

**Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis**

**A Series of  
Terrifying  
Events**

Fiction Novel



**Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis** was born in Thessaloniki, Greece. He has lived in Hong Kong for more than seven years, where he came to pursue his doctoral degree. He is the author of many short stories and four books in Greek, published by *Saita Publications*, as well as the author of the academic book *Populism, Territories, Name Disputes, and Hyperreality: Greek Nationalism and the Macedonian Case* by Bloomsbury. Whenever he is not researching media and politics and publishing in academic journals, he watches movies, hikes, reads, and tries to understand the world. For more information, you can visit his website: <https://minoskar.net/>

Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis

# A Series of Terrifying Events

Fiction Novel

*minoskar.net*



Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis, A Series of Terrifying Events

ISBN: 978-988-71669-0-0

Publication Date: 27 October 2025

Published by Karyotakis, Minos Athanasios

Cover, Typeset: Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis

Editing: Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis

Translated

from Greek to English: Metaxia Tzimouli

The book was published in Hong Kong



CC BY-NC-ND 4.0  
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives  
4.0 International  
Deed

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms:

- Attribution — You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made . You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.
- NonCommercial — You may not use the material for commercial purposes .
- NoDerivatives — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material.
- No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

For detailed information regarding the license, please visit the following address:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.en>





**This work is dedicated to my mother,  
as without her, you would never be able to read this story**





## CONTENTS

PROLOGUE .....	10
THE HUNTER GORDY .....	11
COUNT ELANDY .....	26
THE FOREST OF VARCOLACI .....	46
MIAKODA AND THE STRANGER .....	72
YO-NA AND THE GIRL .....	90
THE WHITE WA-YA .....	117
EPILOGUE .....	128

# Prologue

Dear Reader,

Before you start reading this book, I wish to report on the events you will read about. You may be inclined to believe that what you will be reading is a work of fantasy, imaginative events that have nothing to do with reality. You may come to the conclusion that fantasy stories are just there to entice the reader. Here is where you are mistaken. This story has been written only to show all the strange and unusual happenings that common people ignore, and to make known our world's relationship with other worlds that coexist alongside that no one dares to speak out and say: *"Yes, there are ghosts. Yes, there are demons. Yes, there are other worlds that are sheltered under the same blue sky."*

Then it is up to me and my qualifications as a reporter to reveal some events that happened several years ago, events that have defined my life. These terrifying events will initiate you into a parallel world. They might frighten you, dear reader, or leave you blind to the truth. I want to inform you that if you are expecting to hear stories similar to the ones you heard when you were young, then you are mistaken, and I advise you to read no further. If you want to know more about these unique events, please continue reading, but take caution when encountering events that are reduced to the paranormal.

Moreover, you should remember that anything that has to do with the paranormal terrifies people and gives them feelings of grandiosity. In reality, they are all scared to face the brutal truth. The contents of this book are repulsive, horrifying, and will make your blood run cold.

A series of events unfolds in different parts of the world. In the end, I beg of you not to read them at night, should you want to go to sleep.

I wish you an enjoyable read.

*Arthur Mortimer*

## The Hunter Gordy

“It was about three years ago when I was reading the *London Times* about an incident that had caught my eye. It was in reference to a strange disappearance in Transylvania, an area in Romania, which was popular for its traditions on vampires and werewolves. The incident took place in the town of Brasov.

I went to the Chief Editor of the newspaper in which I worked, and asked him to let me go to shed light on the bizarre disappearance of a British student, James Anderson. It is worth mentioning that at the time, I was not a believer, just like you, in the existence of strange creatures that we are accustomed to reading about in the traditions and legends of the people. As soon as I got permission from the Editor, I journeyed to London airport with Romania as my destination. If I managed to get the local train, I would have had more time left to reach that remote part of Transylvania.

After a reasonable amount of time, I arrived at the *Golden Crown Hotel*. It was a simple hotel with friendly staff, which from the moment I got there tried to make my stay as pleasant as possible. I took that opportunity to ask them where I would be able to acquire information on the unfortunate event, which seemed to have shaken the peaceful, bucolic life of the residents. To my surprise, they told me they met the student when he arrived for his holidays.

“A rather mysterious young man,” the man who led me to my room said.

“He did not talk much. He just sat quietly and observed the lives of the residents with interest. He had no money on him to stay in a hotel, and that is when the mayor led him to the mansion. You can barely see it now,” he pointed out of the window to the mansion.

For more information, the hotel manager will be here in the evening. I will let him know that you wish to speak to him about the student,” and with that, he

disappeared from the room. As soon as he left, I decided it would be best to investigate the incident alone. I had to make sure that the information the manager would give me would match the views of the inhabitants. So I made my way to the tavern, *The Gold*. I wanted to learn firsthand the residents' impression of the strange event. The patrons of the tavern were keen to answer my questions.

"When was the last time you saw the student?" I asked a group sitting at a corner table. The patrons looked at each other, surprised at my question. One of them came forward and touched me on the shoulder. He told me that James Anderson did not disappear; the ghost of hunter Gordy killed him. I asked the heavy-set Romanian what exactly happened, taking care not to let my fear come out. The Romanian looked straight at me and invited me to sit at their table.

"I will recount the events in detail and try to be as objective as possible. But I must warn you, stranger, what you will hear is otherworldly. The events that took place are capable of terrifying you so much that you will leave this place forever. This place, which you are aware of, has become famous for its legends of paranormal creatures," he said. He wanted to get a terrified reaction out of me. I pondered what he said. After all, I had to listen to the story; that was my job. A good reporter is obligated to list facts down in an objective manner and then to publicize them. I motioned for him to continue with the story. It is here, my dear reader, that I must tell you that the story brought on a chain of events which stirred my thoughts, and the perceptions I had developed. This story changed me forever, and it will change you.

The heavy-set man started the story:

"It was on the 11th of September that a stranger came to Brasov. He was a typical Englishman. He came into the tavern. We all turned to look. You may have heard a lot about this place, but deep down, we are simple people, and we do not want any trouble, especially for the event that took place on Friday, the 13th of

September. It may have, of course, flourished the tourism, but it has forever disrupted this quiet little town. If, in fact, this place can be called a town. He asked us in fluent Romanian where he could stay for a week. We wondered exactly what he wanted, and then we sent him to the *Golden Crown*, not far from here. He sat with us for a while to drink a beer, and then left for the hotel. We saw him again the next morning when he went to see the Mayor, in that big building two blocks away. It was heard that he had not paid for the room. The owner found out and kicked him out. So he went to the Mayor and asked him for free accommodation. Then the event that took place made us always realize that Brasov was to become the young man's deathbed.

The only free accommodation the Mayor could provide him with was in the mansion of hunter Gordy. The Mayor warned him about the stories attached to the mansion, but the young man did not believe him. He looked at him with arrogance and told him he did not believe in superstitions and prejudices. The Mayor warned him. He warned the fool several times!, yelled the Romanian, and grabbed me by the collar of my shirt. He was yelling, in a state of panic. "He is dead now, beware, stranger, you cannot play with demons. You cannot play with Transylvania. Not with this stranger, not here."

I must confess that I was terrified by his reaction. The way he was acting was in no way considered normal. Now that I re-think it, I believe he was foaming at the mouth. Yes, I think he was. I wanted to get to the bottom of this, so I composed myself. Maybe he was acting this way on purpose. Perhaps he wanted to frighten me so I would leave. But I was not going anywhere.

"Please, kind sir, you may carry on with your story," I said as calmly as I could. For a brief second, the Romanian was taken aback by my cool mannerisms, took a drink of his beer, and continued with the unfolding of events.

“The mayor took him to the only place the student did not have to pay for. When they reached the mansion, the mayor opened the door and led him into the sitting room, the only place that Anderson could use. There was a bed, a fireplace, and a tall portrait covered in a sheet. I just remembered that in the corner, there was an untidy desk. Handwritten notes were strewn across it. Yes, definitely handwritten. I do not recall whether either man saw the notes. They observed the area, and both agreed that the young man could stay there as long as he wished, as long as he stayed in the sitting room, and would not go exploring the rest of the mansion. The two men agreed, shook hands, and then parted ways.”

The story had reached its end, but I thought the narrator had left a few pieces out. He likely did not want to divulge clues that would make him responsible for the disappearance. Alcohol might have clouded his mind, making it difficult for him to recall the events. I looked at my watch. It was nine p.m. I had to return to the hotel; I wanted to talk with the owner. Something in the depths of my soul told me that he would be the only one to let me be part of the town’s guilty secret. Once again, Transylvania was called forth to reveal all those dark elements which, over time, managed to hide under her cloak, creating a place that would forever remain in humanity’s history.

The back streets of Brasov resembled the old glamour of medieval times. Without difficulty, I focused on that time and how people lived. With my imagination, I could see the counts, the marquises, and their delicate wives, who would most likely become the case for hatred and revenge, which would mark future generations. Moreover, who could resist, even today, their sensuality and their seductive beauty? That is why the forever regarded adolescent men were often driven to acts of bravado, a trait common for those times. Their sole purpose was to gain a glance from the fair maiden, who always managed to thrill the male heart.

Accompanied by those thoughts, I arrived at the scenic hotel where I was staying. As I looked at it, it reminded me of a frightening tower. A beautiful maiden might have been kept prisoner there, and she was waiting for the prince to come to her aid. Afterwards, they would get married and live happily ever after. A black cat passed by me, and I decided to go into the hotel, which had now become a gleeful, atmospheric area to accommodate guests like me. I reached out, turned the wooden doorknob, and entered the lounge. The lighting was dim, and the owner most probably wanted to create the desired atmosphere. A middle-aged Romanian approached me in a threatening manner. Like those patrons of the tavern, he too seemed to hold a dislike for foreigners and was trying to avoid shining a light on the disappearance case. Perhaps they were all hiding a guilty secret.

“You asked to see me.” How he spoke was outright pompous.

“I did not ask, but the gentleman who took me to my room mentioned that you were the person I should contact about the student’s disappearance. I need answers to this strange and complicated matter. Can you help me?” I asked, and observed an intense distress on his face. He stood still momentarily, thinking about how to reveal all the scary, unnatural things he knew to me. He looked deep into my eyes, trying to figure out why a foreigner was interested in a case that was the sole business of the inhabitants in this town.

“I think I can help you. I am one of the first to see the student. It would be best if we moved somewhere more private to talk. No one should hear this. If what we say here tonight is heard, we are doomed. Here, stranger, things are different; many similar things have happened!”

“I would rather that we focus on the events that have to do with the student, James Anderson.” When the innkeeper heard the name escape my lips, he lost all the color in his face and started to tremble. His eyes seemed to change color even though they were locked onto mine. I use the term ‘seemed’ because I cannot



remember. Now that I relive those memories, I can be assured that red replaced dark brown. All at once, he became hysterical. "Do not ever mention that name. He will find us, you idiot, and then we are dead. The demon will kill us. It will kill us, stranger!" he shouted.

"Sir, please tell me who will kill us?" I asked, trying to remain calm. The man slowly regained his composure. His face relaxed, and his eyes regained their original color.

"You obviously have not heard of the tale of Hunter Gordy. He is the demon who, if he finds out about this conversation, will want to silence us."

"I stopped believing in demons years ago, so if you would please explain to me what this hunter has to do with the student?"

"I, too, when I first came here, proclaimed with great ease that I was not afraid either, like I never believed in their existence. However, times have changed, and so have I. But I'd best continue with the story, which has been passed down from generation to generation. Many years ago, lived one of the greatest hunters of Romania, in that mansion, here in Brasov. His name was Gordy, and he was a hunter. His gift was in capturing, with great ease, big animals and then skinning them. He created the finest clothing and footwear in Romania. Counts, Countesses, Lords, and Marquises came from all corners of the world to receive his gifts. The hunter's skill was in finding peltry that was unfamiliar to people. He was the only hunter who had a grey, sturdy wolf. It is said that the animal, like the hunter, had unique abilities. Within a few moments, he could track down the prey, and with a few quick strikes he would take it down, keeping the animal's fur intact."

"According to legend, one time he had killed three people, breaking their skulls with his jaws. As time passed, the hunter gained great fame and immense wealth. He abandoned his small cottage and purchased the mansion that was meant to become his tomb. Every Saturday night at the mansion, dances were held for all

nobles of the area. In these gatherings, events that were new to the eye took place. The nobles, led by the hunter would engage in orgies. Yes, Gordy at one stage impregnated the Marquise from the nearby town. Time passed, and Gordy grew more ruthless. He did not hurt animals anymore, but young women. He would imprison them in his mansion, and after having raped them he would kill them and feed them to his wolf. His noble friends covered up his foul work until they realized that the situation was getting out of hand. They decided, along with the residents of Brasov, that he should be burned at the stake.”

“However, no one would gather the courage to go near the mansion. They were so frightened of him that they even came to the notion that he was the Devil incarnate. They finally arrested him. They led him, tied in chains, to the central square of the town. He was tied to a stake. The local priest performed a conjuration to drive out the devil within him. Gordy was spitting out profanity and threats. The inhabitants had to act quickly. The mayor lit up the torch, and the hunter’s body was wrapped in flames. Their eyes stayed fixed on the flames. They were burning the body of a sinner. But before he burned, he cursed all of Brasov. He warned that every Friday the 13th, he will come out at night to exact revenge. The wolf was never found. As soon as his master burnt, he too disappeared.”

“I must admit the story is unique. I have never heard anything like this.” I said, trying to look as calm as possible. My eyes were watery from the atmosphere, which had become stifling. Sweat was covering my body. In addition to the atmosphere closing in, I felt out of breath. The innkeeper seemed happy that he had managed to frighten me. He believed that I would be on my way, away from Brasov. It had become clear to me that, for some strange reason, everyone in town thought I was a foreigner and should not meddle in their affairs.

“For once and for all, I would like to know about the student. What was his connection to Gordy?”

“All in good time,” said the innkeeper. He turned a corner in the hallway to the left. I followed him, but to my surprise, my interlocutor had vanished. Thus, I took a risky decision to dine at the hotel and then venture alone to the mansion. I had to meet the hunter, if that was at all possible. It might have seemed unreasonable, but my subconscious told me that Gordy would be there. He was seeking redemption; he was not going to leave. With some delay, I made it to the dining room. The waiter came to my table and asked me what I wanted to drink. I wanted to drink alcohol, but I was chasing ghosts, and my mind had to be clear. So I ordered, with less enthusiasm, a pitcher of water. As for the main course, I knew I would taste a traditional Romanian dish, which would be cooked in a handmade cast-iron pot. The mamaliga arrived in time. It was great, but I must admit it was not dinner food. However, there was not much else to satisfy my hunger. After my dinner, I sought out the innkeeper, but he was nowhere to be found.

The time was a quarter past eleven p.m., when I left the hotel. With only a kerosene lamp as my guide, I made my way to the haunted mansion. It was not far. Within forty minutes, I would be in the place where an evil dwelled, a man whose companion was a wolf. Ten minutes before midnight, I was in the mansion’s courtyard. The gate had been knocked down; roots had covered most of the front entrance. Mold and moss had coated the imposing fountain. For the first time in my life, I had encountered a building of such grandeur. Years ago, this building was a benchmark for this town. I moved with caution. The roots and slime growing on the ground had me missing my balance, and the kerosene lamp almost slipped out of my hands. If the lamp were gone, then it is quite possible that I would become trapped in this cursed place. As time passed, my fear and sweat increased. The sweat fell into my eyes, making it difficult to see. If God were up there, I wish he would lay his hand on me, and I could get out of here alive, for He is the only one capable of guiding man out of satanic contraptions. I made my way to the door.

I was at the door, a heavy weight lifted from my soul. I had again found the calmness that defined me as a human. I knocked on the front door and heard nothing. I pushed into it, but still, nothing happened. Then my eyes roamed right and left, in search of a doorknob or something that would open this door. A small bell covered in dust was on the side of the door. I rang it, and it made a peculiar sound, like something had collapsed inside.

Suddenly, the latch on the door broke off and was hurled towards me. It broke my lamp, a shard of glass nailed into my thigh. The pain was unbearable. The other latch broke off, and the door crumbled before my eyes. I had to move fast or suffer the same fate as the young English student. I flipped over and found myself near the bell. The steps were shattered from the falling of the door. The house was haunted, and the evil spirit, which had been kept hidden all these years, had gained immense power, a power that could help set it free once and for all. Brasov was in grave danger. If the evil was not destroyed, Transylvania would be written down in history again, not because of Count Dracula's legend.

"I am here to challenge you, hunter Gordy." The words escaped my lips before I even realized it. The lights flicked on. Crows and bats flew all around. No voice was heard. Emotions swelled up in me. My ego tittered between bravery and terror. I had never believed in dark elements in this world. I always thought it was something adults would tell children to scare them to sleep. Now, I was at the forefront of this clash between paranormal and common logic. I was never a brave man. I took this case believing I would have a good time. I was not at all prepared for this, if this actually belonged in the real world sphere.

After some thinking, my right leg crossed the threshold. It was now or never, a risk that probably few people would take. The smell of mould clung in the air. All the wood was covered in moss, mould, and slime. Every time I took a step, I kept thinking that the floorboard would give way, and I would be plunged into the abyss.

A strange noise was heard from my right side. One of the doors on the right opened wide, and more slime began to fill the room. My shoes were now stuck to the floor. With great difficulty, I managed to make my way towards the room.

“I am here to challenge you, hunter Gordy,” I repeated, not fully understanding the words coming out of my mouth. Again, I heard nothing. I made my way to the sitting room and came face to face with a portrait of a young man with a black beard. In his hands was a rifle; the grey wolf stood proudly by his side. The man in the frame was none other than the demon that was haunting the grounds. An intense smell of a dead animal wafted from the portrait. How was that possible? I prayed to God for the man inside the portrait not to wake. I approached the portrait; with my hawkish eyes, I examined every inch of the masterpiece. All seemed normal, but the smell of a dead animal was still there. I had to lift it. Most likely, whatever was causing the smell was behind it. With trembling hands, I took down the barrier that was blocking me from what I really wanted to see. There was an opening behind the painting. I stuck my head inside. There were two paths, one led upstairs, and the other to the basement. That is where the smell was coming from.

Without a second thought, I went to the basement. The darkness was thick. Luckily, I had my kerosene lamp with me, which not only lit my way but drove the darkness away, which was trying to take over my body and soul. After a few turns, I found myself in front of a set of stairs that were covered in slime. I put my foot on the first step and within seconds, I lost my balance. The lamp was knocked out of my hand. The flame flickered and then died. I was now in the haunted mansion all alone in the dark. I frantically searched my pockets. I never was a lover of hygiene, and that was why I always forgot things in them. I finally grasped onto something that could help me through this. It was a lighter. I lit it and, with extra care, started to make my way down the stairs. The steps seemed to lead me deep into the ground.

Thirty minutes later, I was in an open space. The smell had become unbearable, and it was right before me. "Is anyone here?" I asked in a whisper, all the while a little voice inside my head kept telling me I was doing something extremely fatal.

Suddenly, the lights turned on. Blinding light made me miss my footing, and I fell onto something. The lighter flew out of my hands. Terror had overwhelmed my body, and it lodged inside my heart, like a flesh-eating worm; it would feast on my guts until I was driven mad from fear and would attempt suicide. But I managed to stagger back up. I saw a lot, but I understood more. In front of me lay the body of the student. Maggots were coming out of the empty sockets that once were his eyes. Flies swarmed around the body. His body had been lying there for seven days. I examined the body thoroughly, and with my camera, I took some pictures. It was then that I realized I was not alone in the room. As I looked at the body, someone approached me from behind and touched my shoulder as I clicked the last photograph. I turned around and was face to face with the Romanian from the tavern. He was frightened, and his eyes were watery; sounds came out of his mouth.

"Can you please tell me what is going on here?" I asked in a small voice. I did not want to wake the demon.

"He is alive. He is alive!" said the Romanian with a tremor in his voice.

"Calm down. We are going to get out of here," I said, but I knew that was never going to happen. I lied to calm him down; otherwise, it was sure that we would suffer the same fate as the English student, who was probably in heaven away from this hell.

"He feeds on brains. He feeds on brains!" The Romanian said, calmer than before. With his left index finger, he pointed towards the dead man's head. I had examined the dead body before, but I must have overlooked one detail: the scalp was ripped open. With the tip of my shoe, I pressed on the head lightly. The hair parted to reveal a vacant spot inside his head where white, slimy worms had nested.

“Let us go, my friend. For soon we will become like him here.” The patron did not utter a single word; he just nodded. He knew that if we did not leave now, we would become a meal for the hunter and his wolf. Nevertheless, the lights went off when I knelt to pick up the lighter. We were once again in darkness, exposed to any sudden movement by the ghost, if that. I got down on all fours and searched in the dark for the lighter. It was our only hope of getting out alive from that room. On occasion, my hand would brush up against the dead body as I felt a sticky substance. Finally, I took hold of the lighter. It sparked enough to light up the room, so we could see the floor. I grabbed the Romanian’s hand and pulled him with all my might to the door.

A wall fell in front of the steps, blocking our exit. We were trapped inside that room. The stench of death lingered in the room. My fellow traveller started hitting the wall, but it would not move. I took hold of his arm and told him to be quiet, lest more trouble should find us. The patron took in my words, but after some time, he let out a cry of despair and cursed. A malevolent laugh was heard. Water trailed out from two openings in the wall, slowly filling the room. The lighter gave out completely. We were helpless with death lurking in the corner. Hours passed. Water was now at our heads. The ceiling was awfully close. I calculated that we had only ten minutes left before our brains would be consumed with fervor from the hunter Gordy.

“We are really close to the ceiling!” shouted the Romanian. In my desperation, I thought of threatening him so he could stop behaving like such a nine-year-old kid. My one last thought was in the form of a brilliant idea to free us from this room. The ceiling was made from wood, but with years gone by, and the mould that had accumulated, I could easily cut through. All I needed was a bit of luck. Otherwise, we would not see blue sky again. I forced the pocket knife into the ceiling, jiggled it a bit, but it did not move at all. I yelled to my fellow companion for help. He started



thrashing the wood while I was trying to move it. Finally, after a long struggle and almost drowning, we managed to move the board, creating a big enough gap for us to make it to the floor above. I came up first, and I pulled the man behind me. We were in a dark space once again. We could not see anything.

“Take my hand so we do not lose each other.”

“OK,” said my fellow companion, but something in his voice was different. His hand was cold, so cold that it felt as if my friend were a living corpse.

“Are you alright?” I asked with a low, shrill voice. There was total silence; my friend did not speak. His cold hand was gone. The hunter had eaten the patron of the tavern!

