reese back to the present. He went to the front door and opened the door.

"Sam, come on in," Reese said, extending his hand.

"Thanks," Barkley said as he shook hands.

"Well congratulations, Lieutenant Colonel Barkley," Reese said, noticing the rank insignia on Barkley's uniform.

"Thanks. It even amazed me. I was very junior in the selection process. I think working for the general had some fringe benefits, if you know what I mean. Either that or it was incentive to ensure I kept my mouth shut."

"Nothing would surprise me anymore." Reese said, as he closed the door.

"Sorry to cut you off on the telephone like that," Barkley said.

"No. You were right. I almost slipped and said something over the phone. I should know better."

They sat in his living room exchanging pleasantries for a few moments.

"Well, let me get to the rest of the story," Barkley began. "Apparently, all of the files regarding our expedition into hell with the Team are missing."

"Missing?"

"Well, that's the term I'm using. I don't think they ever kept any to begin with."

"I think Stone probably hid more than we will ever imagine. And I don't think I want to know."

"Yeah, me too."

He felt a sense of relief that any files pertaining to that operation were either missing or non-existing. He sensed many times that the general was operating outside of any procedures or authorizations. Still, Reese couldn't help wondering about the man in the black suit at the debriefing.

"There was one other odd thing about the murder that won't make it into the press?"

"What?"

"Stone's body was found wearing one of the collars."

"The collars for the vampires? How the hell could that be?"

"I don't know. I've been racking my brains over this for hours. I only made so many of those damn things. Do you have any ideas?"

"Well ... no." Reese knew there were no other collars. He had been sure of that. The only place that collar could have come from was Dimitri, Andre or Iliga. Was it revenge? One of the oldest and truest acts of humanity from these creatures? Was that the last thing that Dimitri had alluded to when they met in the bar?

"Are you alright?" Barkley asked.

"Yeah," Reese said as he tried to think of something to say that Barkley would believe. As much as Reese liked Barkley, he wasn't absolutely sure what he would do if he suspected the creatures were alive. Worse yet, he didn't know how he would react to the fact that if Dimitri had killed Stone and Scott, which he probably did, would that make him an accomplice?

"John?" Barkley said. "You look like you—"

"Oh, sorry, I was thinking," Reese said. "Do you remember when Josip was killed?"

"When Idriz had saturated his blood with the elixir and tricked Josip into attacking him and biting him to revenge the death of his two daughters? I doubt I will ever forget that."

"Well maybe when Josip was killed, somehow Scott got hold of the collar and later placed it on Stone." Reese knew that Barkley came in right after the attack and hadn't seen the collar had been totally destroyed.

"Yeah ... I guess that must be it. It's the only explanation that works," Barkley agreed. "You know, I can't say that I will miss General Stone. I don't think he was wrapped too tight. I think he fell off the deep end when his daughter died of a drug overdose. He was fixated with taking out his own revenge on the drug lords, probably in the way that Idriz felt about the death of his daughters by Josip."

"Yeah. I see what you mean. That must be it," Reese said. "But you know, the one thing about Stone that amazed me was that he was always thinking about his next move. He had a contingency for just about everything he planned and put into action. He was incredibly intelligent. I can understand why they placed him in command of SOCOM."

"They named a successor for him, General Morris. Do you know him?"

"No. You?"

"I've heard about him. He's made from the same mold as Stone. For all practical purposes, these two could be brothers, with one exception."

"What's that?" Reese asked.

"Morris is a politician at heart. He can smooth talk his way through anything."

"A dangerous combination," Reese said. "A man with control over the Special Forces of the United States and the clout to convince Washington to use them."

"Well, we'll see. Word is out that he will be testifying before a special committee on the hill about the circumstances of the death of Stone and Scott."

"Do you think he knows the complete story?"

"I don't know. Probably. This whole affair has left me ... I don't know, kind of questioning my own perception of things."

"You sound like me," Reese chuckled. "I've been going through the same thing. All I can suggest is that you put it behind you."

