

THE RESURRECTION TRINITY



FRANKENSTEIN SOUL'S ECHO

Book 2 of 3

PETE PLANISEK

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FRANKENSTEIN SOUL'S ECHO

Book 2 of 3

The Resurrection Trinity

PETE PLANISEK

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Pete Planisek

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CHAPTER 11

THE THIRD ALLIANCE

Abrielle closed her eyes and sighed. She'd done it again, and this time, she would not be able to hide her crime from the others. It would be worse than before. If only they'd bartered for more in that last town they'd stopped in. Oh well, the burnt fare served them right, she thought, since the others refused to cook and knew by now that she couldn't. Maybe she could still slip back inside before ...

"Is that ready?" An unwelcome voice behind her demanded.

She quickly shoved the burnt ham under the eggs on the plate, then turned, and wordlessly handed it to Berryer, easily the most annoying member of the group. He eyed both her and the contents of the plate before he grudgingly sat down. Despite the cold air of the mountains, the cooking fire made her quite warm. Abrielle grabbed the nearest water bladder and tipped it back. No, she would almost enjoy watching him choke on the ham.

"Don't drink that!" Chloe barked as she emerged from the tent.

Abrielle stiffened in surprise. She could see nothing distinguishing about the bladder and aside from the contents smelling slightly stale could detect nothing amiss about the water within. Was Chloe simply trying to make her paranoid?

"What? Are we out of water again?" Berryer whined as a portion of half-chewed egg fell from his mouth.

"Yes," said Chloe without removing her eyes from Abrielle, "go fill the rest of the bladders up."

"I'm eating," Berryer replied dismissively.

"I can get more water," Abrielle offered.

Chloe's visage and stance indicated otherwise. She hadn't allowed Abrielle to leave her sight since their journey began. Suddenly Berryer choked. Abrielle winced as he spit out his food and noisily flung the metal plate back toward her.

"Dammit! I ate better when I had Austrians trying to shoot me!" he thundered, in reference to his previous career as a member of Napoleon's Grande Army.

"I wish one had," Abrielle retorted.

Muttering in anger, Berryer started towards her, but his movement was impeded as Chloe grabbed him and held him in what appeared to be an intimate embrace.

"Touch her and I'll kill you," she hurriedly whispered. "You're causing a scene."

Berryer paused and studied a few of the curious faces, which scrutinized them from the nearby camp.

"I'm playing my role," he asserted defensively. "Do you think they care if another gypsy yells at his wife?"

She held him tighter.

"Imbecile, you almost blew our cover."

"You will now if you don't let me hit her," he countered.

Chloe's eyes touched those of the expectant spectators, her grip relaxed, and he flung her away; then he struck Abrielle. Her eyes burned with resentment as he grinned defiantly back at her. In Berryer's eyes, she was a traitor, and he was more than happy to treat her as she deserved. He stooped and retrieved several of the empty water bladders before leaving. The matter settled, most of

the curious members of the Moon Shadow clan began to disperse.

Chloe knelt down and studied Abrielle's face, touching the tender skin where the blow had landed.

"I'm fine," she insisted, turning away from Chloe in anger and humiliation.

"I don't care," Chloe said evenly, "but they have to believe I do, so hold still.

She took the heavy cooking towel, wrapped snow within it, and held it to Abrielle's face. Chloe brushed some loose strands of hair behind her ear.

"Remember, my love, I'm your sister."

Abrielle tried not to look away. That Chloe had chosen this, of all roles, to assume for their mission revolted her to no end, but she could not allow her to know what affect the words she'd just uttered truly had upon Abrielle's heart. She hugged Chloe, who warmly embraced her in return.

For four days after Chloe's failed seduction of her, she was left alone in her gilded prison. Even the guards did not appear. Then on the fifth day, Chloe returned and offered to allow her an hour's time in the prison yard. Though it was freezing outside, the prospect of fresh air thrilled her. Chloe remained at her side, but neither spoke until the final moments before she'd been returned to her cell. All Chloe asked her was where the Moon Shadow gypsies might be. Without mentioning his name, Abrielle described the area where Ernest had been waylaid and taken to the cave.

Chloe returned three days later. A strange, sympathetic softness overcame her demeanor when she informed Abrielle that she had located the clan, here, secure in the towering heights and awesome beauty of the Pyrenees. And despite repeated attempts, Abrielle had been unable to pry from Chloe or any of the others how they'd suddenly learned the whereabouts of the Moon Shadows.

"Preparations have been made to infiltrate them, but before we can proceed, I will need your word. We will be watched by others outside of our group. If you attempt to betray us or escape, they will kill you. I pledge that while we are on this mission, you are under the direct protection of the Emperor. Do I have your word?"

Abrielle considered Chloe's wholly unexpected offer.

"And if we are successful? What will happen to me then?"

A wry grin had spread across Chloe's face.

"Let us be certain that we are successful."