“Is anyone there?” I asked as silently as I could. I started running frantically towards the nearest exit when a throaty voice was heard from beyond.

“You are next!” I tripped over a board, lost my footing, and fell on the wood. The wood broke again, and I found myself in another room. The room was not entirely dark. Light came through some cracks, and I realized the way out was to the right. The breath was still behind me. Otherworldly screams followed. I lunged at the wooden wall. The wall caved in and I must have broken my right hand. I could not move it, and it ached. I was in the hall now, much to my relief. I made my way towards the entrance. Just as I was about to reach the entrance, the shattered door started elevating in the air, its pieces reassembled. I flipped over, avoiding the door just as it was about to block my exit, imprisoning me in the mansion.

Stumbling, I crossed the courtyard with a sharp pain in my right hand. I stumbled again over a can of petroleum. I could smell it. A bold idea made me take the can in my hands and walk towards the mansion that took the life of the young student and the Romanian. I would set it on fire. It was the only way I could think of to save Brasov from the demonic entity. The only setback in my plan was that I did not have a lighter anymore and was out of matches. I would have to go back inside

and use the kerosene lamp. The door flew open as I was about to go in. The hunter with his grey wolf stood in front of me. His eyes told me that he wanted to kill me. He did not send his wolf after me, but turned his rifle on me.

“I give you thirty seconds to hide,” he said booming. With the can in my hand, I searched for higher grass. I had to think of something fast, otherwise I was dead. Thirty seconds passed, but I still had not come up with a solution. The hunt was on. Gordy stepped down from the entrance. He would track me down instantly; I could see it in his eyes. He was going to kill me, and I knew I had not hidden well enough, as I knew to a professional hunter’s eyes it was ridiculous. He would find me in no time, and did. The grey wolf sank its razor-sharp teeth into my left hand. I yelled. I have never yelled that much. Gordy ordered the wolf to back off. He wanted to finish me off himself. I opened the can and stood waiting for him. He walked up to me within a short distance. The man was not a ghost or anything like a ghost. He looked normal, like a human being. He, once again, aimed his rifle at my face.

“Tell me your last wish, my friend. For you will be dead soon,” he said calmly.

In a flash, I threw the petrol at his face. The hunter lost his balance and fell to the ground. His rifle went off, and his face caught fire from the rifle’s spark. My plan was a success. To my surprise, the bullet from the gun found the wolf in the head. God had saved me from certain death. The hunter’s body was now engulfed in flames. With my left hand, I dropped the petrol can and tried to crawl away from the courtyard. A tremendous explosion was heard as I got to the courtyard entrance. The petrol can worked. The mansion and the surrounding areas were set ablaze—a smile formed on my lips. I had achieved the impossible. With all the strength I had left, I crawled as far away from the fire as I could. Then I passed out.

The next day, I was bedridden. My right arm was in a cast, but my left leg was in better condition. The nurse smiled at me and passed me a telegram from my boss,

informing me of another frightening incident near Brasov. I would take off in three weeks to inspect the case that plagued Count Elandy.

I just hoped that things would not get as dangerous as they did in my case with Gordy. Little did I know that they were about to get even more dangerous.

## Count Elandy

After three weeks, I managed to get out of bed. My cast was gone, and during my recuperation, different inhabitants of Brasov would come to see me, whom I had never met before. They would ask me about what had happened that night I was found almost dead, by the firemen. The residents were a bit overdramatic. My condition was not so dire, and I realized that as time passed, my story had been re-created to fit and satisfy their crazy imaginations. Here, I assure you, dear reader, I never told anyone the truth about what happened until today in this journal that you are reading. I wanted to avoid scaring the crazed residents any further as I was confident that the real danger was now behind me. An old man confessed that firemen did not find me, but a farmer nearby. You see, he stated it as a fact:

“The residents and the firemen did not want to save the mansion. With that house buried, the devil is buried as well,” he said, his tone full of cynicism. He was right. Who would want to save an offspring of Satan?

After I mailed my article to the newspaper editor, I began my next journey to yet another mysterious part of Transylvania. I was heading to the tower that once belonged to Vlad the Impaler. The tower, or rather the castle, as it resembled more of a castle in the picture I had received, had been passed onto Count Elandy for the last thirteen years. It was not mentioned in the telegram why I was called to go there, but the brief research I had conducted had made me a participant in yet another mystery. His wife had died tragically. She was found dead in her chambers on their wedding night. After a two-year relationship, they decided to get married.

The locals in the area said that she was found mutilated, with her left hand and her ear cut off. Her face was distorted with a fear that was not there before. She was a brave woman, they said, a real lioness. She rarely got scared. This made the case more remarkable. It also made my job harder. It had never crossed my mind for

a second that I would become a demon hunter. Unfortunately, fate is the one who chooses what we are to do with our lives; she has outlined the events that are to follow. Fate could stretch my life thread and then cut it with great ease, killing me instantly. But I do not think she would care all that much, having killed a lot of people before the world was even created.

I chose a donkey for my ride to the castle, as my meager salary as a reporter allowed only that luxury. It was probably the ugliest donkey I had ever seen. It was walking with a limp and had two big warts on its face. I turned to the man who lent me the donkey and asked him to escort me to the castle. As soon as he heard my proposition, he started yelling loudly. At least from my story with hunter Gordy, I found out that the residents of Brasov were gutless. In the face of danger, they would run. They were not distinguished for their bravery. I would say they were distinguished for their excessive fear of anything unknown. However, they were right in being afraid, for all these years they had witnessed remarkable and unreal things.

After a day, I crossed almost all the distance that separated me from the castle, which once belonged to Prince Vlad. Legend has it that Prince Vlad imprisoned the residents of a neighboring hostile town and forced them to build a castle for him. Because of the size and location, the castle could not be occupied. Nonetheless, in the years of Vlad, the castle was extended and used permanently by the Wallachian Prince. In 1476, an article read that the castle had been abandoned. Sometime later, Count Elandy decided that it was the perfect spot to build his new home with his love. He never expected that the castle would pose so many threats and bring about the death of his beloved wife.

As a reporter, I had to get there immediately to solve the crime and present a great piece of work in hopes of securing a plethora of readers for the newspaper I worked for, which had fallen into a dire financial situation. I had to save my job and

the newspaper. When the moon replaced the sun in the sky, I decided it would be best for the donkey and me to rest. I collected firewood to light a fire and poured water in a terracotta bowl for the donkey. As soon as the fire was ready, I placed the two small steaks that I purchased from the butcher's to cook. While they cooked, I admired the landscape. The mountains and the thick vegetation created a dreamy landscape that caused awe, rather than fear. This place must be submerged in snow come winter. It looked like an ideal spot for someone who was looking to get away from the misery and bustle of the town. The only problem was the freezing cold and the wildlife.

The smell of meat attracted a lone grey wolf. I gave him a fierce look, and immediately he left me alone. Maybe the news that I had killed the most savage wolf in Transylvania had spread? The steaks, along with the fresh loaf from Brasov made up a great meal, which eased my hunger, and I got to taste a simple yet delicious meal with pure Romanian products. The butcher claimed that the meat he sold to me was his own produce, and I believed he was right. It was soft and juicy, keeping all its juices that give meat that special taste. The loaf came from the oldest bakery in town. Legend has it that the baker's family had been taught in baking bread by Saint Gelasius of Rimet, and to this day, it has honored that tradition. Residents said that God blessed the bread, which makes it so tasty. I never believed in the legend, to be honest.

My eyelids had begun to close. I had to sleep soon, as I still had a lot of ground to cover until I reached the castle. I lay down near the fire, and immediately Morpheus took me away into worlds that only he knew.

The sun rose from behind the tall mountains. The sun's hot rays hit my face, and I woke up. I looked at my watch. It was nine am. I had managed to wake up in time, even though it was a bit early. I ate some blackberries with bread and climbed on my faithful donkey. The donkey went along willingly with a slow but steady pace

toward the Count's castle. I would be at my destination in half an hour. All of a sudden, the donkey came to a sudden halt. I was knocked on the rough dirt road, bruising my leg. Fresh blood oozed from the wound, but it was nothing serious.

The expression on the donkey's face led me to believe again that I was in a place with demons and all types of monsters that were determined to drive me to insanity; to have me locked up in an asylum so the truth, the heart of the matter, would never come out. In this place, one could marvel at the work of God or the Devil. The harmony, combined with the great atmosphere, was hiding upcoming risks, although not so satanic. The donkey's eyes changed into a vibrant red, blood-colored. It stayed rooted to its spot. If the donkey were not a living creature, at that moment, I would have guessed it was a stuffed animal.

A high-pitched scream was heard in the distance. The donkey fled the scene. I looked around me. All I could see were some bushes towards the West, moving. I picked up a rock. If the monster should appear, I would hurl the rock at it in hopes that it would become dust. I had to live. I wanted to live. The world had to know the truth about the entities that continue to create mayhem amongst these peaceable people. However, through the bushes appeared a magnificent blond vision. She was an amazing creature with an alluring glow to her face and skin. Most likely, she was not human; she seemed like a deity or a fairy, for I had never encountered a woman with such finely sculptured curves. She exuded a tranquility and calm, like the sea before the storm. My monocle slipped off my left eye. My lips formed a romantic, pleasant smile, and I had the feeling that on my face was a transparent glow.

"Goddess, how did you get here?" I asked with unmistakable flushing. The girl looked around her, not aware that I was addressing her.

"Are you talking to me?" the girl asked in a sweet and timid voice.

"Yes, Goddess, I am speaking to you."

"I am not a Goddess, kind sir," she said shyly.



“Then, if you are not a Goddess, you must be a fairy or royalty. However, if you are neither of the two, please allow me to express my admiration for your beauty,” I said, taking care to be as polite as possible, and not offend this amazing creature before me.

“I am neither of the two, but I accept your compliment. My husband is nobility. His name is Count Elandy.”

I was sure that if I had a second monocle, it would fall off as well. This woman just said that she was the deceased wife of the Count. I urgently needed a strong cognac. I felt as if the earth was caving in from under my feet, and I was falling into the void, into the unknown. I am sure my face had gone white.

“I am sorry, sir, are you alright? You look as if you have seen a ghost,” said the girl, and she picked up the monocle from the ground. I searched in my desperation to find peace within, which at that moment seemed to be locked away in an impenetrable fortress. Did I succeed? Hardly, but it is best to reassure you that I managed to reach out my hand to get my monocle, in doing so, my hand brushed against her skin. When I touched her, I felt emotions that unfortunately I cannot describe to you, my dear reader. However, I can say that thanks to a higher force, I was beginning to fall in love with Count Elandy’s wife.

“No, I never said such a thing. I am just surprised by your answer because you are supposed to be dead.”

“Who said that?” asked the girl, visibly upset.

“Your husband also publicized some photos. Here,” I handed her the three photos. She looked at them thoroughly, and deep distress was visible in her eyes. Will you escort me back to my husband’s castle, kind sir?” I was bewitched. My answer came out of my mouth before I even had time to think.

“Yes. It will be my pleasure. I am a reporter and here to acquire information on the case.”

“Good, then you must know the way?” asked the girl. She waited for my affirmative answer.

“Sadly, the map was on the donkey, which ran away when you appeared. So, I am unsure which way we should go.”

“Do not worry. I know the grounds quite well. I have accompanied my husband many times on his hunting trips. I am quite good at hunting,” declared the delicate woman with a hearty grin. I nodded my head and stepped back so she could lead the way. I had no idea where we were, but I knew we were standing on the Glade of Sighs, a name Romanians gave because of the sobs that were heard at night. We were several kilometers away from our destination, not a lot, but a handful.

I knew where I was and where I was going, but I wanted to check on the woman. Maybe she was indeed the wife of the Count, or maybe she was a dangerous adventuress. I had to find out if she was telling the truth. After several kilometers, I was certain she was not the Count’s wife. She turned and walked in the opposite direction from the castle. Her eyes surveyed the area thoroughly; she seemed not to understand where she was going. She was doing her best to conceal the ploy that she was planning. Now I could see that behind her seductive beauty, and the attraction which exuded from her, there was something darker. The woman most likely was a demon. She intended to seduce me, or had she already succeeded? Suddenly, she stopped and turned to look at me with a query.

“Why are you strolling?” asked the magnificent entity. Those words echoed loudly in my head. Although late, I realized that my behavior toward her had changed. I kept a great distance, looked at her with repulsion, not admiration, and, most importantly, did not trust her.

“My stomach burns. I have not eaten well these past few days and am also tired,” I said. I smiled sweetly at the Count’s wife. She said nothing as she kept walking in the direction that would take her to her beloved. In a flash, I was right by

her side. Her eyes showed certainty that she was leading me on the right path. Her quick stride revealed her confidence. I felt a heavenly pull towards her. Her aroma, her curves, her face, and the aestheticism that flowed from her were making me fall in love with her.

How is it possible that a reserved person, such as I, falls in love with the wife of the Count? Especially, Count Elandy, an essential figure with overall acceptance amongst the nobles and the residents of Romania. The woman stopped in front of a deep gorge. I almost bumped into her as I was not looking where we were going. I can say I was in love with her. I had no eyes for anything else. All I cared about was spending more time with her. Was I bewitched?

“We have to get across?” she said with purpose in her eyes. I looked at her sheepishly. It would not be easy to cross that steep gorge. I evaluated our chances; they were slim to none. “We cannot cross,” I said, feeling bitter towards the shimmering maiden. She smiled and gestured for me to follow her. She seemed to know how we could climb down with ease. She led me to some thick bushes. There, hidden from the eyes of any unsuspecting wayfarer, was a path. It was a rocky, dangerous path, but the only path within the gorge. With faith and extra care, I believed I would make it to the other side, where the Count’s castle was in view. I was only fearful for the girl. I shuddered at the thought of her falling into the abyss. A wrong step could lead her to her death. However, now that the castle was visible, my faith in the woman had been restored, as she had found a quicker way to the castle; she was the Count’s lost wife.

As we descended the steep path, her gait reminded me of a deer, full of grace and confidence. She never once trembled at the sharp rocks below. I would even say that she had ventured on this path many times in the past. Unlike the lady accompanying me, I had great difficulty in my descent. Any wrong move on my

part, and the result would be fatal. I slipped many times, but the girl would be there to catch me. Every time she saved me from death, my love for her grew stronger.

We made it to the end of the path, on solid ground. Sweat was on my face. I was frightened, but relieved to have been saved. Yes, I was saved from certain death yet again. This time it was because of her. She was that beautiful presence that had given a new and different meaning to my tormented life. Luckily, at the bottom of the cavern, there was shade, humidity, and cold, as the heat had taken all our energy. Sweat was outlined on the girl's face; she was also tired. But I must admit, she was physically fit, because she never complained about the whole ordeal.

"Are you ready to keep going?" she asked purringly.

I was surprised because I did not get enough time to recharge my batteries. I felt an intense wave of indignation. The girl noticed my trouble and gave me enough time to continue the climb. After a considerable amount of time, she led me into a cave hidden behind some cedars. It was highly unlikely for someone to find the opening to the cave's alcove. Only an experienced eye was capable of finding the opening.

"Do not be afraid. There might not be a lot of light, but the opening will lead us to the surface. Just follow my footsteps exactly."

She beckoned for me to hurry up. Indeed, we made it to the surface. The cave was a path engineered by her husband so they could cut a route and surprise their enemies, pointed out the girl. Without rest, we started the hike towards the castle, which was closer now than ever. As we kept moving, I noticed that the girl had begun to stagger. Her footsteps did not have the same confidence and strength as before. I approached her, scared that something might happen. I realized that she was in no condition to keep walking.

"We'd better stop and rest. You must..." The girl fell unconscious to the ground before I even got the chance to finish my sentence. I was by her side in a

flash. I lifted her and carried her to a stream to our left. I could not see it, but I could hear water running. The sun was hitting me with all its might, but I could not waver. I had to take her to the stream. My feelings for her heightened when I touched her to lift her up in my arms, I felt like I was touching something precious.

For a moment, I thought about telling her my feelings and how strong they were, like a raging torrent. I could not restrain them. Touching this divine creature felt like a dream come true. My body wanted hers for the first time in a long time. I was aware that I should not give in to my desires, for that would put my life in mortal danger and her life as well. The Count was stringent toward those who would dare to steal a glance at his wife, let alone me, and my burning desire to taste her complete lips.

I let her down by the cold water, and splashed some on her face to revive her. She did. She got up and thanked me for helping her get back on her feet. She drank quite a lot of cold water, and we resumed our hike. All seemed better now.

After all our troubles and exhaustion, we arrived at our destination later than I had calculated. The Count himself came down to greet us. As soon as his wife saw him, she rushed into his arms. They embraced and kissed passionately. I had to admit that the tender moment between them made me realize that I had no chance, and that I must not come between married couples. Why was I thinking like this, though? They seemed happy. After they parted, the Count greeted me with warmth as well. He was grateful that I had accompanied his wife. He invited me to dinner in my honor to show his gratitude towards me. I accepted right away, hoping to gather enough information to explain the supposed death of this divine vision.

A tan young man led me to my private apartment. The room, in which I was to stay for as long as I pleased, left me in awe. I must have been an honored guest; I was provided with the best room in the castle. The bed was crafted from oak, and the mattress was stuffed with goose down. I had never lived such royalties! The

room also had a fireplace and an extensive library. When he finished showing me around, the young man asked if I wanted clean clothes. I nodded and told him to bring up a tub; I needed to take a cold bath. As I waited, I looked through the library, and my attention was caught by a book titled *Demons and Monsters*. A strange power compelled me to look at the contents of the book.

The book was divided into two sections. The first section was on demons, and the second on monsters. I scanned both sections as my subconscious told me to. I was on the chapter on demons, specifically female demons whose goal was to seduce men and then use them as slaves. The name of the demon was Succubus. The picture was old, but the text stated clearly that it was a highly dangerous demon that, with one final strike, would turn its victims into slaves. It would also turn its victims into slaves. Reports have shown that the demon would also feed on them. The latter opinion, of course, belonged to the fantastical sphere; none of the researchers could understand how the demons feed. The last photograph referred to an incident in a church where researchers saw a Succubus for the very first and last time. The Succubus seduced the priest with her sensual body. The priest claimed that the demon used sorcery.

The door opened, and the young man came in with the tub. The tub was crafted from silver and various designs; valuable stones were carved into it. The young man set the bathtub down and returned with a pail of water and soap. He proceeded to fill the tub.

“As soon as you are done, tell your master that I wish a word with him privately. If he asks on the matter, tell him it is about his wife,” I said, and on my face was a sense of urgency. After filling the tub, he assured me that the Count would be notified on my request, and he shut the door. I took off my clothes and slipped into the gurgling water. My limbs were delighted by this pleasant break from the tedious hike. I had not bathed in four days, and needed to take the stench

and dirt that had accumulated from time from my falling on the ground, away. It was a necessary break to ponder what I just read in the book. I may not have believed in demons, monsters, and spirits, but all my convictions had changed after my little adventure in Brasov. I was convinced that the girl was not human, but an evil demon. She wanted to enslave me and the Count so we could do her bidding. All that seemed strange, but I believed I was right.

I did not hear the two knocks at my door. My thoughts consumed me. Only when I saw the Count's wife standing near my bathtub was I pulled back into reality.

"Hello. How are you?" The maiden asked me in her magnificent voice. I blushed as soon as my eyes fell on her, not just because she could see me naked, but because the nightdress she was wearing was quite revealing. Her shapely curves were defined underneath the fabric, intoxicating me. I covered myself with soap bubbles, assuring myself that she could not see my body.

"I am fine. On what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?" I asked.

"I am here to inform you that my darling husband has accepted your proposition to converse with him on the troubling matter. Incidentally, I do not believe that we have been introduced. My name is Irina Petreskou."

"My name is Arthur Mortimer, and I am a reporter."

"Nice to meet you," said the girl with a smile.

"Likewise, I am sure," I said, quite agitated by the conversation's longevity and its inappropriate circumstances.

"I think it would be best if I let you get ready," said the girl as she left the room. She opened the door and stood by it, and then, with a playful look on her face, which is the impression I got, told me that she would be delighted to see me at dinner. I smiled and returned the pleasantry. Eventually, she walked out. I got out of the tub and asked the young man to bring me new clothes to wear. He left swiftly and came back holding three different shirts and trousers. He held them up with



pride. I chose the orange shirt and the brown trousers. All the clothes were made with attention. They were warm and comfortable.

I thanked the young man again and left him to clean my room. The time had come for the Count and me to have our talk on the mysterious death, which had stirred quite a sensation in the surrounding area, as the news spread rapidly. Elandy was not naive enough to publicize false evidence to the newspapers. Fortunately, the Count was blessed with many talents and had inherited a considerable fortune from his father, who had left Romania years ago to start a big clothing industry in England. The clothes had been distinguished several times, and the sales had increased with time. The company was eventually passed on to his son. Under his management, things went even better. The Count had a good head for business and foresight. Unlike his father, he was never accused of corruption, and there were never rumors of debauchery. The only dark spot in his life was thought to be his marriage to Irena Petreskou, the daughter of a small plantation owner in the area of Transylvania.

After years of absence, his love for the girl led him to sell his business and return to his hometown. It should be noted that when the Count announced his decision to sell his company, the majority of the nobles talked of witchcraft; how the girl put a spell on him. Elandy ignored all the nasty gossip and married his beloved, but not before purchasing this historical castle. The wedding took place when the castle was restored, as it had been neglected for years. So, my dear reader, it goes without saying that the loss of his wife must have brought him to a near breakdown. His wife's reappearance then was a gift from God.

I arrived in the parlour to find my host waiting for me. He looked anxious. A little voice inside of me told me that he was scared of me or his wife. Maybe he was not aware of the miracle yet, if one had indeed occurred.

"Hello, stranger," said the Count with a coldness in his voice.

“Good evening. It is an honor to meet you,” I said and took a bow. The Count looked at me austere and said coldly.

“Who are you, sir, and what do you want from me?”

“I am Arthur Mortimer, and I am here to gain information on your wife’s death,” I compellingly answered him. Elandy’s eyes widened. He looked at me with hate, and then he started to shout. He was out of his wits and acting hostile towards me for no reason.

“Did you not escort my wife back here, so how is it that you can stand there and tell me she is dead?”

“One fact does not negate the other,” I replied calmly. He was taken aback by my answer. He believed his stature and power would scare me so much that I would not look for more information.

“I shall not tell you anything, Arthur.” The Count was calmer than before.

“I think you will tell me what I want to know, for I am the Englishman who came to Brasov to solve the cryptic disappearance of the young student. I am the one who has seen the hunter Gordy.”