"You make it sound so easy, to just forget about it." Barkley offered. "My God, look what we did. We captured creatures that most people believed were nothing than a myth. We controlled them and sent them to kill other humans. It sounds almost like..."

"Slavery," Reese added.

"Well ... sort of, I mean these creatures were killers in themselves. It's just uncanny—the whole damn affair."

"Put the whole thing in perspective, Sam. You were following orders. And now it's done and over with. They're dead."

"John ... you're sure about that, right?"

"Sure about what?"

"They're dead. You're sure?"

"Stone and Scott?" Reese asked, but he knew where Barkley was heading, considering their conversation up to this point.

"No. Dimitri and the others."

"I pressed the button on the remote control to inject the elixir." Reese answered the question the same way he had answered it when he was getting debriefed. It was the truth. He actually had pressed the button to inject the elixir. What he hadn't admitted was that he had planned the escape with Dimitri, as well as disabled the remote control device. He stood on the bridge of the ship and in front of many witnesses, activated the remote control to inject the poison into the vampires. Of course,

nothing happened to the vampires, and in a few days, when the elixir lost its potency due to its short life, the vampires removed their collars safely.

"I just hate to imagine what would happen if they had escaped somehow and were loose. I would feel ... responsible."

"I know what you mean, Sam, but..." Reese thought about mentioning that Dimitri was not like the rest. He was different and his outlook on the world was so...

"But what?" Barkley asked.

"Nothing," Reese said, thinking it was time to get away from this subject. "Well now that we have put all of those messy details, how about a beer?"

"Sounds good," Barkley said. Reese saw by the change in his expression that Barkley was ready to move on in the conversation as well.

Reese grabbed two beers from the refrigerator and came back into the room.

"So how are you occupying your time since you retired?" Barkley asked.

"I've been working on a book. Well, actually, I've been working on it for years. When I retired, I thought it would be easy to finish, but for the longest time I felt I was missing something in order to finish it, one final bit of information. But now, I think I can finally put that finishing touch on it now. The time feels right."

"And after that?"

"I'll be teaching at Old Dominion University next semester, a class on ancient myths. Between my Navy retirement and teaching, I can live comfortably and that works for me.

"Glad to hear it."

"So, what about you? Any thoughts about life after the military?" Reese asked.

"I've been thinking about it. I can retire in about eighteen months or so. John, I hate to go back to this but there's something I want to ask you about the Team op."

Reese felt himself tense. Why was Barkley so obsessed with this, he wondered? Did he suspect that he had set the vampires loose and not killed them?

"What's that?" Reese asked.

"When it all ended, do you remember that "spook" at the debriefing?"

"Yeah ... he was hard to forget wasn't he?"

"What agency do you think he was from?"

"Your guess is as good as mine on that one. Heck, maybe he was from one we don't

even know about. Why do you ask?"

"Well I don't know if, well I'm not sure..."

"What's wrong, Sam?"

"Every once in a while, I get that looking over my shoulder feeling ... like I'm being watched. Do you ever get that?"

"No, but then I have a habit to being oblivious to some things like that. You know, off in my own little world."

"Maybe I'm just imagining this with all that has happened. We went through a lot, didn't we?"

"Yes, we did. Part of me regrets leading Stone to the vampires and training the SEALs on how to capture them and getting you to develop the elixir and collars. It's almost as if they were something that should be left alone. If they have been around this long and gone virtually undetected, I wonder if I screwed the natural cycle up in some way."

"You wouldn't go back to the Balkans and look to see if any more exist?"

"I don't know. If I could study them without causing them any harm ... I don't know. As far as you being jumpy, in my opinion, you have every right to be. We lived on the dark side of existence for what ... almost a year. We saw and experienced things that nobody else can even imagine."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Too bad we can't write a book about what happened. It would be a collaboration between ... let's see ... something like Anne Rice and Tom Clancy would write. We could market it as their baby. Make a hell of a movie, too."