Did they intend to use her to spy on these gypsies for a prolonged period? Would she be returned to prison after they learned what they wished? Or would they simply kill her during the mission? It really didn't matter. As long as she remained locked away, Abrielle could do nothing to save her niece.

Abrielle agreed, and twenty-four hours later they were seated before a campfire with Germanic Romani [\[1\]](#). Several years earlier, Abrielle had infiltrated another group of Romani gypsies, so many of the customs were, if not familiar, then at least comprehensible. She was now Orfilia, a young, widowed Romani who was accompanied by her older sister, Onella, the alias that Chloe assumed.

At first, Abrielle gave little thought to their cover story and identities. She was so relieved to be free from prison that she readily assumed the role she was to play without question. Berryer had been placed within the Romani encampment for several months prior to their arrival. A brief ceremony gave the appearance that they were betrothed and soon after, Berryer got them exiled for violating a host of customs. All of these events were carefully choreographed so that now there was a viable trail, should anyone wish to backtrack them and check on the validity of their cover story. And so the exiles crossed the border into France and headed first south then west. They picked up the other member of their small party in the second to last town they stopped in before entering the demanding

Pyrenees.

Abrielle recognized him from two prior missions but his presence brought no reassurance. During both of those, he interacted only with Chloe, and during both, he pursued some secret secondary mission before vanishing. He was younger than any of the other members of the group, but even Chloe seemed to respect this primarily silent addition, as she always had. For this mission, he was called Grenier, a mountain guide they'd hired to take them to the Spanish boarder, looking for work in the war-ravaged Peninsula. Grenier slept in a separate tent, ate his own food, and interacted with them only when the role he was playing compelled him to. He often scouted ahead of them and did seem to know this landscape quite well. The more Abrielle observed of him the more of a paradox he became, one that was both inviting and worrisome.

They had discovered the Moon Shadow camp three days earlier and petitioned to either join or trade with them. The clan did not react favorably to these intruders and all but ignored them the first day, perhaps hoping that they'd just move on. But they hadn't. The second day resulted in a short conversation between members of the groups. On the third they allowed Berryer to trade some items and to briefly enter their encampment. Now they at least had a basic understanding of its organization. What would this morning bring? Would she and Berryer's spat soften their suspicions, confirm them, or had the incident already been dismissed.

Successfully infiltrating any organization required total commitment by all those involved. There must be a rhythm to such things. A moment's hesitation, any perceived inconsistencies, or lack of sincerity in either words or actions could, and for some groups had, brought disastrous results. In an effort to avoid such a fate, all devoted a great deal of time to developing their fictional personas while they traveled. For a time, they all but disappeared into their respective roles; that was expected. Ironically, by now they knew their fictional selves better than they knew one another in reality.

Since her first return to Abrielle's cell, Chloe had been polite, respectful, and reserved. In short, she'd not been Chloe. What was behind this new kindness? At first, Abrielle struggled to discover what purpose this new act might serve. Did Chloe honestly believe that she was fooled by it? No, she was more intelligent than that, so why do it? As they traveled, she did not once attempt to touch Abrielle and constantly defended her against Berryer's ire. By now, for all appearances, she'd successfully become Orfilia's somewhat protective older sister. But Abrielle came to perceive that Chloe's Onella persona was crafted to serve ulterior motives. It afforded her a subtle, intimate, and inescapable means to continue her interrogation of Abrielle.

It was so insidious that Abrielle failed to recognize it at first. They spent many hours on the road, discussing what type of a life these fictional gypsy sisters would have led. They developed stories about their pasts, plans for their future, even how each would die. The conversation turned to the philosophical, the spiritual, but avoided the personal. Neither ever revealed any links to her past. But there was something now, in Chloe's eyes, when she said the word 'sister' that disturbed her. Abrielle feared that the true purpose of their conversations was actually an attempt to confirm a suspicion Chloe held. Or was it more than that? Chloe was irate when she erroneously concluded that Ailis had been Abrielle's lover. Had she now reasoned who and what Ailis had truly been? How would the knowledge impact Chloe's decisions regarding Abrielle's fate? Would she use the truth to help Abrielle gain permanent freedom or suppress it and use it to keep her a prisoner forever?

Chloe handed her another water bladder.

"I thought we were out of water?"

Chloe picked up the bladder she'd admonished Abrielle not to drink from.

“Don’t burn my eggs,” she instructed.
Then she disappeared back inside the tent.

*

Pias eyed the four surviving Wild Rose clan fighters bound before him as he tried to ignore the numbness in his fingers. Their method of attack was well-conceived and executed. The wolves hadn’t detected their scent. They’d used the surrounding landscape to their full advantage, and by doing so, succeeded in killing half of his men. Pias himself was sent flying down an embankment and into the icy mud of a nearby stream, where one of these men had attempted to drown him. Such spirit and resourcefulness was to be admired, that is, if they’d won. But they hadn’t, and now he must use any means necessary to discover the truth quickly or all of his carefully laid plans could fail.