The Count looked at me with admiration. My goal was to make him see that I was not an ordinary man, but a serious interlocutor, and I would get the information I needed by any means possible. He seemed to understand who he was speaking to. His face softened. He was not looking at me with contempt and arrogance anymore.

“Very well then, I will tell you the story behind the death of my beloved wife. After I have finished, I want you to leave here tomorrow.”

“I promise I will leave as soon as I get the information, but I will need to speak to your wife as well about her unexplained death.” The Romanian leader pondered my terms for a bit, his eyes swept out of the big window in the center of the room, across to the Transylvanian landscape. At night, the landscape was scarier. Wolves

and crows were heard, and the pale moon faintly illuminated the barren area's trees and hollies. Elandy seemed to be thinking, but was contemplating the dangerous games of fate that had violently changed the course of his life.

"I accept your terms, Arthur Mortimer. Sit on this armchair, and please listen to a story as strange as the creation of our world. Months ago, I cannot put a finger on it; maybe it was Tuesday, Thursday, or Friday? I cannot recall the time anymore. It seems to me that time follows a particular tactic; sometimes it moves fast, sometimes it never stops running. I never imagined that I would be facing such a bizarre problem. Look at my beard, and see how fast time has gone by. I am young, nearly thirty, and my beard is white. On that day when the full moon was near the stars, I lost my soul and vibrancy. That night, I was dining with her when I heard a sound."

"I cannot say for sure if it was an animal or a demon. I noticed my worried wife. To reassure her, I sent three men to survey the courtyard. My idea proved to be fatal, and all three of my men were led to their deaths. Their agonized screams made me abandon my well-cooked lamb to inspect what was in the courtyard. Irena would not let me go, and she had a bad premonition. She was right. That day destroyed me forever. We quarreled, and I slapped her. I told her I had to go after my men. I went out to the courtyard, and I assure you that what I saw was something extraordinary. It was a terrifying sight to behold. The three men were on the ground. The first one was bitten on the neck, and the second man's head was torn open. As for the last one, please forgive me, but I cannot describe to you how he was." The Count started to cry. He seemed like a child who had just lost his toy. I was stunned, and I looked at him speechless. His reaction let me know that what he had witnessed was unfathomable. He grabbed his forehead and squeezed it tightly. His skin started to turn red, but he only squeezed tighter.

“Please, calm yourself. You do not have to tell me exactly what happened. A few words will do, or you can leave them out entirely.” I talked loudly in hopes of bringing him back to his senses.

“I must not leave anything out. I gave you my word, and I intend to keep it. The agreement was that I would tell the truth. That is what I will do. But please be patient with me. I need to light up my pipe; it helps me relax,” he said, reaching for a well-crafted smoking pipe. He looked at me. Traces of his tears were gone. He was at peace, a remarkable physiognomy.

“There was a pool of blood under the third man, and he was lying face down, so I could not tell if he was hurt. With my foot, I nudged the corpse, and then I turned him over. I understood then why there was so much blood. His insides had been torn out and eaten from the hole that was in his stomach. After my initial shock, I called the coroner to examine the bodies. He failed to tell me what had killed them. The only thing he told me was that from the third man, the lungs, the liver, and the heart were gone. It might seem strange, but that is how it is or how it was when I came to the same conclusion. I heard A harrowing cry from the dining room when speaking to the coroner. I ran with all my might. My heart was pounding, for some reason, I was sure Irena was dead, and I was not wrong. In the dining room, a werewolf feasted on her flesh. He must have caught my scent, and he raised his head from his prey to lunge at me. He ran faster than a regular wolf, so he could have bitten me anytime.”

“I grabbed a chair and broke it over his head. He growled, and as soon as he recovered, he made another lunge for me. This time, I caught him with my revolver right between the eyes, but it was no use. He managed to sink his fangs into my good hand. I rolled with him towards the fireplace. I freed my hand and kicked him with all the strength I had left. The beast stumbled and fell into the flames. You’re probably thinking that the beast had died once it was in the flames. I thought so too,

but I was wrong. The corpse moved and came out of the flames. It came for me again. Scared, I started shooting. Three bullets were what it took to send him to the grave. I may have gotten my revenge for the four people I had lost, but they were no longer with me.”

“What an interesting story. Can you...” I was midsentence when the Count started laughing. His eyes were laughing as well. Suddenly, he stopped and directed his attention to me again.

“I was expecting you to interrupt me. The story does not end here. I will tell you the biggest secret I have been carrying for a month. The coroner opened the door. His eyes were horrified at the sight he saw before him, and his black briefcase fell to the floor. He accused me of murder and yelled that he would report me to the authorities. I was stunned at what he said, so I looked around me. There were two dead bodies. One body was my wife’s and the other body was human. The werewolf had turned into a human being. The coroner’s outburst was logical.”

“I explained myself, and he believed me, and when he saw that the werewolf had hurt me, he started muttering incoherent words. I handed him a cognac. After calming down, he told me the bite had infected me. By the next full moon, I would become the same as the beast I had just killed. I had to cut off my infected hand; it was the only solution. So I did it.”

The Romanian stopped his narration and extended his left hand. I touched it. It felt cold and fake. The man who stood before me had lived quite an adventure that resembled my adventure in Brasov. He smiled again and continued his narration.

“As the coroner was leaving, he could see my sadness, and he asked me a question that was destined to determine my life. He asked me if I would sell my soul to the devil to see my wife again. I nodded yes. If I remember correctly, I told him I would do anything to see her again. Two days had passed since the incident, and a

Native American arrived. I admit that it seemed clear that the Native American had come for a certain purpose. My Romanian men had never seen such a man before. His sudden arrival carried some mystery.”

“He asked to see me, and I cautiously accepted him in my private apartments. He said that he had an offer for me. He said that he could bring back my wife, and that I had to give him something in exchange. I offered him rubies, sapphires, and gold. Anything his heart desired. But he looked at me and made it clear that what he wanted was my soul. I would give him my SOUL, and my wife would return to me. I had no choice. I gave him my soul, and the vile man said Irena would be back here in three weeks, but she would be a little changed. The rest of the story you know. You escorted my wife here, and it became clear to me that the Native American had lied to me; I saw no change in Irena. Finally, I must tell you that I have never before seen the stranger who had bestowed his gift on me.”

“Count, I think you are mistaken. Irena Petreskou is different. I cannot explain it, but my conscience believes that something evil dwells within her,” I said carefully. I handed him the book I had found on the female demon. He looked at the book thoroughly. The page that described the female demon made him sigh with bitterness. He said nothing, just looked at me, and then he threw the book into the fire.

He looked at the flames, which were burning the book, with hatred. He started insulting me; then he sighed and cursed fate for harshly hitting him. His sobs did not last long, and he told me that he did not care what his wife might be; it was enough for him that she was alive. He had given his soul for her to come back. How could he refuse her? If indeed she was a demon. I left him alone in the room. I reminded him that I would be gone from the castle after my talk with his wife. Elandy may have uttered foolish, wild words, but on his face was pain over his mistake when he gave over his soul.

My thoughts were interrupted when I bumped into Irena. She was still wearing that daring nightdress that clung to her toned body. She grabbed me and kissed me passionately before I even spoke. I was surprised and tried to react, but the arousal that was provoked by her succulent lips left me powerless to any reaction. Was that a part of her plan?

I was no longer resisting her, who was freely offering me what I had craved for so long. She pulled her lips from mine and leaned in to whisper in my ear words that did not make sense. I immediately left her side and headed towards the parlour when the Count was there. Outside, there were two vases. In a trance, I took one in my hand and hid it behind my back.

Elandy was near the window where I had left him. I snuck up from behind, and with the vase, I hit him hard on the head. He fell down, and the vase shattered on the carpet. I lunged at him, crazed. I wanted to kill him, I could not stop kicking and hitting him. The Count blocked my hand and with a right punch broke my nose. Unbearable pain seized my head. My stomach was in knots, and tears welled up in my eyes. The Count was too strong. With one move only, he had managed to deliver a critical strike. I knew that if I got another hit, it would be fatal. Without knowing why I was fighting, I lunged for my host again. He backed out of the way, and I fell against a wooden chair. I hit my head, and the spell that had been over me, cast by the beautiful seductress, was lifted. With those words she uttered in my ear, she wanted me to kill her husband. The woman was a charming demon with a wild appetite. The Count now lunged for me, and I backed away.

“Your wife is a demon. She had put a spell on me. That is why I attacked you. We must stop this at once!” I yelled.

My opponent would not give up. He lunged at me like a maniac. I grabbed hold of his arms, and we rolled together on the carpet near the fireplace. The shards of

glass tore at our flesh. My screams deafened the Count, and he covered his ears. A punch to the stomach knocked him against the wall.

“Your wife is a demon!” I yelled once again with all the strength in my lungs.

The Romanian Count started to curse me. I told him to stop attacking me, as he could not fathom the danger he was in. The man pulled out his pistol and shot me in the left leg. I managed to crawl out of the room. I wanted to reach the hallway, where I had encountered the girl. The Count did not follow me as he most likely believed he had shot me in the heart.

“Irena,” I yelled her name as I was crawling. “Irena!”

She appeared before my strength left me, dressed in a white gown and a golden necklace shaped in a spiral around her neck. It was well crafted, and in the center was a red diamond. The woman was exquisite. She hovered over me, took me in her arms, and kissed me once again. My cries had stirred the whole castle, and the Count and his guards had arrived and taken in the sight of us kissing. The crowd stood speechless. Elandy took another shot with his revolver. It was rare for someone to have such a revolver; only the nobles and the rich had them in those days.

The woman let out an inhuman cry, which resembled the voice of a falcon. I walked away from the woman and walked to the Count, who grabbed me by the hand and pulled me to him. He tried to say something, but the demon let out a high-pitched scream that shattered the windows. With the windows shattered, the demon fell quiet. Many men had fallen unconscious, but the Count, I, and two guards managed to stand up.

“You were right,” my host whispered in my ear.

“Leave my beloved alone,” the woman said.

“Irena, don’t you recognize your husband?”

“I am not Irena. I am a demon, Count. I am not your wife.”



The Count looked at the three of us. He then told me to leave the castle to save myself from the demon. I tried to change his mind, but he told me that he was already dead; his only reason for living was now being a demon. If he could not have her by his side, then living was pointless.

“You must live. You are a good man, Arthur Mortimer. I have no hard feelings for what happened, and I apologize for my inappropriate behavior.” Those were the Count’s final words to me.

The two guards carried me to the stable and hoisted me on one of the horses. They told me to head west and that an epidemic had spread in Brasov, which was fatal. They went back to help their master. As I left, I could hear yelling and cursing. In the West, a forest of oak trees was barely visible. Suddenly, an explosion from the castle made me lose my concentration, and my hands left the reins. I fell to the ground, the pain from my body combined with my failing energy left me in the hands of God once again. If he did not help, I would not see daybreak again.

## The Forest of Varcolaci

The warm rays from the sun hit my face. My eyelids squinted. The pain from yesterday's blows was still there. My leg was probably infected; it was swollen. I tried walking, but it was no use. The forest was a few meters away, so I started crawling. An hour passed until I got to the first tree. I sat under its shadow to survey the land. Count Elandy's castle was hidden away from the horizon. The power of the couple levelled the whole castle. The mighty Count had probably entered the gates of the afterlife. If I did not find help soon, I would be crossing those gates myself. Crawling, I managed to reach the outside of the forest, and the wounds on my body reopened.

My situation was dire. I had lost so much blood that I was trying my hardest to stay awake. Aside from my swollen leg, which fortunately was not bleeding, my head was in pain. I cried out seven times for help, but to no avail. Fate had abandoned me, helpless in this cursed place. I made a promise along with a wish. I wished to be saved and promised myself I would never set foot again in Transylvania. I gathered up my strength for one last yell. Someone must hear me; otherwise, all my paranormal adventures would come to an inglorious end.

A cry of desperation escaped my lips, those same lips, which last night succumbed to the beautiful demon woman under the moonlit sky. The memory of how wonderful that kiss felt boosted my spirits a little. My mind clouded, my strength left me, and I passed out.

\*\*\*

A female voice was heard. Was I dead? Was I alive? Were I in heaven or scorching hell, which, according to folklore, sinners go?

In the flickering light of a lamp, a young being was formed in front of my blurry eyes. She was noticeably plainer than the female demon. My eyes blinked

several times until my mind could adapt to the space around me. A young girl with pitch black hair, in the shade of ebony, stood before me. Her eyes were green, and she had tanned skin. Her lips were a soft shade of pink, and she was considerably taller than expected for that time. On her left side, a brown dog sat. Drool was running out of his open mouth, and his eyes were covered in multiple wrinkles.

Next to the dog was a bulky trunk. I was in a cabin with a wooden floorboard and a ceiling. It was a cabin that had been in the forest for a while, judging by the condition of the wood, which had been eaten through. The bed that I had been placed in was overfilled with leaves and hay. I smiled and asked her in a pleasant tone where I was. She looked at my wounded, but notably toned body, a little longer, before addressing me in a whisper.

“You are deep in the forest. I washed your wounds and tended to you as best as I could. You were badly injured. Your clothes were soaked in blood, and after washing them, I hung them out to dry.”

As soon as the words escaped her lips, a heavy burden lifted from my heart. I looked at my body and noticed that my wounds were indeed cleaned. The swell from my leg had gone. The girl must have removed the bullet. My wounds were covered with leaves. As I surveyed my wounded body, I became aware that I was completely naked. I felt awkward. My cheeks flushed, and I noticed a trace of shame on the girl’s face.

“I thank you for your valuable help. I owe you my life. I would not be here right now if you had not found me,” I said, taking care not to sound overdramatic.

“It is nothing. The only problem is that you will have to stay for two weeks, at least. You are badly hurt, and I do not think you will get better any time sooner than that. I should warn you about moving about. If you move too quickly, you run the risk of developing a chronic problem in your leg,” the woman told me as gently as she could.

However, I had concluded that circumstances were more complicated than that. As she spoke those last words, trepidation and fear were lined on her face. She was also nervous in her movements, occasionally glancing at the door. Something must have happened before. She may have claimed my presence was not a bother, but reality proved otherwise. All the while, I did not want to seem nosy and let my worries be known. She sat with me for quite a while. We did not speak. We only looked at each other. I tried moving a bit occasionally, but she would throw me a stern look, and I would be forced into immobility.

The dog let out a growl. The girl got up quickly. She grabbed her bow and arrows and told me she was going out hunting. I looked at her retreating when she walked out of the wooden cabin. I hoped she would return triumphant. I had lost a lot of energy, and had to refill it. Also, my stomach had begun to complain. Several hours passed, and the huntress was nowhere in sight. I started to grow bored lying in bed. I was sick of looking at the trunk, which seemed to carry years of secrets in it. In there, I might discover something that will lead me to the girl's identity.

How could I think so negatively about my savior? Maybe the adventures, which I previously had, had changed me? Several times, I thought about dragging my weight to the trunk. My entire being longed to see what was in it. However, logic was set in. So I remained on the bed, looking at the space around me. I had noticed the girl's sight was apparent. She would see in an instant any movement of mine. For a huntress, that observation was routine. The ceiling had been built from a different type of wood than the floor. It had not been eaten through that much, and the color was not the same. At first glance, I thought it might have been an old cabin, but then I realized that it had been fixed recently.

I was picking at the roof when I noticed a bite mark on the corner to the right. It was similar to the one Count Elandy had described. The bite in the board came from the sharp jaws of a werewolf! I cursed and bumped myself against the bed. I

was in mortal danger again. The girl, my savior, was a werewolf. Luckily, I knew when there would be a full moon again. I carried with me an astrological map. I always believed that the stars revealed a person's future. For me, it was more like a road map, and also a hobby when I wanted nothing more than to escape the daily routine of my life. The only problem was that all my papers were in my clothes' pockets. Terror was taking over me as I thought back to the day before, when I was having a conversation with the Count. The sky was lit up by a full moon that night. That meant I only had twenty days until the next full moon, when I would come face to face with the devilish beast.

The door opened. The girl with her brown dog walked into the room. She seemed upset. Sweat had her face and hands glowing, revealing a wild beauty. She set down her bows and arrows in a corner. She kneeled, hugged her dog, and then gave him some meat from her bag. I opened my mouth to welcome her, but she quickly motioned for me to be quiet. She had a savage look in her eyes, and that is when it dawned on me that this woman could very well kill me. She was a young Amazon. She had been living in the forest for some time. Her only friend was her dog. He was a tracker, an essential tool for a hunter. Some time passed, and she permitted me to speak again. She placed her bag, which was full of animal kill, on the floor.

"Are you certain I am meant to stay still? I find it quite difficult to stay still for so many hours. I want to walk around for a bit. Go outside and see the forest," I said politely.

"I thought I told you to stay still for two weeks. However, if you wish to go outside, you should know I will not let you come back in," she said coldly.

"Alright, but may I please know what is happening in the forest?" I asked, irritated.

“The forest is full of wild boars and wolves, so I forbid you to go outside. It is too dangerous. If you go out in your condition, you will surely be killed. I’ll leave you alone now. I have to gather up firewood.”

“Wait. Before you leave, I need a favor; I would like...”

“To bathe, I thought so. Tomorrow night,” said the woman.

She went out again, leaving me alone. This time, I was going to see what was inside the trunk. I tried moving out of bed, but instant pain ravaged my body. I wanted to yell out, but thought better. I did not like the girl to hear me thrashing around in pain. I had to prove I was stronger than what she thought. So, I decided to sleep and stay away from the trunk. So I did.

The brown dog was on the bed, licking my face. The dog’s cold, wet tongue, which was full of saliva, pulled me away from the land of Morpheus. I landed abruptly back in reality. I had to admit it was quite a disgusting feeling, disgusting enough for me to complain. However, my current situation forbade me from lashing out at my hostess. She returned with two logs of wood, where she placed the pieces of meat and cooked them. She handed me a piece, and she sat next to me. The meat was excellent. Even better than the one I tasted in the castle. It was like chicken, but I was unsure if I wanted to know where it came from. So I ate without a word. I looked at the woman next to me. Under the dim sunlight, she was as desirable as Irene Petreskou. Perhaps, she was even more beautiful than Irene. She was real. She was not a demon or a ghost. She was just human. The passing of my wife and my voluntary abstinence from all physical pleasures, until recently, was the reason I longed to love again. My lonely life needed a companion. But was there something else? Did the female demon from before leave a spell to make me fall easily in love with women?

“What is your name?” I asked, ending the silence between us.

“My name is Nicolette, and you?”

“I am Arthur Mortimer. I am from England and I work as a reporter. I was called to Romania to investigate the mysterious disappearance of the English student in Brasov.”

“I know who you are, Arthur,” she said, looking at me with glowing green eyes.

“How do you know me, Nicolette?”

“News travels fast in Romania. You have become the topic of conversation. You are the reason Count Elandy and his wife were killed. Also, according to local authorities, you are the instigator for the epidemic that began in Brasov after hunter Gordy’s mansion was ruined.”

“Sorry. What do you mean?”

I was surprised. She looked back at me with her green eyes, without blinking. She made a gesture with her hand that told me this was another case that had to remain covered; the world had to stay in the darkness of delusion and vanity. Reality had to disappear because we all lived in a virtual world created from lies and semblance. They were looking for a victim to shoulder actions that were not his. I had become that purgatorial victim, where the paranormal powers of demons would hide behind.

I assumed that upon my return to civilization, I would find a note from my boss notifying me of my dismissal from the newspaper. This trip to this cursed place had cost me a lot. To be exact, I had lost nearly everything. This tragic state I was in was yet another blow to my fractured frame of mind, which, since losing my beloved wife, had been driven to Tartarus. Was I losing my mind?

My eyes welled up. I grabbed the girl’s hand and broke down. I cursed God and angels as I sobbed. Nicolette’s hand was the only support I had left. I was unemployed, bedridden, and trapped in a forest infested with dark entities.

“Keep quiet,” hissed the girl. I stopped my sobbing and asked her what the matter was. She told me to keep quiet again. I kept quiet. I had no choice.

“When will there be a full moon again?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but the cabin jolted. I fell quiet. The woman, shaken with fear, gestured for me to follow her, but I could not move a muscle. Without turning around to look at me, she kneeled in front of the trunk and retrieved a key that hung on a necklace from her bosom. Her hands trembling, she placed the key inside the lock. Another jolt and I lost my balance, falling flat on the wooden floorboard. I let out a cry of pain. The noise stopped. A newfound silence covered the area.

“Maybe my cries...”

My words stopped violently when massive jaws broke through the wooden ceiling above our heads. At that moment, I knew Death had reserved a ticket for me to the Underworld. My thoughts were interrupted again when an arrow was shot over my head. The howl of an animal was heard. The dog climbed into the trunk without hesitation. Nicolette rolled to me, and with quick movements, she lifted me into the trunk. She went in after and locked it from the inside. I began to say something, but a deafening sound combined with the breaking of wood brought me back to reality. We were trapped in a forest amongst creatures that desired our flesh. We were prisoners in the forest—or rather, in Transylvania, which felt like it was dead set on destroying me. Was I being overdramatic, or was this indeed the case? Time could only tell.

The noise continued above our heads. Howls of anguish and rage were heard as the dinner, Nicolette, and I managed to escape. Nicolette dragged me to the end of the staircase, which was located inside the trunk. The trunk was leading us into a second room. There was no light, but I was aware that I was underground. She left me to climb up the stairs, holding a golden locket, a pair of shoes, and a wooden



plank in her hands. What was this woman after? I wanted to ask, but decided not to trouble my rescuer with more questions. I sat on the wooden floor next to the dog. I tried to stand still, but my body ached. A fleeting idea of surrendering to the beasts to relieve my pain occurred to me. She came back down the stairs without the things in her hands, and I realized she was no longer gasping for breath.

“What did you do with the plank?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

“I placed it on top of the stairs. If they open the trunk, they will see the locket and the shoes. This way, they will think we have gone,” she said, relieved.

“I think you owe me an explanation on what just happened.”

“It’s true. I must tell you how you got here.”

Nicolette paused for a while and took a deep breath. She took a seat next to me. With sobs, she began to tell me her story. Crying, she whispered that she would start her narration later when she was more composed, because, as you know, it is difficult to go back to the past, especially if you have given everything to forget it. As time passes, you think it has been erased, but it reappears again like a phantom to remind you who you are, and mainly to frighten you. When my eyes began to close, Nicolette decided to share her own terrifying events with me. Despite the frustration written on my face, I tried to remain relaxed. I opened my eyes, forced myself not to fall asleep, and listened to her narration.

“I was not always like this. Life’s hardships forced me to this cursed place where I have been a prisoner for over seven months. God has never been there for me. In less than a year, he has managed to take my whole family. It might sound strange, but that is what happened. He killed my brothers first and then my mother...”