"Yeah and maybe we can star in it as well," Reese added. "Ah, the life of the rich and famous awaits us. Too bad that by the time they declassify this, if ever, we will be dust in our coffins."

Both men laughed and then sipped their beer in silence for a few seconds before speaking.

"Thanks, John," Barkley said.

"For what?"

"Talking this out with me. It's good to talk about things and it's not like this is a topic that just can be thrown out at a cocktail party. I feel a lot better. Maybe I am just paranoid about all of this. You're right—I should just lay it to rest with Dimitri and the others."

"Good man," Reese agreed, forcing a smile.

"Speaking of laying them to rest," Barkley continued, "philosophically speaking, do you think vampires go to heaven or hell when they finally die? Do they regain their soul or are they outcasts forever?"

Reese fought to maintain a smile. The question was too similar to a question that he and Dimitri had discussed as to what now seemed like a long time ago. He smiled and answered, "Don't get me started on that one. Talk about a philosophical nightmare! I'll save that one for discussion with my students. If you want an answer—take the class and find out." Reese raised his bottle of beer and said, "Cheers!"

As the cold beer flowed down his throat, Reese couldn't help but notice the even colder sensation that pervaded his thoughts. Something bad was going to happen. He didn't know how he knew that or what caused the feeling, but there was no denying it was there.

As he closed his eyes to clear his mind of the feeling, he saw two red eyes staring back at him.

Tony Ruggiero has been publishing fiction since 1998. His science fiction, fantasy, and horror stories and novels have appeared in both print and electronic mediums. His published novels include:

*Team of Darkness*. The US military has developed a new weapon to be added to its arsenal—the creatures known as vampires. Tony uses his Navy experience to write this dark fantasy thriller about vampires being used by the Navy. Ground-breaking and fast-paced, the novel is a characteristic mixture of the vampire lore of Anne Rice and the clandestine secrets of the military found in Tom Clancy novels. The concept has led to a series of books to be released in 2006 through 2008: *The Team of Darkness declassified files. Book I: Operation Immortal Servitude*, *Book II: Operation Save the Innocent*, *Book III: Operation Face the Fear* and *Book IV: Operation Endgame*.

*Aliens and Satanic Creatures Wanted: Humans Need Not Apply*. Aliens, Satanic Creatures and other alternate life forms have gathered together to make a stand for literary fairness. Move over, pesky human ... a change is coming. An anthology of short stories where the center character is not human; includes the award winning story, *Lucky Lucifer's Car Emporium*, as well as *Electronic Bliss*, *Invasion or Subversion*, and *Going up?*

Tony is also a contributing author to *The Fantasy Writers' Companion* from Dragon Moon Press. *The Companion* picks up where *The Complete Guide to Writing Fantasy* leaves off. *The Fantasy Writers' Companion* takes on more advanced topics of writing, such as incorporating horror, incorporating mystery, developing a story in your favorite RPG universe, and exploring alternative cultures for world building. Tony's contribution is a chapter on the effective use of horror in fantasy. Other collaborative work includes *The Writers for Relief Anthology* and *No Longer Dreams Anthology*.

Coming in 2006/7 from Dragon Moon Press:

Tony's longtime favorite of space opera adventure debuts in a two-book series: *Alien Deception*: Nothing is as it appears ... nothing. Your whole life you think you understand who and what you are and then one day you learn that it is all a lie. So what do you do? You have lunch with the leading candidate for President of the United States ... you and your alien friends.

*Alien Revelation*: Death has many meanings. For some it is an end, while for others it is a beginning. Yet, for one human/alien hybrid, it is a way to have one final chance to try and save his home, Earth, a son he has never seen, and find an enemy that just won't stay dead.

Tony retired from the United States Navy in 2001 after twenty-three years of service. He and his family currently reside in Suffolk, Virginia. While continuing to write, Tony teaches at Old Dominion University, Saint Leo University, and Tidewater

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