“Sorry for interrupting, but I do not understand. Perhaps you can...” She nodded and began her narration again.

“Forgive me. I always make the same mistake. I let my emotions get the best of me, and I forget that no one can understand what I am talking about.”

“My story begins when we arrived here, in the forest. This was three years ago. I lived alone with my brothers. Our parents had died from a strange illness that no doctor could detect. Some say it was the last stage of cancer, but it was never diagnosed. So we were left on our own. We each offered to the household what little we could provide. It was a poor life, but a good one. There were difficult days, but they were carefree. Until the day my brother got lost in the forest when he went to get firewood. He was a lumberjack, and my youngest brother was a fisherman. I took care of the house. He was lost in the forest, whether you believe it or not. We waited three days for his return. He never did return. The forest swallowed my brother.”

She started to cry again. It was a great surprise to me that a courageous girl such as she was in tears. Her green eyes were red, and her face was terrified and sad. I tried to speak, but my mouth was dry.

“I will continue, don’t worry. I have to. I owe it to myself. For so many years, I have lived in despair. I did everything I could to save them. I still do. Some time passed, and my youngest brother went out looking for my oldest brother. He ignored my warnings, and he too was lost. This time, I waited five days. Deep down, I hoped he would return. However, when I began looking for clues in the forest, I was positive that my brothers would never return the same, if they ever do return.”

“Do you know what varcolaci means in Romanian?”

I looked at her with wonder and shook my head, due to the lack of sleep, and my poor knowledge of the Romanian language. She asked me again and, with her hands, made out the word varcolaci in the dirt. It meant werewolves. I was in a forest surrounded by werewolves. This time Death was determined to suck my soul, and as it seemed he would manage it without any problem. The girl continued, ignoring my terror-stricken reaction.

“According to legend, this forest was a witch’s lair. She turned anyone who dared to cross into the forest into the shape of a werewolf. As time passed, the witch did not have to do much, for one bite from a werewolf would turn any victim in the next full moon into a large beast, whose only purpose is to feed on raw flesh. I do not know if you noticed, but there are some ruins before you enter the forest. Those ruins were once a small village. I stayed there for some time, until I was ready to carry out my crazy plan to save my family. My only solution came in a forgotten book with yellow pages. The person who wrote it marked down the events in the area.”

“The book said that the witch had to be executed. An outrageously difficult solution. But I was not going to give up. I practiced my archery every day. I managed to gain a reputation as the best archer in the village. The time came for me to enter the forest. I needed to find the witch and kill her. As you can imagine, I found myself trapped in the forest. There is no way out of this hellish place. I have tried leaving several times, but I was not successful. It is easier to leave when the moon is full at night than on any other night. In the mornings, she can see what stirs in the forest. She will kill anyone naive enough to escape in seconds. Also, when there is no full moon in the dark sky at night, various other beasts worse than werewolves wander.”

“It might sound dramatic, but that is how it is. I can assure you. Only one person ventured out to the boundaries on a night like this. The result was something more than frightening. His body was found mutilated. The head was missing, and his legs were found fifty meters away from where he was killed. The only escape comes with the full moon. You may not have a lot of chances, but there are only five to six werewolves out there.”

“How was the village ruined?”

“The witch burned it down. She did it out of revenge because I killed a werewolf. My arrow struck him in the head. I was surprised that I had killed him because, as you can see, I handmade my arrows—the steel arrows I once had broken three months ago. The witch burned the villagers at the stake because she hated them. She wanted to do it, and so she did. I was just the cause.”

“When I lost my brothers, I lost all the pieces of my soul. I felt like a soulless body. But then the village burned down, and I can tell you that it hurt so much more. It is strange, but true. I am responsible for all those deaths. They say God gives you only what he feels you can handle. In that moment, I felt that I had reached a breaking point. What more would you like to ask?” she asked, struggling to hide her tears.

“I would like to tell you something you missed out on. How did I end up here with you?” The girl smiled for the first time after an hour.

“I forgot,” she looked at me for a while. Her eyes held promise.

“Where were you when you reached the forest? I ask because I found you deep inside, a little further away from the witch’s tower.”

“I remember being outside the forest. My back was resting against a tree. Then I woke up at the cabin. Then everything is a blur, like it never happened.”

“I found you at night. A werewolf was coming towards you. I killed it, saving you, and now you are here with me. As I said before, there are five werewolves now. I killed the last two. From seven, they became five. The number seven is important. It is a magic number. According to knowledge that has been kept hidden, the number seven holds much paranormal power.”

“Nicolette, the time has come for us to decide how to escape this hell. We both know very well that the only chance for escape is when there is a full moon. Or we could both venture to the witch’s tower and kill her. I would say these are our only options. But I must tell you we should wait a few more days for my wounds to heal.

The pain is horrible, I am afraid. I doubt I will be able to walk,” I said. Pain stabbed my sides.

“We will wait here three more days. That should be enough for your recovery. Then I will take you to the forest’s boundaries. I will remain here. I have been trying to save my brothers for so long. I cannot abandon them.”

“Nicolette, you cannot save your brothers. Even if you kill the witch, it is not certain that they will turn human again,” I said abruptly.

“I will only give up when death parts us. I have been in the forest for so long, hoping. Why should I leave now?” asked the girl, avoiding my gaze. Could she not tell that I loved her? The feeling was intruding deeply into all my being. I hoped that she would follow me, away from cursed Transylvania. We could go live somewhere far away, in love and peace. Was I becoming crazy?

“I love you,” I said impulsively. Her green eyes wavered for a moment, but she was pleased. I have uttered those words so many times without thinking of their meaning. Now I felt sure of my feelings. I eagerly wanted to be with Nicolette, to get married, and start a family. She did not say anything. Throwing one last look in my direction, she turned her back to me and disappeared into the darkness. At that moment, all seemed lost.”

Had I lost the girl who, after all these years, had ignited all these real feelings? It might seem that she did not harbor the same feelings I did, but in the depths of her soul was the feeling of love. Her angelic voice would refuse to utter “I love you.” Maybe in another time, in another world, she would reveal her true feelings to me, just not in this world. She was not scared. She had already made her choice. She would remain here to salvage what was left of her family. If she did not succeed, the cost would not be so high, as she would be with them again in heaven. Thoughts swam around in my mind and then left. I was facing the dark, hoping for light to shine in and shed away the fear slowly but steadily nesting inside my body.

This was one of the few moments when I felt helpless. Hopefully, in the next few days, I will be rescued from this forest and go back home. In London, with a sound mind, I would consider the next steps in my career. I might abandon the profession, I might not. Of course, I might continue chasing demonic hobs. One thing was for sure: Arthur Mortimer, reporter of the inconspicuous London local newspaper, would never be the same. All these adventures I had lived through had changed me physically and mentally. My hair was whiter, and I had lost a lot of weight. I resembled a scarecrow. I wish I could see Percy, my cat, again. I would give anything to see him one more time. Was I hearing voices?

My eyelids began to close. With the day I had and the exhaustion that came with it, I demanded that I go to sleep. Ignoring the danger that might have been lurking on top of my head, I fell asleep. I wished for a peaceful sleep, no nightmares that might weaken my body.

The brown dog's drool touched my lips. The taste was anything but pleasant. I looked at the dog with ferocity. Frightened, it withdrew with a muffled sound. Guilty of my appalling behavior, I crawled to where the dog had disappeared. A cold breeze hit my face, refreshing me. It was a pleasant feeling that there was air here in this artificial cave. But I feared that the air would diminish with the hour going by, leading to asphyxiation. I had crawled far enough, but could not see any sign of life. Nicolette and her faithful companion had disappeared. I crawled through the thick darkness and wondered if my love confession had made the beautiful woman disappear to get some distance between us. Maybe my words intensified the tragedy in her life as I reminded her that her family was trapped in the forest.

An intense, macabre smell emerged in the air. My strongest belief was that the trap was not the forest or the alleged witch, who had turned several folks into werewolves. The trap, or if you will, the weakness stopping the girl from moving on with her life, was her mind and stubbornness. Living for long amongst these beasts

had alienated her from the real world. Her obsession with saving her brothers and her fear of the outside world had fixed her here. I would say it has led her to disfavor. It is a harsh test to be used, but I believe it could reveal the outcome of her extended stay in this hell.

From my left appeared a gaunt shadow. His long beard wrapped around his body, and his bones were outlined under his skin. He had no teeth, except one that was rotting away.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him in a whisper as I approached him. The old man’s eyes searched in the dark for the voice that asked the question. After a moment, his faded eyes found me. He then fell against the cold ground.

“What are you doing here?” I could smell starvation and filth on his breath.

“Go away. Go away, you are in a damned place. She wants you. She will suck out your soul to live longer!” he spoke with difficulty. His words came as no surprise. He was a man trapped in a different kind of prison. Going closer to him, I could make out the chains that were clasped around his hands, his ankles, and his neck, and time had slimmed him down. So he could very well escape. But if he did, where would he go?

“She will kill you, my child. She is terrifying. Get away, the cunning witch will suck your life”, he said, squeezing my shoulders with what little strength he had left.

“Who is going to kill me, old man?” I asked, and I felt that behind his words lay a great secret.

“She is an enchantress. A conjurer, she is cunning and will lead you to your death.”

“Who is she?” I asked the enchained with anguish. I grabbed hold of his bony arms.

“She is...” The old man’s sentence was cut off when an arrow struck his skull. The sound of his skull breaking was terrible. I pulled back; I felt danger lurking. I fell to the ground; my cheeks touched the cold floor of the cave. I heard footsteps behind me. They were not human footsteps. The creature’s stride must have been gigantic. In a short amount of time, he had covered a great distance. With every step came a growl. I grabbed the old man’s corpse and placed it on top of me. The scent from the dead body would fool the creature, and it would think me dead. The beast hovered over me and sniffed. The nasty scent from the prisoner deceived the beast.

“He must be here. Look around. I want him alive. If you kill him, I will leave you forevermore to burn in hell,” a woman’s voice threatened.

The beast that followed the order, growled and moved away from where I had come. When the witch and her beast left, I decided to find the courage to stand on my feet. I had reached a pivotal point. I owed it to stand on my feet, not just to save myself, but also to search for my beloved Nicolette. My soul feared I would never see her divine face, which had enslaved my heart, again. I carefully pulled the old man’s corpse off me and placed it carefully on the ground. A mistake could kill me. No noise should give away my position. Everything was important. I leaned against the wall. It was as cold as the ground. My hands stung from the cold, but I had to keep going.

I finally stood up. I moved my right leg, then my left. Every movement was difficult. I ended up dragging my body with the support of my left leg. I was a cripple, walking to his death. This time, I would not be alone. The thought made me smile as I made my way to the Underworld. Was I crazy?

\*\*\*

Nicolette had arrived at the root of all evil in the forest. The rope ladder in front of her led to the witch’s tower. The risqué plan she had been working on had



reached its culmination. The only bleak point to this plan was leaving Arthur behind in the passageway. The witch's werewolves would surely find him and tear him to pieces. She had no choice. She had been approaching the tower all this time. She kept building her cabin closer and closer to the passageway, using the necessary tools to remain invisible to the untrained eye.

She opened the hatch that separated the cave from the cellar in the tower. The cellar was a dark space full of wine barrels. She could make out the year the wines had been made in the dim light. The wines had been in the cellar for a hundred years. Their price, most likely, was baffling even to the nobles of the area. A bottle of good wine could create a plethora of pleasant feelings, revealing power, social standing, and a love for life's pleasures. The rats and the mice were engaged in a tug of war over food scraps, while the spiders weaved odd shapes in their webs.

Nicolette scrutinized the area. The space was not as big as she thought. However, she could not see a way out. She was trapped in a cellar amongst spiders and rodents. She then remembered a discarded notebook in the forest, far away from the secret passageway and the cellar. The notebook said that on the left side was a wooden door, made from cedar. A single wine barrel stood in the same corner where the door was.

Footsteps were heard. The woman turned her head to the sound, but saw nothing. A barrel stood where she heard the footsteps—an idea formed in her head. The cellar had a door inside the wine barrel. The sound of footsteps was becoming stronger. An angry woman's voice was heard. Nicolette knew that voice very well. It was the witch of the tower—the same witch who had turned her unfortunate brothers into werewolves. The huntress had to hide to save herself. She had to trick the beast's sense of smell to escape.

The only way out was to hide in one of the wine barrels. The only problem was that the barrels were facing down. Fear combined with gooseflesh left her shivering.

She grew desperate as her eyes searched for salvation. The big barrel in the corner fell open, and a woman with long black hair and white skin walked out. Behind her was a werewolf holding a torch. The torch lit up the area, but the witch could see in the dark, and even when she could not see, a spell of hers could light up the room. She needed the necessary power and energy for one of her spells to work. The witch's body was becoming frail, and it needed energy. That is why sucking a person's life from their body was vital.

"Someone is in the cellar!" the witch yelled.

She hit the beast that was perched on her back. It made a noise and began sniffing around to find the culprit. He knew very well what the demonic woman would do to his body if he came up with nothing. She would torture him to no end until the lesson was learned that her way was always the right way. He was not picking up any weird scents, but there still was something different in the cellar. The smell may have been subdued, but something peculiar, aside from the mice, rats, and spiders, wafted in the air. A woman had set foot in the cellar.

Further away, the werewolf saw a half-open barrel. The huntress was probably hidden in there. His body went into attack mode when he approached the barrel quietly. He waited to reach the appropriate distance to dig his hand, grab the girl by the hair, and rip her apart. His claws plunged into the red liquid. The witch looked at her servant, anxious. She believed that at long last they had found the woman who had been tormenting them for months, with her attacks against the tower.

Nicolette heard the splashing sound of his hand when it searched around the liquid. She was afraid that they would eventually find her. She closed her eyes and prayed to God to send them away. She was aware of how werewolves killed their victims. A fat rat jumped out of the wine and bit the werewolf. He let out a cry. He did not manage to find anything in the wine. The huntress had saved herself again. Upon their arrival at the tower, the witch would torture him. She favored the

torture rack. She had tortured him twice on it, and his body was still recovering from the pain.

“You failed again, foolish creature!” raged the woman.

The beast touched his back. She was going to hit him again with the cane she had in her hands. Instead, the wine barrel was elevated and came crashing down. Red wine slopped across the wooden floor. The animals that had made the cellar their home ran away to hide, disturbed by this unexpected riot. The witch did not frequently visit this part of the tower. But many bad things took place when she did, disrupting the harmony amongst the animals in the cellar.

“She is not here, you imbecile! The girl has left the room. There is no other barrel that she could hide in. Wait!” said the witch, and with a few jargon words, the whole room lit up. The light unveiled every corner of the room. Bats, startled and unhappy with the sudden glow, flew away to find an escape, but ended up stumbling against the walls.

“Now, look around again, you idiot!”

She still felt an alien presence. The beast looked around, but still could not see or smell anyone. He was sniffing the air when his ears caught the sound of someone conversing with someone else. It was the old man who had been kept prisoner.

“Mistress, I found her!” The beast opened the hatch leading to the cave. The two conspirators disappeared in the enveloping darkness.

Nicolette slipped out of the wine barrel. Her clothes were dusty, and webs were tangled in her hair. She had no time to straighten herself out. She had to leave quickly, should her pursuers return. This time, she owed her escape to divine intervention. Surely, it was God who helped her escape her death. Thus, without losing any more precious time, she climbed into the wine barrel and reached for the door made out of cedar. Behind the door was the entrance to the witch’s tower.

Finally, after so long, she would enter the evil woman's home. Her hand, which shook with emotion, touched the doorknob. She twisted it to the right and left, but the door would not budge. There was no keyhole, but it was locked. Oh, how she wished there was a way she could open it.

\*\*\*

Tears of joy and pain from my efforts trailed down from the corners of my eyes. I had reached the rope ladder. I had wasted a significant amount of energy getting to this area. The tragedy here was that I had not managed to cover much distance. My body was worn out and needed time to recover. The rope ladder swayed slightly to the right and left. I knew that I was frail, and because of that, I would not be able to climb the ladder. As a child, I boasted that it was simple, but as soon as I started climbing, I realized the stupidity behind my words. Now, after so many years, I find myself chasing demons in Transylvania. I had saved Brasov from the hunter Gordy, helped Count Elandy somehow, and could not climb a miserable ladder!

The thought upset me greatly. After some mature thought, I decided to stay strong and, with determination, make the first and last effort to climb. So I let my body collapse, not making noise that could get the witch's and the werewolf's attention. Time passed, and I felt my body becoming weaker. I was left unable to take on the challenges that I had to face. Adding to that, my stomach craved food desperately. My tragic condition made me ponder something obvious. Nicolette knew that I might not have long to live, and she left me at the entrance of the passage so that the beasts could finish me off, saving me from the physical torment that I had been enduring for days now.

I squeezed my brain to forget those speculations that were there to drive me mad. I tried to grab the ladder. I was motivated enough to start climbing at the

touch of the wood. Sweat was falling from my body, but my determination won out despite my poor condition, and I found myself on the cold, dark floor of the cellar. I was overjoyed. Tears of happiness and pain ran down my tortured face. Then, and there, I made an important decision regarding my life and the whole adventure. I would try to stay alive and get back home, whatever the cost. I wanted to live, for some unexplained reason.

The rats, spiders, and some greenish snakes approached me threateningly. Who knows why? Maybe they thought I was dead, and they wanted to feast on my raw flesh. I could not help but pity the creatures, even if their glances were frightening. Deep down, they were piteous, stuck in this dark den. Many of them had not seen the outside world. They had not seen daylight, whereas for someone like me, it was highly beneficial. Down in the cellar, they had formed a terrifying community. Any moribund or outcast that dared to set foot in their home would suffer the same trial. A round rat masterfully jumped on my stomach. A big smile was on his face when he invited the rest of his family to dine with him. At that moment, I expected nothing from anyone. I expected a decent end, despite the fanfare about my struggle to live, which had crossed my mind.

\*\*\*

Nicolette opened the door and now stood in the main entrance to the tower. Looking at the basement, she believed the rest of the tower would look like a regular house. There would be no dust, the cobwebs woven from the spiders and the dirt that had accumulated over time would not be there. Unfortunately, she was wrong again. The inside was empty; the lack of cleanliness made her detest herself more for her initiative to go deeper into the tower, and into the damned varcolaci's forest. How could this woman live in such a dump? The windows were in the same state as the rest of the house. They were covered in dust. The windows had become a

charcoal color. The furniture had been chewed on by termites and stood half ruined in the center of the room. A solitary wardrobe with carvings on it remained untouched in the sweep of time. Surely, the furniture hid secrets of grave importance.

The elaborate representation on the wardrobe reminded her of the story Mortimer had told her. If you looked closely, you could see the witch. The werewolves' heads were figurative. There was something about the closet that seemed outrageous to her. She moved back sharply and fast, hitting the representation. The finding made her stumble. She knocked herself against the ruined furniture and was left unconscious.

\*\*\*

I felt the rodents licking my flesh with ample pleasure. Luckily, their leader had not plunged his sharp teeth into my stomach just yet, so the others did not follow his lead. I was left with only minutes to live. The unpleasant sight before me left me wishing for death rather than salvation. I was out of strength, and even if I managed to get away from the deprivation that I had endured these days, my bleeding profusely, which had started in an unknown part of my body, would lead me to death. The hatch that divided the cellar from the cave broke open like a toothpick. Nicolette, with her familiar bow, arrived. With her slender fingers, she took a bow and killed the rat with an aim at its head. The animals within the small community let out mournful cries. The leader of one army was dead.

The spiders, dauntless, lunged at her. Some of them bit her on the hands. Her skin reddened, and hives, which appeared to be infected by the smutty insects, formed on her hands. The mice did not join the spiders' battle. They could predict the outcome of this useless battle, and they disappeared into their nests. There, they would surely find something to eat.

The huntress threw her bow at the spiders, killing some of them. Then, she grabbed two arrows and expertly started to wave her arms; she killed as many as she could. The result was remarkable. She had stopped the onslaught. Terrified of their adversary, those who survived retreated to their nests. They should not have attacked. They were only insects, and she was human, a superior being.

“Are you alright?” shouted the woman as she fell against my body. I looked into those green eyes that made her so beautiful. I wish the series of terrifying events had turned out differently. This girl would have been my wife, and I would have made her my first priority. But nothing in my life happened the way I wanted. Fate always had other plans for me. Was I becoming crazy?

“Thank you,” I mumbled with difficulty.

“You are going to be alright, you just need rest, my love,” said the huntress. My heart fluttered at the sound of her voice addressing me in such a way. She had touched me with unsurpassed tenderness. After everything I had been through, the Creator rewarded me for my trials. My beloved loved me truly. Her hot lips touched. A rush of spontaneous emotions, which, unfortunately, I cannot describe, came over me. I will tell you only this: imagine a fervent passion, an attainable dream becoming true. I smiled at her tenderly. Thanks to Nicolette, I have lived many adventures, and have become wiser from them.

My life now seemed to go down an easy path that would lead to the fulfillment of my dreams. My eyes grew heavy and closed, drunk from my beloved’s kisses. Before sleep settled in, I felt her arms wrapping around my waist. Her hair caressed my face. She asked me to kiss her one more time. I could not resist the invitation, and I kissed her with passion. Was this a dream or reality?

However, there was no pleasure between my lips and hers. I felt like my lips had caught fire. Unbearable pain hit my body. I tried pulling my mouth away, but my lips were stuck to hers. The woman was sucking out my soul greedily. My

foolishness had led me to make a fatal mistake. The woman kissing me was not Nicolette, but the witch who was shaped into the form of the huntress. She wanted to steal the energy from my body. I would be allowing her to carry out her evil plans.

Sounds like scratching woke up the huntress. She stood across the magic wardrobe. Without wasting time, she opened the cedar door. She was prepared to kill the witch. Her lethal arrow left her bow with a whistle until it found its target. The woman who had been tormenting me was knocked back against the stone wall when the arrow hit.

“Leave him alone. You will not kill him, too,” yelled the huntress with passion in her voice. The witch rolled to the floor, grabbed the arrow, and pulled it out of her wound. Inside, she felt tremendous pain, but did not show it to her enemy. She was immortal, but she felt intense fear. She might have been in pain, but the only way one could kill her was to utter her true name, which had been lost in time. That particular fact gave her an obvious advantage.

“You cannot kill me, Nicolette. The only way to kill me is to call me by my true name,” cackled the witch. The huntress remained untouched by her words and shot another arrow. The witch removed her cane, and the arrow bounced and ricocheted back to Nicolette. She tried dodging it, but it followed her wherever she went. Finally, it pierced her back.

Blood pumped out of her injury, but she did not give up. She knew how to fight her battles till the end. She used one hand to push herself up, and with the other hand, she took another arrow. That one would plunge into the witch’s heart. The woman with the evil smile would ultimately end up in hell. She was fired up from the hit, and the time had come to save me and the rest of the forest from her tyranny. The cellar would become her tomb. The witch, witnessing the desperate



attempts from her opponent, began to cackle manically. How could that woman have had the nerve to mess with her?

“Drop your arrow and I will not hurt you, fool,” she laughed louder.

“I do not have to let go of my arrow as it will send you straight to hell,” Nicolette answered with difficulty.

Her toned arms arched the bow. It seemed her aim would become the witch’s swansong. Passion and a desire for revenge are the emotions that are stronger in times like these. A normal person might have begged his enemy for forgiveness, but Nicolette, with ease, aimed precisely at the witch’s heart. The witch stood in front of the arrow, her chest thrust out as she waited for the blow, which came instantly. She was hurled against the stone wall for the second time and uttered a ghastly death cry. She fell unconscious, and the swarm of rats and other creatures that lived locked up for years in this dark place showed up to taste the flesh of the tower’s mistress.

A positive grimace formed on my beloved’s face. A fleeting thought passed through her mind. She laughed loudly. She believed deeply that all her ordeals were finally over. Her story was going to end happily. She fell on me and kissed me, excitedly. The rapture I felt made me thank God I was finally with her. I looked into her eyes tenderly, and asked:

“Would you like to marry me?” Tears of emotion wet my face. Why did I have these thoughts?

Sadly, I never got to hear her answer as the witch got up and started laughing loudly, holding her belly. Nicolette and I froze. The woman was immortal. The only way to get rid of her was to call her by her true name. We were doomed.

“I told you, my darlings. I can be killed by only one way, and that one way cannot happen by you as you must be at least 100 years old to know who I am. Now I will kill you.”

With those words, she cast a spell that lifted and smashed all the wine barrels in the air. The red wine chased away the animals that had readied themselves for loot. I was soaked in red and white wine. Nicolette stumbled and hit her head on the stone floor. Just when all seemed lost, I heard a voice calling inside my head. I closed my eyes to concentrate on the sound coming from my soul's depths. I had become a communicant. The voice yelled rhythmically a female Romanian name. I did not know the language well enough to understand the word, and to say it nobly. I could not do anything. I stood in the center of the cellar with a drone inside my head, while a battle was being fought next to me.

"What is your last wish, Nicolette?" asked the mistress of the tower. She licked the dry blood on her lips.

"Den-i-za" I mumbled. The color drained from the witch's face. The cane fell from her trembling hands. She turned to me, trembling violently.

"What did you say?" she asked, shrieking like a frightened child. The drone inside my head tried to utter the correct name. I had made a mistake somewhere. Yes, the consonant was wrong.

"Denisa," I said. The earth shook, and pieces of the wine barrels hit me on the head. The hysterics of the animals and insects filled the space. The witch was destroying the tower. With God's help, I had become a hero in the eyes of all who were now freed from the eternal spell.

A spirit appeared in the cellar. It threw a lightning bolt, which scorched the witch. She uttered only a few cries. In her place was nothing left but her ashes, which were quickly washed away by the wine. Only her cane was left unharmed. It was a reminder of the incredible story of the witch in the tower.

A mixture of emotion and joy relaxed my tense body muscles. After all that happened, I wanted to sleep. I needed immediate medical care, but the little voice

inside me told me that I was going to be fine. I believed that voice because it had saved my life. I shut my eyelids, and I slept for a long time.

## Miakoda and the Stranger

I found myself on my bed. Percy, my cat, was sitting on my lap. The clock beside me told me it was midnight. I got up, drew back the curtains, and opened the window. I was in London. For some unexplained reason, I couldn't remember how I had made it back home. Bewildered, I searched for the journal. Three months had passed since the incident with the witch. Where was I all this time? Why couldn't I remember? I opened the bedroom door and made my way to the sitting room. I desperately wanted a glass of whiskey. I hoped it would help me think more clearly. I went in and came face-to-face with a rather strange sight. Next to the fireplace were two men. They were both tall and well-built, with dark brown skin. I believe my guests were to be Native Americans. They were talking intently with a woman dressed in a maid's outfit.

*Strange, I do not remember hiring help?* I thought.

"Who are you and what are you doing in my house?" I asked aggressively, looking at everyone in the room. They stood motionless. The maid bowed her head in respect to her employer, while the two men stood still. No one wanted to explain their visit. Their behavior did not shock me at all. I assumed it would be a shock to see the man who had been bedridden suddenly wake up one morning and roam the halls, trying to gather up evidence that would give him answers to where he had been for all these months. So I started again, this time showing my pleasant side. I offered cognac or a glass of cold brandy. They looked at me, perplexed, as I went to light my pipe. It had been a while since my last puff of that magnificent London smoke.

"We are from the Cherokee clan," said the one who was more built.

"Continue, please. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

“We have come to ask for your help. Since you visited Transylvania, you have acquired a considerable reputation as the most famous hunter of strange phenomena. That title was initially given to you by your editor and then the whole of Great Britain. So, we are asking you to come and investigate a strange occurrence that takes place every Sunday night in our settlement out in the West. We live in the Great Smoky Mountains and would be glad if you would come with us,” my guest said and took a bow in my honor.

“When did I return from Romania?” I asked, bewildered, the three people whose eyes were on me. The maid stepped forward and whispered in my ear that she would explain everything to me as soon as the two gentlemen left.

“Well, we are waiting for an answer,” said the other man who had not spoken for all this time. I didn’t know what to do. I had promised myself, when I was in Romania, not to return to my paranormal adventures. I might have become famous, but there were many times when I could have been killed. I looked at the two Native Americans and told them I could not help them. I had to take care of my life first. And I still had no clue of what had happened to me during those previous three months.

“Before we leave, we give you this,” said one of them, and he handed me a dream catcher.

“What is this?” I asked, feigning naivety.

“It takes away bad dreams. You will need it from the looks of it. Curses have driven people insane. If you ever want to be saved, come and find us,” they said in unison as they departed from the main entrance.

Their words had upset me, and I thought about all the events that I had experienced. Then I realized that I didn’t know the chain of events that had taken place. Apart from the witch’s curse, something strange must have happened when I blacked out. I had to find out the truth.

“What has happened to me, my dear woman?” What have I been doing for the past three months?” I asked the maid, horrified. I hoped she would give me an answer to the questions that clouded my mind. Was I becoming crazy?

“You need to sit down first. Relax and I will tell you everything I know,” the maid said, and she helped me to get comfortable on one of the armchairs near the fireplace.

“You arrived in London a month and a half ago. Your condition allowed such a journey. You were hospitalized for a week. Later, the doctors informed your editor that you were out of danger and could return to your home. The only problem was that you needed someone to care for you around the clock. I visited your Chief Editor and inquired about the job. He agreed, as you can see. My name is Kate, and I am very pleased to meet you,” she said and curtsied gracefully.

“I still do not understand that much. How did the two gentlemen know who I am and where I live?”

“I am not done with the story. We brought you back here, and I took care of you. The Chief Editor of the newspaper would stop by sometimes and inquire about your health. He would bring with him newspaper clippings that detailed your bravery and findings in Transylvania. It was two weeks ago that a terrifying event took place, and I believe it is linked to your series of terrifying events. An old woman came to the house. She knocked me to the floor and ran up to your room. Afraid she might harm you, I started screaming for help. The gardener heard my screams and ran to see what the matter was. The old woman had drawn a chalk circle and a few strange symbols in your room.”

“Thank heavens she had not touched you, you were still asleep on the bed. The gardener and I began discussing the incident. We thoroughly checked the area, and after ensuring everything was in order, aside from the chalk circle, we returned to our businesses. I will now tell you what happened the other day. Everything was

fine until the clock struck midnight. Something out of the ordinary happened. The light from the moon intensified to such an extent that it blinded me. Fearing for your life, I walked to your room and was surprised by what I saw. The window on the right was wide open. The moon's light spilled into the room and lit every corner."

"You were thrashing wildly, like something was torturing you. I even recall you saying some words that did not make sense. Then, through the light appeared a woman. I call her Mooncloaked. She wore a long dress, sewn by the beams of the moon. Her eyes were a deep blue, and her hair was a rich golden hue. She said, "I am here, my beloved," to you, and you opened your eyes and started talking to her. You asked her why she was late and why she did not want to join you in love with vows. She bent down and whispered words which you laughed pleasantly at. Then she left, and everything went back to the way it was."

Kate's story had some interesting points worth studying. Some were clearly a product of her imagination, as she did not have my experience with paranormal elements. However, she had given me a clear picture of the events that had taken place here while I was in bed.

"Thank you for those interesting pieces of information," I said, and I formed rings of different shapes with the smoke from my pipe.

"I have not told you everything, sir. The particular incident happened five more times. Every time the moon was in the sky, Mooncloaked would visit you. It was only when I cleaned the floor from the chalk circle that the visits ceased. You woke up today, despite rumors that you have been getting up to take walks in the garden. I have never seen such a thing, therefore I consider it a blatant lie," the maid said and smiled.

She had finally finished the recounting of events. However, something about the way she spoke and behaved was not right with me. I could feel a negative vibe.

How could she not have a clue about the two Native Americans who had visited me? The girl with the innocent look, who was impersonating a maid, was certainly keeping well-hidden secrets.

“Who are you?” I asked in a threatening voice.

“My name is Kate, and I am your housekeeper. I will take care of you until you are better,” the girl answered, trying her best to remain calm.

“Who are you?” I yelled.

“I told you,” her voice quivered.

I lunged at her, not being able to contain the anger swelling inside me. She let out a high-pitched scream and started running away from me. She wanted to get away, but she had no idea whom she was dealing with. I knew the house like the palm of my hand. The sitting room door opened wide. A man with black wavy hair moved quickly towards me. A kitchen knife was in his hand. He wanted to hurt me. I took hold of the Chinese vase on my bedside table and hurled it at his head. I missed, and the vase shattered into pieces. Scared of the strange man, I ran as fast as lightning before thunder. I managed to get away. The man with the kitchen knife was slow and clumsy. He tripped five times. My beloved Nicolette appeared just when I thought I had to leave my house in my madness, by jumping out the window in front of me.

I wept with emotion and begged her to stay with me. We would become one. We would get married and start a family. Her response, however, was not the one I was looking for. Her beautiful green eyes grew wide with fright at the sight of me. She cried out and disappeared. She headed in the direction of the bathroom. Drunk from the scent of her, I went after her. I longed for her curvaceous body again. I wanted to put my arms around her and taste her lips.

The bathroom door was locked. I tried to knock it down but it was no use. Nicolette had blocked the door so I could not come near her. My heartache made me



pound on the door frantically. I characterized her with a word that I should never have said. I called her a bitch. I gave her everything, and she continued to act strangely. I could sell all my fortunes for her. I did not want anything but her. The pipe fell from my hand. Did it fall? I do not recall. Everything went blurry then.

My strength had abandoned me, and yet I would not stop pounding the door. Exhausted, I fell to the floor. The pipe, if it was a pipe, caught fire. I touched it by accident. I started to burn. I awkwardly shook my legs and rolled to the floor. I tried everything to put out the fire, but it would not stop. Was I burning? Yes, I was burning. I was melting like a candle from the heat. The door opened just as I was about to take my last breath. It was not Nicolette, but the woman from the moon. Mooncloaked? Yes, it must have been her. She kneeled down and whispered some words I did not comprehend. Why did I not understand them? She looked at me with pity and left me to burn.

“Wake up!” a thick voice shouted.

“Please wake up,” a familiar female voice was heard. The fire was gone. The area around me did not resemble what I had seen. My adventures in Transylvania had left an indelible mark on my health. I was not mad, yet I was delusional. If what I had just gone through was a delusion.

“Who am I? Where am I? What is happening to me?” I asked, crying like a baby. “You are Arthur Mortimer. You are a reporter working for my newspaper. You are in the sitting room of your own home, where you fainted,” Jerry, the Chief Editor of the newspaper where I worked for quite a long time, told me.

“Did I faint after the Native Americans left?” I asked, visibly upset.

“Which Native Americans?” asked Kate. My eyelids fluttered. The light affected my vision. All I saw were two silhouettes.

“When did I pass out?” I asked as my vision cleared and I saw Kate and my editor.

“As soon as you saw me,” Kate blushed. Her answer gave birth to many questions. If I did pass out when I saw Kate, then logically, we never engaged in a conversation about the three months that had been erased from my memory? I felt terror. I had entered the threshold of a maze without any directions. I had to know what took place after I left Transylvania. I asked them to piece the puzzle back together.

The editor of the newspaper, which had gained quite a reputation due to my terrifying story, spoke first. I did not hear anything earth-shattering. With Nicolette’s help, we made it to a village, and she stayed with me for two days, making sure that I stayed alive. When the doctor arrived, she returned to the forest. The doctor took me to the hospital, and from there I reached London. Kate spoke next. She said everything she had said in my dream. She did not mention the two Native Americans.

The newspaper editor left. I asked Kate for a cup of tea with lemon, and I lazily walked back to my room. I wrapped myself with a blanket, as the weather had turned chilly. I closed my eyelids and hoped to sleep as my body still ached. I slept almost immediately. I woke up to the sound of scratching noises in the dark. I stood up and listened for the sound. It was coming from the basement. The house was old but had been recently remodelled. Therefore, it was unnatural for scratching noises to be heard in any part of the house without someone making them; I tried to go back to sleep, but the scratching noises kept getting louder. I had to find who or what was making those sounds.

I stopped in the sitting room and grabbed hold of a walking stick to use as a weapon, should anything bad happen. It was not much in terms of security, but it was better than nothing. As I walked with cautious steps, it occurred to me to notify Kate, so she could stand guard in case anything bad happened. I searched all the rooms, but she was nowhere to be found. Kate had vanished. There was no trace of

her, only an iridescent powder that hung over her bed. The scratching sounds had to be linked to her disappearance. I finally gathered the courage to reach the basement. I arrived at the entrance of the room. The noise was driving me mad and fear kept me from reaching for the doorknob. I could leave the house. I would no longer be in danger. I could also call Jerry. I quietly turned around and made my way back to the sitting room. With trembling hands, I gripped the telephone and pressed in his number. It rang.

“Who is calling at this time?” Jerry asked, enraged.

“Jerry, it is Mortimer,” I slowly answered. I did not want the creature in the basement to know that I was awake.

“What is it now? This is why I pay Kate for, so she can do your bidding for you throughout the day,” Jerry yelled, clearly annoyed.

“Jerry, I am not alone in the house,” I said, and reached out my hand in front of the candle’s light to decrease the lighting in the room.

“Yes, Kate is with you.”

“You do not understand. Strange sounds are coming from the basement. I searched the house and the girl is gone,” I whispered, horrified. A strange sound came from the receiver. Jerry was speaking in a strange tongue. His words sounded like a threat. I tried to understand some of it, but one word only made sense: Miakoda. I had never heard of that before. Suddenly, the line went dead. I decided then to go down to the basement. I did not have another choice. I kept a firm hold of the cane as I walked, more afraid than before. I touched the doorknob. The door opened, and one of the Native Americans jumped out in front of me.

“Miakoda,” he yelled and hit me on the head.

I sprang up from bed. The mattress was soaked with cold sweat. I shook uncontrollably. There was a time I had a good life. I had a job and a place to call home. Everything was peaceful, almost harmonic. Jerry’s decision to send me to

Transylvania had ruined my life. I could not let this fairytale of dreams and fantasies continue. I had seen demons in Transylvania. But that place had long been abandoned by God. Here in London, there was no such thing as ghosts, just a handful of people intent on driving me mad. Behind these terrifying events was the maid. I did not even know her parentage. She had probably convinced the editor to secure the job. I would take back my life, whether they liked it or not.

“Kate!” I shrieked.

No answer came. The woman had some nerve. She refused to show herself because she knew I was searching for her. I had had enough of her tricks. Today was the day of my salvation. I grabbed my blue robe and an umbrella from my bedroom. The umbrella was going to serve as a weapon against the woman if she dared hit me. I reminded myself, just before I was about to turn the doorknob, that this woman was probably not even human. Such a fool I was! I would give away my position without preparing first. I searched hastily for a stake and some garlic. I found them, as well as some other items that could prove helpful in the coming battle.

Apart from the stake and the garlic, I picked up a nail, a top hat, a teapot, an empty bottle, and a nail cutter. My soiled hands opened the entrance to the room. The items I carried were weighing me down, but I was not going to give them up. The enemy would gain the upper hand if I were to give up even one. Before I charged into the sitting room where the woman was, as I could hear her discussing with the other plotters, I pulled out a cross and wrapped the garlic around it.

May all of the angels help me with my mission, I thought as I crept into the sitting room. The woman, if she was a woman, was conversing with two well-built men. They were so engrossed in conversation that they did not see me. I watched my target. All was clear now. She had two front sharp fangs, and her eyes were on the men’s throats. She was a vampire. The cross with the garlic would fatally hurt her. If my gun did not hurt her, then the stake would. I jumped out of my hiding

spot, chanting in hopes of scaring the vampire. The three of them stood surprised at my presence. They looked at me oddly. They did not seem afraid by my chanting. I pulled forth the cross with the garlic. They kept looking at me, unmoved. Then, I pulled out the stake and charged at the woman, yelling.

“You will die, beast!” One of them managed to hold me down.

“Is he crazy?” the man who resembled the Native American I saw in my dream asked the woman.

“No. Recently, he has been experiencing some difficulties. He sees things and says strange words. I would say he’s on the edge of madness,” answered the maid.

“I guess we did not make it,” said one man to the other.

“Miakoda!” the other man yelled.

“I have heard that word in some of my visions. I will come with you to the Great Smoky Mountains as long as you get rid of these visions,” I begged them.

“Good, so you know who we are. Take this dream catcher and hang it above your bed. It will restore some peace in the world of dreams. The problem is that we cannot help you. You are on your own. You will have to beat Miakoda by yourself. Miakoda means the power of the moon. She appears in the form of a woman. She is a creation of the moon. She will try to draw you in, but you must not be fooled by her magic, and do not let her whisper the fatal words,” said the two men in unison.

“What exactly do I have to do?” I asked, terrified.

“Not a thing. Just stay alive in the world of dreams. If you die there, you die in the real world.”

“But, I have already died there.”

“You have to die three times. You have two lives left. Remember our agreement, Arthur. We will wait for you at the Great Smoky Mountains after your adventure. Don’t worry, you are a useful stranger to us and will not be lost. Goodbye,” they both said in a sing-song voice as they left my house. The two men

made me realize just how foolish I had behaved. Kate was a normal woman. She was doing her job; she did not want to hurt anyone. My behavior left me exposed. I owed it to safeguard her life and beg her forgiveness.

“Please forgive me. I was unacceptable.”

“It’s alright. But you really should not appear like that again. I might do something next time. I do not think you should listen to those two gentlemen, to be honest. You need medical attention,” the girl said, looking at me with pity.

“What I need for you now is to clean up the mess I made and take the rest of the day off. Consider it a gift for the marvelous work you have done.”

“But sir, I cannot possibly leave you in a time like this. Your life is in danger.”

“Who says such things? I do not believe those two men. Besides, did you not point that out earlier?”

“Yes,” answered the woman with an emphatic tone.

“So, the best thing is for you to start tidying up and then take your day off. I am going to my bed to read a book. Do not worry, nothing is going to happen.” The maid nodded. I had achieved my goal. I knew I had told a lie and that Mooncloaked was going to come again tonight. But I could not blame myself. I was trying to save the poor girl’s life.

The two Native Americans assured me that I was not going to die in the world of dreams, but I could not risk an innocent’s life. So, she had to leave the house. The curse of Miakoda was only about me. I was again dealing with supernatural phenomena. My greatest worry lay in the trial that was bestowed upon me. It still seemed impossible for me to complete a task in a world that did not exist. If I had not lived those adventures in Transylvania, then I would not worry the slightest about the curse. I would not even consider it. I waved farewell to the woman, thinking that this was going to be the last time I would ever see her again.

I headed to the bathroom. I needed to calm down if I was going to the world of dreams for my challenge. Water hit my face. I washed myself mechanically. There was no joy in my body. I had lost all hope of surviving. I did not know why. Even when I was scared at the witch's tower, I believed I would survive. Now, there was nothing. I stepped out of the tub, took a white towel, and dried my hair. For some reason, I felt as if this was going to be my last bath. I looked at my reflection in the mirror. Something in there caught my eye. Was it a shadow or a ghost? My thoughts disappeared out of exhaustion, along with the ghost in the mirror. If I lived, I would deal with that phenomenon later. I slipped into bed. The sensation of the mattress behind my waist was rejuvenating.

There was less pain in my body. The moon was slowly coming out, and the sun was setting. The time was approaching. Miakoda was coming for my soul. The curse of the witch had served its purpose. Suddenly, I had an epiphany that seemed to provide me with logical causality for the events.

The two Native Americans had laid out a perfect plan. They wanted me to be at Great Smoky to aid them in their paranormal threat. They made it impossible for me to refuse the mission in the United States. If I chose not to go, Mooncloaked would whisper the fatal words. That apocalypse revealed another fact. The Native Americans wanted me alive. The dream catcher would get rid of her. The woman was about to end my life. Time passed, and the woman did not appear. It was about two o'clock when I got comfortable and allowed myself to sleep. Mooncloaked was going to leave me alone for the night. Maybe she was otherwise engaged, I thought, laughing. I fell asleep because I had to. Was I going crazy, though?

I woke up to ample light filling the room. The window had been magically opened, and relaxing music was coming from it. She came from out of the darkness. Her hair looked as if it were spun out of pure gold. She wore a long dress that covered her entire body, and the energy emanating from her was majestic. Her

attractiveness had the power to sway someone in a world of euphoria and bliss. It was impossible to resist this divine being. Driven by the magic that was coming from her or the moon, my heart ordered me to give myself to her. She was almost near the bed when I remembered the words of the two Native Americans. I could not let myself be seduced by her; she would lead me to my death. I closed my eyes in desperate hope for logic to win. Her song was so inviting that I struggled not to give in.

The more I kept away from her, the more intense her satanic song became. She had come to lead me to my death. It looked like she would succeed. My one open eye gave me away. The view that I looked upon surpassed the one before. Mooncloaked stood naked to achieve her desire. Her golden hair covered her sculpted breasts. Her divine body was highlighted by her hips, and drove me into a game of fantasies. The woman who stood before me could only be compared to Aphrodite, the Goddess of Beauty. I opened my second eye, not being able to stand the temptation. I was mesmerized by the nude vision. How could I have been involved in numerous incidents with similar ethereal beings, and still lived alone?

She approached me, allowing my mind to get aroused with various fantasies that her body provoked. Her eyes held promise. That is when I thought of something that was entirely consistent with reality. I had believed the trial would be a breeze, compared to all the other ones I had lived, but for the umpteenth time, I allowed my arrogance and haughtiness to derail my rational thinking. It might seem foolish, but I was trying my hardest to close my eyes and not be driven by her. It was no use. They refused to close and I also felt intense pain. My poignant cries filled the room.

My cries dumbfounded Mooncloaked. She realized I had supernatural powers. Deep down, I wanted to run away from all these terrifying events and live the rest of my life in a peaceful routine. However, she kept on looking at me with lust in her



eyes. She wanted me. Now, I could have reached out and touched her, but I didn't. I was scared that the contact would trigger a flood of emotions, stronger than the ones I felt at that moment. I thought about getting up from my deathbed to run away from her. But fear had crippled me. It seemed that the end had been written for some time now. The fates had stretched my thread of life, and were waiting to cut it with the lethal scissors. Was this truly happening?

She leaned in and whispered the fatal words. Horrified and without thinking of what I was doing, I hit her violently across the face. She did not scream; she just laughed. She reminded me of the Devil. The woman had finally shown her true self. She leaned in a second time to finish me off. I slapped her with all my strength. This time, she showed signs of pain. On the left side of her face, the shape of my palm had left its mark. Unfortunately, my slap did not stop her. She kept grinning fiendishly. She leaned in a third time. I would hit her until she would leave me alone. That is what I did. My right hand marked her right cheek. I had gathered all my bodily strength in that hit. That is when she opened her mouth, and from it sprang out bloodthirsty snakes that charged at my face with their teeth forward. I kept out of their way.

Thankfully, just one caught my face. Its teeth plunged into my left eye. It wanted to blind me. I had injuries on my body from the other six snakes. For some unexplained reason, I did not scream but endured my torture, because deep down I believed it was all a figment of my imagination. They could not kill me. They would only cause psychological pain. Why was my body then shaking with fear and immense pain? I went to hit her for the fifth time. That is when I realized the unthinkable. I would die in the world of dreams, and probably die in the real world. The nude being in front of me opened her mouth wide to reveal a series of sharp teeth. They caught my hand, and she chewed it off. My cries filled the room at that

moment. All the while, I felt the poison mixing in with the blood that flows in my veins.

The wise say that fear gives you wings, and in that moment, in the world of dreams, my feet had gained wooden sandals, similar to the ones the messenger of the Gods, Hermes, wore, a thousand years ago. I threw back the covers, and with blood running from my severed hand, I began to run frantically. I kept shouting wildly, anything I could think of. I swung open doors with unmatched strength, all the while stumbling and falling on the wooden floor, forming puddles of blood. The snake that had dug its teeth into my eye remained latched onto me. Behind it, I saw plenty of light fill the rest of the house.

I would die soon from bleeding profusely, unless I could get hold of my severed hand and connect it with the missing limb. The poison must have been infecting my immune system, and I decided that thought was insane. I had to look my opponent in the eye and fight to the death. I went to the living room. I had lost so much blood that I had difficulty walking. I slipped and rolled down the stairs. My battered body hurt more. My only comfort was that the snake had left my face. The light was almost near me, and as I was in front of the stairs, my clothes bloodied, I asked in a loud voice.

“What do you want with me?”

A mysterious voice was heard. I could not say if it was male or female.

“I challenge you to an ancient game from the beginning of time. You have twenty minutes to live. In those minutes, we will play a game of riddles. I will give you a riddle, and you have three guesses. Should you fail, you will not only die in this world but in the real world as well.” I could not think of any way to escape, so I accepted her challenge, as I had no choice.

“Say the riddle,” I yelled, spitting blood from my mouth.

“As you wish, on the passage of mountains, it dissolves. Flowers, birds, and hordes of people disappear, and the silver is easily chopped. Cities are afraid of him, and wise people think of him as their father. Ultimately, it leads to monumental changes and pain. What is it?” Mooncloaked’s voice was heard.

I confess I grew faint at the sound of the riddle. I was expecting a riddle, but not as hard as this one. I knew some riddles as I was interested in them like a little child, but I never gave them my full attention. I had always underestimated them. The Native Americans said they helped me? They called me ‘stranger’. Why?

“The answer is stranger,” I answered with a groan.

“Wrong answer, my dear,” she said and advanced closer to me.

“You have two more tries.” Deep down, I had lost my faith in the two Native Americans. This was their doing. They cursed me so they could kill me. That is what their hateful hearts desired. In some way, they knew I was unskilled in riddle games. Damned people!

*May they burn by the outermost fire,* I thought with rage.

“The Devil,” I murmured and spit out more blood.

“You have seven minutes left and one last try,” her voice came out mechanically. Somewhere far from this world, Death was sharpening his scythe. It had been a long time since he took a head off someone like me, a man who had escaped from his clutches four times, until now, at the last moment. They say that in these moments, if you do not have luck, you will not be saved.

“I need time,” I yelled desperately.

“You have one minute,” she said, and crouched torturously over my head. I squeezed my brain to think of the riddle one last time. The sentence that referred to the wise person confused me the most.

“Who do the wise have for a father?” I asked myself as I only had thirty seconds left to live. She came closer to my ear. The Native Americans had to help

me. What was it they said? I had to stay alive in the world of dreams if I was going to stay alive in the real world. What did I need to stay alive?

“Time,” I whispered in her ear.

“You are free,” Mooncloaked said, and clapped her hands. I was lifted in the air when she clapped. The shiny light of the moon wrapped around me. As I swayed in the air, I realized that when she clapped, she was casting a healing spell. My severed hand was whole again, and the rest of my wounds healed. I was back on the wooden floor when the spell was complete. The daughter of the moon waved goodbye. For some unexplained reason, my eyes closed.

I jumped out of bed. I looked around the room. Nothing was out of place. I touched my body. My wounds were gone. My severed hand was reattached so perfectly that no one would be able to tell that it had been cut in another world. All my experiences and incidents seemed to be swept away in time. My faith that I had lived a terrifying event with Miakoda would remain unshakable, until the search in my room and the rest of the house was complete.

“Kate, come here,” I said in a loud voice. The creaking of the stairs indicated that someone was coming up. My joy to see the woman again lit up my fast-aging face, and it exhaled a godsend glow from it.

“Hello. What would you like?” asked a different woman from the one I had previously met.

“What is the month?” I asked. Her response left me shaken. It had been four months since I had seen the two Native Americans. Four months since Miakoda appeared.

“You are Kate, right?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered.

“May I have a glass of whiskey?” The maid left to get me the whiskey. I was certain that everything that had happened was a figment of my imagination. It was

part of the fantasy realm. My thoughts led me to the bathroom. I wanted to look at myself. Time had passed swiftly. Wrinkles appeared on my skin. From inside the mirror, a shadow appeared, and covered my face, her teeth cut off my head. I closed my eyes and after a few minutes I opened them again, and saw my reflection in the mirror.

I was able-bodied, and no shadow was there. I felt something moving from under the wash basin. I opened the cupboard. There was no monster there to jump out and kill me. But at the far end was the gift from the Native Americans, the Dreamcatcher. Was the story of Mooncloaked real? I had to get answers. The two Native Americans would know how to stop the terrifying events. Tomorrow I will depart for the Great Smoky Mountains.

## Yo-Na and the Girl

The red suitcase emerged from the attic. The darkness and the stillness of the air in the room made it difficult to breathe. There in the attic, I had stored different trinkets. Classical fairytales, sketch notebooks, and board games could have been found under the mossy wood. When we were young, all that emitted a feeling of childishness and innocence. It had been a long time since I came up here. The grief over my wife's death had stopped me from going up to the attic. You see, here is where I stored most of her things when she died. Somewhere in the corner, there were boxes with her belongings. I only burned our wedding photos. They reminded me of the day she died, our wedding day. After our wedding feast, we went for a walk around the neighborhood.

She looked like an angel who had descended for a little while on earth to liven up my meaningless life, in her dress. I saw the signs that foretold death. An owl was heard, and a sweaty horse was dragging a carriage. Two warnings of death, and yet I ignored them and continued our pleasant walk. The eroticism that hung in the air made me feel like I was in a fantasy world. When I held her hand in mine, I felt complete. Nothing was missing. After all those years, after so much searching, I had finally found the woman of my dreams. Unfortunately, fate had found a way to punish me for my past sins, but be assured that they were not many or important. Lucifer had come disguised as a horse. He stepped on my beloved and took her from me.

Tears filled my now mature face. Unbearable pain closed over my soul. Many years had passed by, but that incident haunted my life. I could not forget, as I had let my wife die so I could live. Distracted by love, I didn't see the animal as it approached us. She pushed me away in self-sacrifice. But what was my life without her? I had gone from married reporter to half-crazed paranormal hunter. I hoped

my trip to America would help me get to the bottom of things, or at least help me find out what was causing these terrifying events. I threw the red suitcase on the floor. I fell into despair once again. Why did my life end up so wrong? I have always cared for the poor and people who face various challenges. God only gave me problems. Suddenly, the idea of suicide seemed ideal. Next to my feet, under some newspaper articles, was a large knife. I could have killed myself quite easily. My calloused palms grasped the wooden handle. The Native American appeared before me before the sharp end reached my vein.

“What are you doing?” he asked in a threatening tone.

“I am ending my life. I cannot take this anymore. You cannot understand how I feel. I am starting to go mad. I just want to die,” I said sobbing.

“Do not forget your promise, Mortimer. We saved you from Miakoda. You are obligated to come. If you do not hold your promise, then even death will not save you from our wrath.”

“Leave!” I yelled and threw me knife at him. It passed through him, and shattered the window, disappearing into the horizon. The man must have been a paranormal being. He had come to remind me of the deal between us, and only when it was done, he would leave me alone.

“Who are you?” I asked with intense curiosity.

“You know me very well, my dear Arthur,” he yelled as he was fading from the real world. Female footsteps were heard coming up the stairs to the attic. The tray with the tear fell to the floor when she got near me. The hot splashes from the tea burned the skin of the soles of my feet. I felt pain, but I did not give it much thought. I had been through worse.

“And what happened here?”

“That is none of your concern. I am going now. I shall not be coming back to this house. You may pack your things and leave,” I yelled as I closed the door behind

me. I got dressed and filled a backpack with a few clothes. In less than ten minutes, I was out of my room. The area was silent. Kate must have left the house already. I made my way into the kitchen and placed some food in my backpack. I also took a lamp. I was ready to go to America to uncover, finally, what was behind the terrifying events. The phone rang just as I was locking up. I hesitated, wondering if I should pick it up or not. I finally unlocked the door and picked up the receiver.

“What are you doing? Have you gone completely mad?” Jerry’s voice was angry. “I have to leave Jerry, time is running out. Strange things are happening. I have to uncover the truth. Do not look for me. Maybe, someday I will return to London,” I said, before I hung up.

“Wait...” I heard my editor’s voice on the other end. It was the last time I would listen to it.

I crossed the courtyard and boarded the carriage that would take me to the harbor. From there, I would take the ship to America. In two months, if all were well, I would have reached my destination.

“Take me to the harbor, please, fast as you can,” I told the driver with the top hat. The driver seemed familiar to me, but my brain could not recall. Without a word, he pulled on the reins, and the carriage took off. In a few minutes, I would be at the ship that would take me to my destination, where the Cherokee would reveal my fate.

“Do I know you from somewhere?” I asked the driver. His build reminded me of that of a Native American Cherokee. There was no answer. He pulled on the reins forcefully, and the carriage swung into a wild ride. I was trying to remain in my seat; the heavy breathing from the animal was intensely heard. I ended up bouncing up and down, banging my head against the wood.

“Who are you?” I asked as I hit my head again. Suddenly, the carriage came to a complete stop. The driver turned his head, and I saw his monstrous face. Red eyes,



green slime, and smoke came out of his face. Where there should have been teeth were tentacles. The creature spoke in a tongue which only its kind could understand. I remember it sounded like Yo-Na.

Without waiting for the monster to speak again, I opened the door and ran. I ran frantically without reason. Just the thought of the monster's face fired up feelings of terror, but also primitive knowledge. From behind me, I could hear the strong neighing of horses. I turned around and saw a gang of carriages following me. The word Yo-Na was coming out of all their mouths. I hid in an alleyway, hoping to get away. How could no one else see these monsters? Jerry and his clever idea to send me to Transylvania... He owed me an apology for all the things I have been put through. No one has ever felt as strange as I have. No one has ever faced demons like Hunter Gordy. Madness was slowly driving me to a sanatorium. I threw the suitcase on the street to block the carriages from chasing me.

I started knocking on different doors. One door opened by itself. No one appeared. Without having time to think, I crossed the threshold. The door closed behind me, without me touching it. The space was dark. An intense smell of burnt skin pierced the nose.

"You have to become a Yo-Na. You have to meet Belphegor. He will rid you of the curse. You have to follow the Cherokee, and you will be saved," the old man said; his hands struggled to touch my face.

"How will that happen?"

"The Native American knows. Go where he wants you to go, and it will all be over," said the man, and he died, and with his death, the bell tolled. The room lit up. The sight before my eyes caused only awe. The house was a place of torture. The walls were covered with incoherent words and runic symbols. In front of me, a young man was being stretched by the torture rack. His veins had popped out, and he had cut wounds on his skin. A picture is worth a thousand words, the old folks

used to say, and it seems they were right. I walked to the tortured young man. The sound of broken bones reminded me of the old man's words. I pulled myself to a corner of the chamber where there were no runic symbols, blood, whips, or guillotines. There, I could think of my next move. Despite the stench of death, the heart-wrenching cries which to this very day still haunt my dreams, or the awe for the higher paranormal powers, I managed to concentrate, and made a recount of all the terrifying events.

The gang of carriages had led me six blocks further from the ship to America. I would step outside with caution. I was troubled by the fact that I didn't know what kind of creatures I would encounter. There was no other choice. I had to leave the house. I opened the door and walked out of the house onto the street with slow steps. The carriages had disappeared from the vicinity. Maybe this time I would succeed in embarking the ship?

I made it to the harbor, having crossed twice as much distance as I needed to. I wanted to make sure that I was not in any danger. I walked cautiously as I looked for the ship, New Continent. I had gathered enough information about the voyage and the ship on which I was about to board. I hid behind the bowls of rice. I could make out the dock from there. I looked out for any strange creatures, but luckily, only people were working at the harbor. My ship was in front of me. It was impressive that I had not spotted it earlier. The captain of the ship was an old friend. He owed me, you see, so he had let me come on board for free.

"John, how are you, old friend?" I shouted out merrily as I approached the ship. A well-built man with a black moustache turned around. The pipe in his mouth formed various clouds of smoke, an ability that was solely attributed to me.

"What took you so long? You are late. I had to insist that we wait for you," the man called back cheerfully.

"When are we leaving?" I asked somewhat irritated.

“Once you get on board,” answered the captain of the commercial ship. Once on the ship, the captain showed me to my cabin, where I would be staying for the duration of the voyage. The cabin had a bed and a night table. The wild beauty of the sea was to be admired from the round window. A flock of seagulls was diving in the ocean for catfish that swam in the dock. After thanking the captain, I lay on the bed. I wanted to rest after the day’s events had built up. The strange creatures I had encountered brought with them a remnant of ancient times. My editor was probably at my house. He would be trying to understand why I left like a man on the run from London. Perhaps someday he would see the signs and understand why I had to leave. The ship’s smokestack puffed out clouds of black smoke. The engine’s roar was heard clearly. My voyage to America had just begun.

A month had passed since I first boarded the ship. Everything was running smoothly. I would help out the sailors with the ship as best as I could, then I would remain in my cabin, pondering the mysterious events. My way of passing the time was not really significant, but it was a way to pass the day. The food we ate did not taste like the gourmet meals of London at all. It was a meager fill of peas, maybe beans, and salted fish. Sometimes we would open cans of meat. Beans were almost always on the menu.

The sailors never complained about the food; rather, they complained about the bad state of the hull. They said that it had been a long time since it was checked, and a coming storm could sink it. Of course, all their complaining was never publicly expressed. They were whispered amongst the staff, and every time the captain walked by, their pompous words would diminish to low whispers.

One day, when a mass of clouds gathered in the sky, the crew’s murmurs grew into demands toward the captain to change the course of the ship. My friend seemed to be in an awkward position. He could not impose upon the sailors.

“We will not change course,” the captain stated in a way that could not be questioned. The head sailor took a few steps forward. He came face to face with my friend, and he could smell the stench of his breath. He had a determined look. Deep down, he knew he could change the captain’s mind. Otherwise, we would all end up at the bottom of the sea.

“Why did you let us get on board this moving coffin, Johnny? You are responsible for the deaths to come. Our only hope is to set anchor on an island until the storm passes,” said the head of the sailors with an aggressive tone. “How can you think that this ship will not survive a sea storm? Are there any gains behind this mutiny? I am not fooling anyone. Before you came on board, I told you what was to be done. The ship is and always will be resilient. Do you think me so reckless, sailor?” my friend asked angrily.

“We will have a meeting, and after we will announce our decision,” he said, and he slowly walked back to join the other sailors. The uncertainty in that moment filled my heart with dread. I was in the middle of nowhere without a crew, and a storm was on its way. The situation called for quick action. My friend had to use his leadership skills. The coordination among the sailors may have been our only hope of avoiding death.

“You have to show them who is in charge,” I whispered in his ear. He looked at me angrily and uttered a few curses under his breath.

“You have to persuade them, otherwise we will all drown. Without a crew, we will not survive this.”

“Don’t you think I know what I have to do? Damn! This has happened many times before, and I always manage to persuade them. Damn!” the captain yelled manically.

My friend might have known the real reason behind the mutiny and his weakness in imposing, but I knew it was all fate’s fault, or whatever all those

demonic entities that were set on killing me, called. For you see, reader, this may sound like a simple adventure without consistency, but for me, the reasons were many. In the world I live in, everything has its importance. Respectable people, a child, or a noble, you have to understand that all these terrifying events are connected to them. When connected, they form a chain that, in this particular case, has a deeper meaning. It has led me to the meaning of my life.

“I will leave this ship. You will provide me with a boat and I will travel to America alone. Do not be afraid. I will make it.” I told the captain of the ship with a serious face. He started to laugh, as if my words were tickling his ears, paying no attention to the judgmental looks he got from the sailors. He laughed until he decided it would be best to gain some self-discipline, a trait every serious leader has. And he was just that in his humble opinion, and a very good one.

“You are not going anywhere. What are you saying? Damn! Are you crazy, Arthur?” he asked, visibly distraught from the words I had said with a serious face. My silence hurt him like a knife. The man who had obligingly accepted me as a passenger understood, maybe a bit late, that I was no ordinary man. My passive attitude towards the whole situation and my impulsive decision to go sailing in the middle of a storm revealed the precarious situation I was in.

“I’ll leave, Johnny. Things have gotten out of hand. I must stop this madness. I am sorry for the trouble I have caused you,” I said, apologetic.

“Alright, but before you go, I would like you to tell me what has led you to this tragic decision.”

“Sure. But you won’t believe me. You will think I am fooling you,” I said, trying to avoid telling my story. John walked over to the team of sailors and told them what was going to happen. A shiver ran down their spines when he told them of my decision. Some of them looked at me like I was already dead. I must admit those particular stares made me rethink my decision with a more rational mind. One of

the sailors came up to me and said that my decision was pure suicide. He begged me to reconsider, but I explained to him that nothing could change my mind. I was a fugitive on the run. I was seeking a way out and a way to end what had begun unconsciously.

Once John finished his conversation with the sailors and reached an agreement with them, he led me to his cabin so I could share my story with him. I told him the whole truth. I began my story from my arrival in Transylvania until I boarded this ship. As I unraveled my story, my friend looked at me, dumbfounded and quite terrified. Actually, I was expecting that reaction. It was normal if one was talking about monsters, werewolves, ghosts, and demons, and no one believed him. Besides, there was a time when I did not believe them either. What sane person would believe any of these events? You do not believe me either, but please understand that you must see the truth. Everything I am telling you is very real.

He led me out to the boat when I finished my story. It was sturdy enough. I could make it to the Great Smoky Mountains with a huge amount of luck. The only thing that comforted me was the fact that the Cherokee had not appeared. Every time he showed up, everything would lose control.

“Good luck, my friend. You will need it. You are going down a dangerous path. I hope you achieve your goal,” said the captain as he lowered the boat onto the water.

“Good luck, stranger. Take care,” yelled the head sailor, and he waved at me with his right hand. The boat floated with difficulty on the churning waters. The cold wind hit me. The wood of the boat was yet to come to pieces, but I could hear it cracking. My friend’s ship was now gone. My voluntary leave from the ship would save them. As long as I was on board, the danger of shipwreck was there. John, I believe, was happy to see me leave. Surely, he and his crewmates did not want to

die. I grabbed the wood with all my might, when I heard thunder and then lightning. I was afraid.

“Hey man,” the familiar voice of the Native American said.

“What do you want?” I asked without turning around to look at his evil face.

“I am here because I want us to have an important discussion. You know, you are almost finished. That is why I think it is time for me to explain why this is happening to you. Do you want to know?” he asked, and his big red eyes were in flames.

“I would rather you leave me so I can concentrate on what I am trying to do. I want to get to where you told me to go. To get there, man, I will have to avoid getting shipwrecked, right, man?” I asked sarcastically.

“That is right, man,” he said, laughing menacingly. When he stopped laughing and hitting me on the back, he decided to tell me all he wanted to say.

“For starters, you should know that you have Cherokee blood in you. Please do not interrupt, whether you like it or not, it is true. We, the spirits of the clan, have decided to put you up for a challenge. Arthur Mortimer, you have been chosen for an important mission. Throughout these thousand years, we have not found anyone with your capabilities to undertake this mission. We have always been watching you, just as we have been watching all of the Cherokee descendants. Your trip to Transylvania and your dealings with demons have revealed to us important layers of your skills. To cut a long story short, because, as you can tell, I am not very good with words, you are the chosen one. Now, when you arrive at the new world, which you will, I will see you again to turn you into a Yo-Na.”

“You will need the disguise to get the statuette of Belphegor, which an evil bear guards. When you retrieve the statuette, you will then be halfway to completing the mission. If you complete the mission that your ancestors have

ordered you to do, you will have a life of riches, happiness, and exquisite bliss. Should you fail, you will die,” said the Native American, emphasizing the last word.

“What do you mean?” I asked, and I turned my head with difficulty to look at the Cherokee who was there to destroy my life. Fortunately or unfortunately, my erratic visitor had already left the boat. Every time I saw him, I would begin to realize more and more that I was caught in a big and dark problem. I beg of you, reader, to stay with me a little longer; I feel that we shall be approaching the end shortly. Wherever I was, the fear of a demon making its appearance lurked. I hope you will stay with me to the end, because to be honest, I am afraid to continue this on my own. I would rather plunge into the sea and disappear for good. Will I disappear, though? Will I get rid of the Native American? I guess not.

That is why I kept going on with my voyage with the ship to America. A huge wave washed over me. Luckily, my hands were gripping the wood. A seed of doubt nested in the depths of my soul. The weather kept it rooted. I was doubtful about the outcome of this trip. The cold wind, the salty water that had drenched me, and the fear that had overwhelmed my body left me so disoriented that I let go of the handle. The soaked wood contributed greatly to my swerving around, and then I plunged into the water. My reflexes worked quickly. I managed to grab hold of the edge of the boat with one hand. While I tasted salt water, I tried raising my other hand. When I had achieved this small trial, I felt joy. A funny notion, the feeling of joy is, while you are with one foot in the grave. Nonetheless, climbing and jumping over obstacles gives that special feeling, which I felt then. Lightning, however, hit the wooden boat, landing me violently back into reality. The wood crumbled. A fire struck where my hand touched. My hands burned, but the water soothed my skin after my fall. The situation, for the umpteenth time, was tragic.

“Hey man,” the Cherokee’s voice was heard. The Native American stood next to me. He was walking on water!



“What do you want?” I called out before I drowned.

“Nothing, I am just here for fun. So, what’s up? Oh, I forgot you can’t talk, you’re drowning. Look, don’t fret. I said that you will reach your destination, and you will. But, for now, I will lift your spirits with my dance moves,” said the Native American, and he started jumping up and down in a peculiar way, without touching water. The Native American had crossed the line. I was drowning, and he was jumping left and right to annoy me. I spit out water and shouted.

“Will you help me or just sit there and make fun of me?” The guy stood motionless. He seemed to think about what I just said. He scratched his head and smiled broadly.

“I guess I’ll choose the second,” he replied, chuckling with hate. A plank from the boat fell on my face. I lost consciousness and plunged into the wet abyss.

\* \* \*

I woke up the next day on a seacoast, sand was in my pockets, and it covered the rest of my body. If I remember correctly, my face was the only area that was not covered with it. I pinched myself to see if I was alive. I was alive because pinching me hurt. Gathering up enough strength, I managed to get up. The fact that I was alive was a miracle. Maybe the Cherokee had come to my rescue? The sea water hit the sand, wetting it. The clean bottom of the sea was demonstrated in detail by the rays of the sun. Storks and a few pelicans looked at me in wonder. It was actually a bizarre sight to see a man in such poor condition. Their cries filled the coast when I got up, I remember. My stomach grumbled as I had not eaten for days.

The problem was that I had lost so much weight that I was now a skeleton. I resembled an anorexic. The flesh had become one with the bone. I must have slept for a month. I chased away those thoughts as I had to see where I was. I stepped out onto the road twenty meters away from where I was found after the storm. The dirt

road had been unused for some time. There was only a sign. It said in capital letters: "TO THE TREE," and there was an arrow painted on the top.

"What a strange sign," I thought.

I would follow the direction of the arrow, but first, I need to eat. I had not eaten and needed to regain my strength. After some thought, I decided to fish. I would construct a fishing pole, and with a little help from divine luck, I could catch a fish. I had already found the appropriate wood. I walked down the sandy beach. I needed rope and metal to create a hook. In fishing and in crafting tools, I always excelled. Some years ago, I had orchestrated a band of improvised instruments. Good times, those were, without the wicked Native American.

The hour passed, and I still could not find anything to use as a hook. The beach was very clean. I almost overlooked the shoe laces I used for string.

"Hey man," the familiar voice was heard.

"What do you want?" I answered with the same clichéd question. The Native American laughed out loud. He did not speak right away. He gazed out at the land before him in awe. Admiration for the place was mirrored in his brown eyes. How did the color of his eyes change again? The storks and pelicans were not disturbed by his appearance. They probably had been used to seeing all sorts on the beach.

"You know, Mortimer, the coast wasn't always like this. With time, it has grown more beautiful. Many years ago, I was here with a previous colleague on the same mission. Sadly, he did not complete it. He was swayed by Belphegor's lies at the TREE, and didn't do what I wanted him to do. Shame, he was a man with an adamant character, like you. But you know how Belphegor is, he always wants to pull people into the gutter of sin," said the Native American sadly.

"Are you a spirit?" I asked the question that had been burning in my mind.

"Depends, I am something different for each person. I may be just a spirit for you," he answered in a mild, casual tone.

“I think it is time you help me in finding something to eat,” I said, somewhat irritated.

“Fine, but you don’t have to get upset over every little thing. That is why I am here. What would you like to eat? I can bring you fish, pork, beef, lamb, and anything your heart desires. Just tell me and I will bring it.”

I searched my soul and the cravings of my immune system. I did not want much, just a hook to catch my food with. I would not need any help from the guy.

“I want a hook, spirit,” I yelled. My request took him aback. He was probably used to fulfilling grand wishes.

“Look, I will give you what you want, but on the condition that you will carry out this mission, and you have to understand that I’m not a spirit. Whether you like it or not, I’m something superior,” he said in a condescending tone.

“Throw the half-finished pole in the water. When the rope touches the water, then your wish will be complete,” he continued.

I did as he said, and to my great surprise, the makeshift pole, after two hours, caught a big fish. I am sorry to admit it, my fellow traveler, but I was always lame at fishing and could not recognize the fish.

“Great job, you are truly marvelous,” cheered the Native American. Without paying him any attention, I began to look for wood. Now that the most difficult part was over, I was happy and excited for the cooking of the fish’s flesh. I had always hated fish, but when one is starving, they will eat just about anything. I found wood and rocks for the lighting of the fire. At last, I would eat. Alas, the spirit’s voice revealed the harsh truth.

“Look, I’m bored with your grotesque situation, so I would like to confess that the fish you are about to eat is poisonous. I didn’t tell you because it was amusing to see you exhaust yourself,” he chuckled.

Hate overflowed my heart. The spirit was not to be tolerated. Enough! I was forced to endure all this humiliation so that I could complete his stupid mission. On this beach, I would overpower him, even if I have to fight until death pulls me away from the land of the living. Overcome by my hate, which had lodged deep in my heart, I lunged at him. However, my body passed right through his, and I landed on the sand. I was hurt, if I remember correctly.

“I realize that you have reached your limit, but I would like to remind you that I am not to blame for your trials, and to show you how nice I really am, I will leave you alone. First, I shall satisfy your hunger.” With those last words of his, a gourmet table appeared near the fire. On the white tablecloth was a plethora of food. My eyes, if I remember well, saw pork, beef, chicken, fish, caviar, and every kind of pie, along with a feast of fruit. The crockery was made of clear crystal. A waiter stood near the fire. He wore a black bow tie, and his suit was in shades of grey.

Excited for the delicacies on the table, I started to taste them with gusto. The superb attitude of the waiter was memorable. He would willingly fill my wine glass every time it became empty. Dinner near the sea may have been the best thing that had happened to me since the beginning of the terrifying events.

When I finished eating and drinking, all the food was gone, and dessert appeared. The waiter, like a true professional, asked me what I wanted for dessert. I chose the pudding after consulting my stomach’s cravings. After all, it was a traditional English dessert. I sat for hours at that table and gazed at the sea. I thought about how it would be all over soon. The overworked waiter sat next to me. Even if he was created by a spirit, to me, he seemed like a living being. He touched me with his warm hands, and he began to tell me the story of his life.

“Before I became a waiter, I was like you. Young and full of dreams, I wanted to conquer the world. I wanted a big family, a wife, children, and a happy life. I had a flaw, though. I was inquisitive. Until I was thirty years old, that flaw aided me in my

line of work. I worked as an amateur investigator. Initially, I investigated straightforward cases, including fraud, petty crime, and forgery. I gained a good reputation where I worked because of my skills. From an investigator, you might say that I became a detective, as I occasionally helped out the police or kept an eye on the wives of different men who believed they were being cheated on. The money I got from my occupation was satisfactory, I would say. Sadly, my megalomania led to some wrong choices.

To make a long story short, one day a woman, my age, came to my house. Her beauty was something extraordinary. She had black, long hair like ebony, red cherry lips, and an excellent, juicy body. As you can tell, the woman had captivated me, and without giving it a more sober second thought, I agreed to help her. A foolish move, in my opinion, but once it was made, there was no alternative solution. I decided to investigate a haunted mansion that she had inherited from her father. Motivated by curiosity and the heavenly woman's effect on me, I was driven to the mansion. I stayed for another five days to solve the case. In the walls of the house lived the woman's great-granddad, and he wanted me to fetch a diamond from a house. When I did that, he left the mansion. The woman paid me handsomely, begging me to keep the case to myself. I promised not to say a word. Since then, she has disappeared as if the earth had swallowed her up. No trace," whispered the waiter.

"I imagine that other similar events took place before you came to this beach?" I asked, but I felt that I already knew his answer. He laughed loudly, but it was not a happy laugh. It sounded like a mad person's cackle.

"Yes. There were two similar incidents. After that, Miakoda appeared, and the two Native Americans. I managed to survive the woman of the moon, and then later, some strange beings on carriages chased me. To escape, I went to a house where an old man told me about Yo-Na and Belphegor. After that, he died. With his death, I

saw runic symbols written with blood on the walls, and different torture devices. I walked out of the house, scared. I came to the harbor and boarded a ship.

In the middle of the voyage, a mutiny broke out over a trivial issue, which, for some reason, I mistakenly believed I had instigated due to the bad luck they were experiencing. That is when I decided to abandon the ship amid a storm. A foolish decision if you ask me, but see, I had no choice. I drowned as the Cherokee laughed at me. I was cast away on this beach and searched for food. Then he appeared and asked me if I was hungry. I nodded yes, and he offered me pork and plenty of beer. The taste of meat in my mouth, combined with the magnificent view of the sea, filled me with joy that I had never felt before. I have never felt anything that came close to the emotion since I started my peculiar adventure.

Morning came. A different feeling lurked in the atmosphere. Truthfully speaking, my friend, I hoped for a second that the end was near. I would finally save myself, and I would have become the only Cherokee descendant to have completed the mission. Swept away by the thoughts, I came to the giant tree. There was a hollow in the tree big enough to fit a person. The Native American appeared and asked me to transform into a Yo-Na, the Cherokee word for bear. That way, I could climb down and grab the statue from its guardian. The guardian is a horned bear, green saliva drips from its mouth, and it has one red eye and one green eye. Its teeth were created out of iron, and lastly, I watched out for its claws as they were made from steel. I found it asleep. It was easy enough to get the statue, which was in the form of a deity, without being noticed. Sadly, my dear fellow, the problem was not in snatching the statuette.

My ex-wife appeared as I made my way back out. Whether you believe me or not, my professed beloved's absence had haunted me for many years. You should have been there to see her. Her lips were juicy and inviting. Her posture was

goddess-like. I cannot describe her any better. Something was wrong, though. Was I becoming crazy?

Near the way out, she looked like the Goddess Aphrodite. I started to shout. I begged her to turn me back into a bear so I could feel her breath, her hair, her skin. She smiled sweetly. If you could see her eyes, you would understand that she wanted to touch me as well. She walked up to me as I continued shouting in joy. When my snout touched her nose, that is when I felt a strong stab of pain on my back. I turned my head and saw the ferocious bear gnawing on my back. As you can tell, the animal killed me,” said the waiter, and he tried not to cry. Nonetheless, a single tear rolled down and disappeared into the flames.

“And what have you done since then?” I asked, voicing a reasonable question.

“I wish I knew! Ever since my death, I have been in a world like a dream. As you can see, I have kept my youth. There are many times when I think that I must not be dead, but if that is not the case, then what happened to me?”

“Why are you a waiter then?”

“Do you know what it is like to sit around all the time? Boredom sets in, and you decide to do something,” he answered nonchalantly.

“Ok, let me get this straight, tomorrow I will be faced with the horned bear and I will have to retrieve that statue, and then I will run out of the hollow of the tree?” I asked fearfully.

“Exactly, and if you want my advice, try your hardest to win; otherwise, you will end up like me. Imagine the benefits you will gain if that spirit says that the mission is important. I always believed that my reward would be that my wife would come back to life. Sadly, my failure to complete the second-to-last hurdle ultimately led to my downfall. But you, my friend, can gain everything your heart desires,” he said and slapped me affectionately on the back.

“Has it ever crossed your mind that we might be aiding some dark incident to take place?” I asked in a whisper. The waiter’s happy face darkened. He frowned as he thought about what I just said. His hands began to twitch as they formed symbols in the air. Then he got up from his chair and started dancing, cheering while he did. I was in intense awe at the spectacle.

“I have thought the same thing lots of times. Look, I always try to help anyone who needs my help. The Native American wanted my help, and that is what I did. I did not have a choice. Believe me, you do not have a choice either. I think it is best that you reach the end. Good luck, I hope you make it,” said the waiter, and with the flick of his hand, he disappeared.

Now he was in the world of spirits to meet the Native American Cherokee. There on the sandy beach with the tapestry of stars above my head, I slept. Tomorrow was going to be a challenging day. I would see my dead wife. As my eyes began to close, I felt a newfound excitement at the thought of seeing her sweet face. The salt water wet my feet. The water level had risen considerably since yesterday. The cold wind left me in shivers. You see, I was wearing those ragged clothes that were not warm at all.

At some point, I felt the sun’s rays on my face. I rose with difficulty. Even though the sun was out, it was still very cold. Still, I began walking towards my destination. As I got on the road for the TREE, I rubbed my hands together to keep warm. Later that afternoon, I had managed to cross the distance on hot sand, and I saw the TREE peeking on the horizon. I was happy to have abandoned the desert, but my soul flickered like light at the thought of the bear and the only woman of my life. Something felt off?

My intense thirst led me to a bowl with water. Thankfully, it looked clean. I shoved my dirty head in and started drinking as if I were an animal, until all the water was almost gone. The liquid was good for my soul. I felt alive and vibrant



again. My lips were no longer dry, and my skin glowed under the rays of the hot sun. I arrived at the hollow when the moon was in the sky.

“Hey, man. You’re late,” said the spirit, chuckling.

“Hi. After this, what do I do next?” I asked, exhausted.

“After you snatch the statuette, you will take it to the Great Smoky Mountains. From then on, you will no longer see me. The White Wa-Ya will be in charge of you. He will lead you to your final destination, where you will place the statuette of Belfagor. Now I will turn you into a Yo-Na, which in your language means bear,” he said, and he clapped his palms loudly. He was getting ready to transform me.

“Before you leave, may I ask you something?”

“Yes, but hurry because we are late. The spirit Belphegor is getting irritated,” he answered impatiently.

“Why did you say that the statuette is called Yo-Na and that Belphegor is evil?”

“Oh, get over it. I may have made a mistake. Are you ready to be turned into a bear?” he asked with huge impatience.

“Yes,” I answered, somewhat scared. Melodic voices flooded the area where I stood. A lightning bolt pierced the ground. From out of it sprang water jets. In the center of the makeshift lake, a halo was created. The Native American shouted to me to sit in the center of it. Timidly, I approached the shimmering semicircle. The spirits’ voices began chanting the word “Yo-Na.” I was lifted in the sky as divine light bathed me. The song ended. The lake and the halo were gone. I was a bear. But something felt very wrong.

I examined my new body. I felt strange, but I was no longer cold, nor was I hurting. I felt stronger than ever.

I will get the statuette, I thought menacingly. I must have laughed. My laughs were cut short when I recalled the waiter’s words. I should not have yelled, or I

would have awoken the horned guardian. Remembering every word from the conversation of the previous day, I crossed the bowels of the earth. The path towards the bowels of the earth was dark, but through the eyes of a bear, I could almost see. The path was narrow, and as I progressed further, it became even narrower.

There were bugs everywhere, grasshoppers, cockroaches, ants, worms and other types that I was seeing for the first time. On occasion, I would get the feeling that the roots of the giant tree were moving to get me; they were not. I stayed on the pathway. Maybe later, when I had the statuette, they would try to capture me. I walked carefully for forty minutes until I reached a spot where the downward path came to an end. In front of my surprised eyes was a whole world.

On the ceiling of the cave was a black sky with stars. On the walls, different types of flowers were growing. I could identify azaleas, some blue roses, and a Wisteria tree. Beyond the horizon, a pine forest was growing, and fifty meters from where I stood was a wooden cabin. Next to it was a bridge that had been crafted out of gold, rubies, and emeralds. Red water that resembled lava flowed underneath it. On my right were signposts. One of them read "STATUETTE" in capital letters. I surveyed the sign and found behind it numerous blood stains. A chill ran through me. The place seemed ideal, but the sign revealed the truth. The place in the hollow was a cemetery for all those fools who dared to take the statuette of Belphegor.

I walked on the golden path that led to the bridge, keeping in mind the waiter's description of the horned bear. I had to be calm with all my senses on guard; I wanted to get out of the cemetery alive. Only the thought of death scared me. My beady eyes caught a movement in the shadows. Above my head somewhere was a bird. I quickly turned into the entrance of the cave. In a hurry, I tripped. I walked off the road and fell into the meadow. My fall opened my eyes to reality. The

bump on my head from my fall woke me up from my trance, and I could finally see the true image of the cave.

The magical landscape, which I described earlier, resembled a children's fairytale with fairies and happy animals. I should have known from the start that something was wrong. The bird that flew over my bearish head looked like a lark, but it was actually a bat. The "signpost" was actually a rock drenched in blood. Someone had carved the word STATUETTE, without success. The golden path was constructed from bones of the dead. The cabin was there, but it was so frightening that I almost let out a few screeches. All the while, the plants on the walls were called mosses, and lastly, the bone bridge was erected above the hot lava. The greatest mystery was the forest. Green slimy liquid was coming from the bear's jaws, from the beginning to the end. On the peculiar lake, on the beast's fur was a pedestal. There sat the red statuette of Belphegor.

Having faith in the abilities which God had freely given to me, I walked to the beginning of the bridge. The heat that was coming from the lava dampened my fur. The worst bridge gave birth to feelings of doubt about crossing it successfully. If I remained in my human form, I would have more chances of getting across because of the decrease in weight. Even though I had false hopes and misgivings about my current mass, I stepped on the creaky bridge. It moved, but it was still standing. I started walking, somewhat clumsily, breaking the bones that were in the path. I was fearful that maybe the shattering of bones would wake the blood-thirsty beast.

However, the guardian of the desired statuette was driven away by Morpheus on a great journey in the world of dreams. Without a particular problem, I managed to cross the bridge. The stench from the green liquid pierced my nose. The beast's saliva smelled bad. It reminded me of the smell in the torture house in London. With my smutty claws, I touched the liquid. It was sticky. It would be difficult to run and escape the guardian. In grabbing the statuette, I would activate a series of traps. The

traps would be fatal. Still, I needed to finish the mission. The greenish liquid was above my furry ankles.

I grabbed the statuette. As soon as I held the red statuette, an unbearable weight descended upon my body. Carrying it required extra strength. I started to plunge into the sticky substance. The liquid was now at mouth level, and some slipped into my mouth. The taste was incredibly awful. My stomach almost threw up the food that I had consumed the previous day. After an incredible effort, I managed to escape from the peculiar lake. I had to think of the best way to cross the crumbling bridge. All of the weight would destroy the bridge and send me plunging into the abyss. The only way for me to get out of the cave was to throw the statuette over the lava.

Hoping to make it, I bit onto the statuette. I charged forward, and with a swirling motion, I threw it across. It landed across. The impact with the ground created a deafening sound that grew stronger due to the enclosed space. Without thinking, a sound of relief came from my mouth. With the sound of my relief came a terrible growl. I had never heard such a thing. Fear nested in me when I realized that the horned guardian had woken up with the intent to punish the ignorant who had dared to cross the threshold of the house to steal the precious trophy, which had been kept guarded for years. No one had gotten this close as I, a bear, standing in front of the bridge. With no time to waste, I walked to the other side. I wanted to prove that I was capable of completing, for the first time in years, the Cherokee's mission.

The sharp teeth of the beast were bared forward and threatening, as he ran to kill the intruder. He looked at me with unbelievable hate. He did not seem to understand much. Killing was all he cared about. Surely, he would fight to the death to get all he wanted. I started to cut the ropes of the bridge so he would not be able to get across. Perhaps this would be the only thing that could prevent a fatality,

which seemed to be drawing closer menacingly. The chase inside the cave was expected to be quite dangerous. May God help me to see blue sky again. The horned beast stepped on the crumbling bridge, causing it to sway madly.

The guardian lost his footing as a rope was cut. He almost slipped into the hot lava, but at the last minute, he managed to bite onto the wood. He stayed alive for a little longer. With my claws, I cut the second rope. The bridge, along with its passer, was lost in the lava. The guardian started howling when his fur caught fire. I had never imagined such a beast would feel so much pain from fire. I stood for some seconds, gazing at the remnants of the bridge, the guardian, and the statuette that was before me.

I was happy as I had achieved something surreal. I was the first and the last to kill the guardian. If I had my human legs, I am convinced that I would start dancing wildly. I opened my mouth. Biting the statuette, I was overwhelmed by the bliss that filled the atmosphere. My joy, along with my conceit, had led me to forget the waiter's words. The waiter at the beach had warned me about the dangers that the world inside the hollow of the giant tree held. He had spoken about the appearance of his wife, and the horned bear found that opportunity to kill him. I thought I had killed the beast. I thought the end of this story would be recorded soon. I had faced many demons and therefore should have understood all those meaningless signs that, if put together, would reveal the only truth.

Holding the statuette of Belfagor between my sharp teeth, I arrived at the beginning of the dirt road. The tree's roots obscured the entrance. I tried to cross without having to cut them, but it was no use. The closing was tightly closed, and even my massive self could not open it. The formation was once again trying to stop my escape. Finally, with my claws, I cut the roots without difficulty. Stunned, I saw that the roots recovered so swiftly that it was almost impossible to cross onto the other side. I cut the roots again. A circular hole was formed, big enough for the

statuette to go through. I threw it, and luckily it passed without difficulty. I repeated the same steps many times until I was able to go through the entrance. When I reached the uphill road, which passed exactly under the tree amidst the moving roots, which for some reason had gone quiet, I felt that my mission had come to an end.

Now there was nothing that could stop me anymore. My four legs were leading me with absolute confidence towards success. Even the creatures on the path had left. However, the reason I had entered the world of the horned guardian was nowhere to be found. “Little” Belphegor had vanished. My heart skipped a beat. Fear consumed me. Where had the statuette gone?

From behind me, threatening cries in an ancient tongue which had not been spoken in a thousand years were heard. The roots that had blocked the entrance now retreated. From the opening, I saw the horned beast running towards me. It was on fire, but it did not seem to feel pain. The teeth, with the greenish substance that he would leave in his path, were replaced by flames. The creature, which had been transformed into a burning mass with deer horns, was charging at me. Without hesitation, I started running to be saved. My mind was no longer thinking of the reason I had come to this inhospitable place. It told me just to save myself. It did not matter if I had lost the statuette. I had to stay alive because, simply put, I did not want to die.

The climb to freedom had left me exhausted. My legs were hurting, but I could not give up. I had managed to escape the jaws of the guardian the first time, and I was going to do it again. When I saw the sun’s rays that were piercing the ground, my body gathered more strength. My heart grew wings. I was sure I had escaped. I was oblivious to the true power of all those forces that I had challenged. Nothing was decided yet.

My sweet wife appeared before me, coming out of the uphill path. In her tender hands, she held the desired trophy of the mission. Nonetheless, her glorious face captivated me. You see, I had not seen it for years. She was so beautiful that I could not pull my gaze away from her. I shouted that I missed her. I shouted that I desired nothing more than to touch her. With tears in my eyes, I shouted to her to forgive me, and that her death was not my fault. I even remember, my fellow traveler, I bowed before her divine form. She seemed not to understand what I was saying, but her features shaped a unique smile which warmed the cockles of my soul. With slow but steady paces, I approached her. Every step of mine brought me closer to the elusive dream. I would touch, for the last time, the woman who had indelibly marked my life.

My paw was closer and ready to touch her well-shaped hand, which is when I felt the guardian's hot breath. That is when I realized that everything could end soon. The woman's shape had achieved its purpose. Was it an illusion? She had distracted me long enough so that my fiery persecutor could get closer to me. I forgot the statuette that was in front of me because of my wife's attractiveness. I thought about what to do next. I could have put an end to the story with my death and lived eternally with my wife in the other world. If I died, I would be reunited with her anyway in the Jehoshaphat Valley, where the Lord will raise the dead. Or I could just ignore that crazy idea altogether and complete the Cherokee's mission. The latter, truthfully speaking, scared me more because of the stranger who was waiting.

A twinge of pain pierced my body. The horned beast had bitten my left leg. Fire burned my fur. The pain became my motivator in getting out of the hollow in the tree. I kicked the beast's face. I got burned, but at least I had escaped from his jaws. I began to run. I passed over my wife and grabbed the deity statuette. The roots tried to entrap me again, but in my Yo-Na form, as the Native American would

say, I managed to get out in the open air again. From behind me, I could hear cries. I ignored them as I thought that I had finally escaped. From out of the hollow jumped the guardian.

With a giant jet of flame, he tried to burn me. He would have been successful if I had not pulled away. The fire touched a few hairs from my already burnt and bitten leg. I did not feel any pain or fear because I knew the horned guardian had failed his mission that had been given to him by the forces of darkness. Sooner or later, he would cease to exist. I had forgotten the statuette on the ground, and now it was engulfed in flames. You should have seen me then. My snout was wrinkled, and the hairs on my body all stood up. I had come so close. One foolish mistake had ingloriously brought the mission to an end.

Just when everything seemed lost within the vortex of time, salvation came from the sky. Black clouds covered the dominant sun. Thunder was heard. Lightning and thunderbolts were visible, and intense rain began to fall. The raindrops soaked the enflamed creature. Cries of joy filled the space. The guardian was happy that the fire on his fur was being extinguished. If I remember correctly, a peaceful smile was on his face. He understood that it was time to leave this world behind. Still, he seemed overjoyed by the outcome. The great Yo-Na, guardian of the statuette, looked into my eyes. He no longer had pupils, and there was no trace of flesh left on him. His gaze revealed a lot, or maybe he was trying to warn me about the end that was coming. Compassion, sadness, and love were visible in his burned eyes. His four bear legs abandoned him. He fell on the ground, creating an unmistakable thud. I felt sad for the beast that had spent its entire life guarding something so valuable.

*May the Lord forgive his sins and help him find eternal peace.* I said while I was happy to have completed the mission. Really, how much of a fool could I have been back then?



## The White Wa-Ya

Redemptive rain washed over the dirt that had accumulated in the area. The giant tree seemed to have lost all the glow and magic that once drew anyone who approached. The leaves were falling off the branches. The great hollow was beginning to close. After a while, a tree stood in the place of the plane tree, drooped down without any leaves. All the signs that hid something foreboding disappeared. The ground had absorbed the ruined body of the guardian. Whatever element had conspired to make the cave world frightening ceased to exist. Maybe they wanted it to remain hidden from this strange part of the world. Next to me was the deity's likeness. The fire had not burned it. Most likely, higher powers protected it, and nothing could happen to it. It would continue to be in the world, no matter how much destruction occurred.

"Congratulations, man," said the Native American as he jumped over the bare tree branches.

"What do you want? I thought I was never going to see you again?" I asked aggressively. You see, I was growing tired of his face. He laughed loudly. He looked happier than usual. A hearty smile formed underneath his big nose. That was the only time that I believed the man was showing genuine emotions.

"Look, I should not respond to you as you just spoke in bear tongue, but as you can see, I am quite cheerful and I would like to congratulate you and transform you back into a human. Unless you prefer to stay like this, because to be honest, you are much prettier as a bear," the Cherokee said, and he grabbed his belly from irrepressible laughter.

"Firstly, I need you to tell me what else I have to do?" I asked with full curiosity.

“Nothing much, you just have to reach the Great Smoky Mountains with the statuette. Along your journey, you will meet another Native American. He will be in the form of a Wa-Ya, wolf. He will lead you to the end. Before I turn you back into a human, I would like to thank you for completing the mission. If it wasn’t for you, we wouldn’t be able to create a better world. The success of our grand plan is because of you,” he said, and he bowed with grandeur.

With those final words, I was lifted in the air. Blinding light wrapped around me, and I was human again. I felt better than before. I was getting bored with my fur. The thing that surprised me was that my wound was still there. It bothered me more in this form than the previous one. Staggering, I searched for the spirit. He was nowhere to be found. He had disappeared craftily without being noticed. The fact that he had not healed my wound bothered me. He should have helped me more if he expected me to reach my destination.

I tried walking slowly, and I can say I managed it perfectly. I was hurting quite a bit, but I managed to stumble across the dirt path and reach the beach. From there, I would head east and maybe find some transport to take me to the mountains. I knelt down to lift the statuette of Belphegor. It required a massive effort to lift it from the ground. I was walking at a snail’s pace. Another problem that hindered my journey was the sudden change in weather. The hot sun rays made me perspire. In short, I covered almost three kilometres until all my strength left me.

In the deserted place, I found a tree. I crawled to the shade. The wound on my leg was getting worse. Yellow liquid was oozing out of it, and it was swollen. I touched my forehead. I must have had a fever. The whole situation in which I had been placed had affected me negatively. I had reached the end, and it looked like I would not be able to make it to the mountains of the Native Americans. It was quite

sad that I had given everything to succeed. I would not fail that moment that I had reached the water tap, and waited for the gurgling water to refresh me.

An old man appeared to walk from out of the desert. His white hair formed a mane that reached his waist. The wrinkles on his face and his hands clearly showed his age. What struck me most about the old man was his lush green eyes. They were enclosed with immense kindness. The rags he wore signified his abjection. In another life, perhaps he had worked as a mystagogue, as it seemed he was involved in something similar. It was impossible that he would be at a place such as this for leisure or just to get lost. My mind told me that he was here for me. He had something to tell me. In his hands, apart from a walking stick, he held a flask.

I needed water. I shouted to him to come to me. I begged him to give me some water so I could wet my lips. He heard me, but he did not turn to me. Instead, he started running in the opposite direction. I wanted water, I needed water, so I will beg you, my fellow traveller, do not judge me for my action, which I will describe to you. I know that it was the biggest mistake I have ever made in my life, a mistake which has essentially marked me forever. It was a desperate move that led to my total decline.

I stood up and moved faster, holding the statuette, to reach the old man. Without knowing why, the prominent feeling of clear wickedness spread inside me. I felt hatred towards the person who had something of value for me. I would take it from him, even if I had to kill him. Regrettably, that is what I did. Despite my bad shape, I reached the old man rather quickly. I hit him on the head with the heavy statuette. My hit landed him on the ground. On his head was a dent. Fresh blood poured out of it. In that moment, I was afraid that I had killed him. But when he stirred and spoke to me, I was happy that I had saved myself for a little longer. To be honest, I never expected to debase myself so much, like I did that day. Now that I recall it, maybe what happened was logical and my tragic end.

“Do not kill me, my son. I cannot give you my water, for I will die without it. But you can head east, where you will find a water fountain with cold water, two kilometres away. Please do not kill me,” he said, frightened. I thought about his words. They did not move me. He must have been lying to me. The old man wanted to deceive me. He would get rid of me and disappear from this empty land, with the vital liquid.

“Give me the flask, old man,” I threatened him, yelling and trying to grab it from his grasp.

“Please do not take the water. If you do, I will die,” he said and pulled on my leg trousers. Ignoring him, I took the precious flask. I opened the cap and drank. Cold water energized me. Full of energy again, I abandoned the old man. I went towards the fountain that he mentioned. I would refill the flask with clean water, if there was any, and then return it to him.

I walked quite a while under the hot sun, until I saw the fountain the old man had told me about. Even though I was no longer thirsty, I fell headfirst into the water. After I tasted the cool and clean water, I thought about how I had just left the old man in the desert. My heart trembled. I most likely left a person to die. Terrified, I filled the obscure object that most likely had driven me to murder the man. As I ran as fast as I could, an unsettling thought came to mind. It was no coincidence, but a test from the Maker. He wanted to see if I would remain on the right path or not. If the old man died because of me, I would wind up in hell. Why did I act like that? I have never been a bad person.

I arrived at the spot where I left him. He was still asleep on the hot ground. The sun had burned his body, while a vulture sniffed him. His chest was not moving. For a moment, I imagined him speaking to me. His lips parted. He said he was ok and in need of some water. The vulture, which turned to lick the blood that was coming

from his head wound, and maybe to consume his brain, brought me back to dull reality.

I, Arthur Mortimer, a reporter, had murdered a man, a man who had done nothing to me. The search for the statuette of Belphegor had driven me into a complete decline. I had killed a man so that I could drink a couple of sips of water. I stumbled and fell next to him. I chased the vulture away. I closed my eyelids. I remained shocked, looking down at my incomprehensible act, terrified. My sobs, along with my wails for the unfortunate man, filled the empty land. Some birds, which had become empathetic to my pain, perched on a tree branch. Some even cried over the tragic event. The whole scene reminded me of the death and funeral of my wife. How could I have taken away a person's most valuable gift?

After shaking myself out of the terrible, tragic act that I had committed, when I was in another state of mind, I decided to bury the deceased at least. I would dig a grave, hoping that God forgives me. Saddened and short of breath, I plunged my dirty hands in the red dirt. I would dig a grave for the slain man. Digging with my bare hands was not easy. The rocks with the hard sand hurt them. Cries of pain and bereavement were heard in the abandoned place. Blood trailed from my open, cut skin. I was not giving up, though. I had to bury the dead man and give his spirit the chance to free itself from its restraints. Maybe, at some point, he could forgive me for the irreversible damage that I had done to him, with a light heart. I placed the corpse in the improvised hole with pity. Then, I carefully covered the old man with the red soil. I could remember my blood from my hands touching his cheeks. How did it fall so low?

I covered him up, and then I looked around for material to form a standard which would indicate that a dead person lies here. With a bit of a branch and some torn fabric from my clothes, I constructed a flag. After I propped it successfully, I started to sing a prayer. The strange group of birds sang with me. With my last

words of the prayer, tears came. Later, the “chorister” flew away from the gravesite, and the “preacher” drew a cross with his blood. On the cross, I noticed the flask, the murder cause.

“May you rest in peace,” I shouted, looking at the grave and then up at the sky. As I walked on the road towards my destiny, I realized that I had become an enemy of goodness. I alone had dug up my moral decay pit. I had abandoned my life, committed murder, and behaved inhumanely, all because of a statuette depicting a stupid deity. Everything had been planned in perfect detail so I would get caught like a mouse in a trap. Ultimately, my mission had turned out to be a tragic mistake. Belphegor must have been a demonic god. The likeness that I carried with me probably belonged to an occult religion.

I crossed the desert land, when suddenly in front of my weary eyes appeared a dreamy flat plain. Perhaps God had pardoned me and was rewarding me for not leaving the old man without burying him first. Those were foolish thoughts, which, as you can understand, had no logical foundation. I had pulled away from the path of righteousness because I had convinced myself I was something special. My vanity, which had become bloated from the Native American’s words, had turned me into a monster. In the far-off distance, I could see a carriage with two golden horses. The driver was a thin man wearing a black top hat. He was smiling as he was driving, and I understood that he was coming to me. With perfection, he stopped the carriage right in front of me.

“Hello. Would you like to get on board, sir?” asked the driver politely.

“Why would I want to do that?” I asked, bewildered.

“If you come with me, you will be taken to a magical place which will rid you of all the problems that trouble you. You will arrive in a dreamland where you can atone for all the sins that you have committed,” said the man with the top hat, in a serious tone of voice.

“I will not get on the carriage, demon,” I answered. The driver did not lash out angrily. Instead, he suggested that I reconsider his proposition for the last time. He emphasized that this would be my last chance. If I said no again, he would disappear forever.

“I will not get on the carriage,” I said with finality.

“Shame,” said the driver in his thick voice for the last time. The brown reins pulled back. The golden horses followed their master’s command. Slowly, the clip-clop of the horses’ hooves faded away. Sadly, I had missed my third and last opportunity to escape the terrible ending that awaited me. Now that I’ve recorded the events, I will tell you that if I hadn’t had this innate arrogance, I would have saved myself.

A white wolf approached me just before I reached the end of the plain. I gripped the statuette tighter for protection and to hit the animal. But something in the wolf looked familiar. He arrived in front of me and turned into a Native American. He resembled the Native American I already knew, but more sturdy. He must have been the Native American who would see me through the last stages until the completion of my mission.

“Congratulations on succeeding in getting the likeness,” he said, extending his hand to congratulate me.

“Now what must I do?” I asked, hoping for this torment to finally come to an end.

“To get to the Great Smoky Mountains, you will have to learn the spell that will transform you into a Wa-Ya. Wa-Ya, in our tongue, means wolf. Without the transformation, you will not be able to get there. The learning process begins tomorrow,” said the Native American in a final tone.

The moon climbed onto the cloudy sky. All the stars were covered by the clouds, except the Orion Constellation. I was waiting for rain that night, but nothing

happened. My tired eyes closed. Happily, I was transported into the world of dreams. But I had a rather strange dream. I was a wolf, and I was approaching the mountains. I stopped in front of a decrepit cabin. I crossed the threshold after the Native American prompts. The door hinges creaked loudly. Inside the cabin was a black marble altar. I had to rest the statuette of Belphegor there.

Trembling, I placed the statuette on the altar. As soon as it touched the marble, the earth started to quake. The statuette was coming to life. Before me appeared a horrible demon, he thanked me for all that I did for him, and then he ate me, the whole time yelling that now he was free from his shackles and he was ready to take over the world.

I woke up from my heart-rending cries. This was quite possibly the worst dream I had seen in a long time. Unfortunately, the nightmare partially confirmed my suspicions about the destination of this journey and the fatal mistake that I had committed. As I got closer to the end, I realized that whatever I had done was with the ulterior purpose of exploiting the world so that humanity would immerse itself in chaos and terror. I was the most crucial piece to the story.

I got up from the wet grass and decided to abandon the Native American. Maybe I still had the chance to save my hide and the world from a new threat. I had forgotten that the two Native Americans, aside from being mentors, also acted as guardians. They never rested. They were always on the watch in case the sheep, I, should escape the pen. I turned my head to check if the Native American was sleeping. Drool touched my legs. The white wolf was licking my legs. He was not speaking to me, but I understood the licking not to be a sign of goodness. He wanted to show me that all my movements were watched. If I did anything that he would not like, he would torture me so I would satisfy his whims.

I returned to the damp, humid grass. Without looking at the white wolf again, I allowed myself to gaze up at the sky. Those moments held something special and



extraordinary. I started to recall all of my achievements. The Count of Transylvania, Nicolette, the hunter in the mansion, and generally everything I had gone through. All those terrifying events were distant memories. I smiled, thinking that my achievements weren't as bad as I had believed. I knew I was entirely wrong, but when one has reached the end of one's life, everything is seen in a more mellow light. That night, I slept twice more. I saw the same nightmare. God was probably revealing to me the end of my miserable life. Call me crazy, but since I had killed the old man in the desert, I imagined my ending would come sooner or later.

I woke the Native American and asked him to teach me the incantation so I could turn into a Wa-Ya. He sternly looked up at me. The Native Americans knew from the start the purpose of the mission. All that was left was for me to learn the incantation so I could get to the cabin and place that statuette on the altar.

"You do not need to rush. We have plenty of time," said the white wolf.

"I want to get there as soon as possible," I answered.

"Even if we get there sooner, there will be no point. We have to be at the cabin on a specific day and time," he said casually.

"I want to arrive there earlier because I need to rest. If I am near the cabin, I will be calmer. You owe me a reward of some kind. All I ask is more time. This is my wish," I demanded in a strict voice. His eyes shone.

Even now as I write the last words of my story, I am definite that he wanted to kill me; he knew what was going to happen. He knew I would trigger absolute chaos. However, he did not attempt to act on what his subconscious told him to for the simple reason that he needed me. Without me, Belphegor would never stop trying to break free from his shackles.

"To turn into a wolf, you must successfully learn the dance which I will perform," said my guardian, and he changed into his human form. He began hopping left and right like a goat. With his hands, he formed circles, and he let out a

few cries. The dance did not have any specific steps. It resembled a drunken man's dance. Perhaps that is why we should have arrived earlier at this place.

I do not have a lot of time left, and to make a long story short, the dance took me about ten days to learn. He explained to me much later that I had to turn into a wolf; it was the only way to go unnoticed by the forces of menacing spirits.

I never believed him. His excuse seemed ridiculous. We arrived at the cabin after five days, and we waited for the right day for me to enter and place the statuette on the altar. I could only achieve that when some of the planets would be aligned. I cannot provide you with any further details. Time is over. These words that you will read are the last words of a man driven by greed and arrogance, which ultimately led to his demise.

During those twenty days, we stayed near the cabin, and I tried to escape many times. I tried to get lost in the forest many times. Every time the damn Wa-Ya would find me. The Native American's herbs had healed my wounds. But that does not matter anymore. What matters to me, my fellow traveller, is that you read my story till the end. You may not have believed the events recorded in this journal by Arthur Mortimer, but please consider them for a moment, for they are true. They describe the tragic conclusion to my life. They describe my descent into hell because of the series of terrifying events. Maybe if I had been a better person, I might not have ended up like this? Perhaps if I had rejected the missing student case in Romania, I would still be alive as you read these pages, and I would not have caused so many problems for the world. My success in the mission means that now all these monsters, ghouls, entities, and demons have been released into your world. I am truly sorry for the misery that I have caused you.

I have recorded my story in these pages so that I can feel I have at least managed to inform you about the existence of demons and other fantastical

creatures that you thought only existed in fairy tales. I, too, once believed that, but now my whole world has come crashing down.

He is looking for me. It is time. He is not aware of the journal. Before I throw it in the forest, in hopes that someone will find it, I will beg of you, if you are reading my story, to understand that there is always a way to change the course of your story. I had three chances to save myself, and I refused them. I turned down my last opportunity, the trip on the carriage with the golden horses. He is getting closer to me. I can see him coming. Please forgive me for the hurt that I have caused. As I throw the journal on the grass and make my way to the cabin, remember that I was not solely to blame for the most terrifying event of all, the release of the TERRIBLE BELPHEGOR.

Bye. May God forgive all of your sins, and mine.

P.S.- If this journal should ever come into your hands, spread my story to the whole world. Maybe then I can FIND everlasting peace?"

*By copying  
Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis*

## Epilogue

My name is Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis, and it may be written on the front cover as the writer of this story, but the truth is, I did not write Arthur Mortimer's story. I participated in the translation and edited the journal with the yellowed pages to the best of my ability, which coincidentally came into my possession. I did my best to write down his story. My only intervention in the narration was about Mortimer being abandoned by Nicolette. But even there, the description of the incidents was based on some loose notes from the reporter that revealed what happened to the woman.

You are probably wondering how the story got into my hands. I owe you an explanation for that. You might have noticed at the beginning of the narrative a special dedication to my mother. My mother is the one who handed me the journal one day when we were sorting out the attic. That is where she found it. She told me that it was given to her by her father, on the condition that she would not throw it away and that she would take care of it. My grandfather had claimed that those yellowed pages were given to him as pay for his services to an English woman. When she gave it to him, she uttered some incoherent words. That is how I found out about the reporter's story and became intrigued about the terrifying events recorded, mainly the postscript at the end.

Before I conclude this epilogue, I would like to state that I have conducted extensive research on the files to ensure that Arthur Mortimer's story is entirely accurate. I found a considerable amount of evidence that proved he existed. However, his traces disappeared from the start of his journey in Transylvania. The files from the newspaper where he worked said he died while in Romania. I do not mention the name of the newspaper where he worked or any other clue about the case as I consider the narration has reached its end, and by now you may tell if the

story is real or not. Many of you will view it as a fairytale, and others will believe, like me.

Before I say goodbye, I would like to add that Belphegor, according to folklore, is a demon that bears many similarities to the Devil. I hope that I have answered all your queries about the series of terrifying events. I want to thank you, dear reader, my family, and *Saita Publications*, which first published the story in the Greek language. Without their help, the story of the unfortunate reporter would never have been known to the public.

Goodbye. I wish you all the best.







Then it is up to me and my qualifications as a reporter to reveal some events that happened several years ago, events that have defined my life. These terrifying events will initiate you into a parallel world. They might frighten you, dear reader, or leave you blind to the truth. I want to inform you that if you are expecting to hear stories similar to the ones you heard when you were young, then you are mistaken, and I advise you to read no further. If you want to know more about these unique events, please continue reading, but take caution when encountering events that are reduced to the paranormal.

*Arthur Mortimer*

ISBN: 978-988-71669-0-0