He paced before them. They all averted his gaze. Normally he would have executed the leader, but time elicited a different choice be made. He picked one at random, withdrew his pistol, and shot the man cleanly through the temple. The wolves strained against their leads at the sight of blood upon the snow. He studied the reactions of the remaining three prisoners. None ultimately revealed what he needed.

“Your friend was a brave man . . .,” Pias mocked as he released the wolves that quickly descended upon the carcass. “Look what it got him.”

He waited, but none of the others spoke. He shook his head.

“Now . . . I’ll ask again and then the lesson repeats itself. How many more of you are there?” he asked as he reloaded his pistol. No one spoke.

Pias turned to one of his men.

“Take two men back with you. Tell Nicabar where we are and that we need a cart or horses to bring in . . .,” he paused and fired, randomly ending the life of another, “two prisoners.”

His men moved quickly to obey their orders.

Pias squatted down and touched the warm barrel of his still smoldering pistol to one of the remaining gypsy’s faces. The young man strained not to cry out.

“You must be dead inside. I murder two of your friends, and it means nothing to you.” He drove the hot barrel harder into the man’s cheek.

Eyes choked with pain and violence suddenly met his.

“I swear I’m gonna kill you,” the gypsy vowed.

Pias laughed then became quite sober.

“Brave men don’t just let their friends die, nor do real leaders. My father taught me that. Didn’t yours, Espen?”

*

Tasaria blinked as she tried to clear her mind. Slowly, the world came back into focus. She was back in her tent. It was a welcome sight. She was never completely comfortable entrusting herself to the chaotic energies of the unseen world, and for several years, all but refused to do so. It was too easy to become overwhelmed while under their influence or to touch forces she could not control. But since the arrival of their Master, there had been little real need for her to seek guidance from the hidden realms. All was as it should be. Besides, in her younger days, too often when that Elemental energy revealed secrets to her, these had only led to great problems or miseries, but then again they

had also once led her to greater levels of knowledge and power. Gifts she'd seen fit to use.

Ever since his return, Nicabar insisted that she attempt to access them again.

Even absent his urging, she would have. She'd felt her mother pass long before Nicabar returned and informed her of both the disastrous raid and of her death. Pias was to blame for both. She'd never liked the man, but now she detested him. He was a necessary evil, but now that the war with the Wild Rose clan was all but finished, both she and her husband knew that his usefulness was nearing an end. He was too volatile, too unpredictable. He was a creature of violence and war, but when the Master's work was complete, there would be no place for him. At least, none that Tasaria could foresee. Besides, he was an outsider. How could he possibly understand the great destiny of her people? Then again, if they still lived, could her mother or her sister have truly understood? She doubted it. They'd both adhered too closely to a flawed interpretation of the prophecy, one which offered no hope for a better world.

And now, she was the last Seer. Fate intended it so, and it only re-enforced, in Tasaria's mind, that as regrettable as the outcome of some of her choices, they were also correct. Soon the Moon Shadows would claim immortality for humanity and replace fear with eternal hope. Though her heart was certain of this, her spirit was wary. Something vital remained obscured from her. She could feel it. But did it threaten their success? The energies of the unseen world were growing increasingly erratic, and as they did, that which she sought became even more elusive. Still, an unknown whispered to her. Something was waiting for her. Would she recognize it for what it was when it came?

Suddenly the flap to the tent drew open and a cold rush of mountain air banished any further musings. Nicabar stomped in and threw himself down onto his favorite chair. Despite the fact that he was obviously in a bad temper, Tasaria could not let a long-standing argument rest.

"How many times do I have to yell at you to take off your boots before you come in?"

"I haven't tracked anything in here in months," he snapped.

Tasaria scoffed but allowed the matter to fade. He obviously needed to confide something to her. She took a moment to seal the flap properly then turned to face him.

"What troubles you, Husband?"

*

Abrielle scraped the last remnants of grease from the pan. The water was frigid, and her hands now burned with cold. She stood and plunged them beneath her heavy cloak then against her body for additional heat. Unconsciously her body began to move, as if the motions themselves would generate the warmth she sought. She had to be careful though. The rocks were slick, and this pool was not far from where the mountain stream turned into an impressive waterfall that vanished over the edge of the cliff. Her eyes began to study the terrain. Was she being watched? Despite the cold, it was pretty here. Even winter could not fully mask the lush forests that covered the landscape. It felt warm and familiar. Her thoughts turned to Anne and Noel D'Aoust, tucked away here among the peaks. She turned west and wondered for a moment how long it might take her to reach them if she just began to walk. The flurries, which had begun several hours earlier, seemed to have become more purposeful. Abrielle peered through the waves of snow.

A cold hand gripped her shoulder. She shrieked in surprise, and to her astonishment, found that it was Grenier. He held one finger over his lips. Her questions died on hers.

"Leave the pans," was the only instruction he gave before walking away, in the direction of the

waterfall. She followed as quickly as she could, but the flying snow hindered her progress.

He stood upon the precipice where the waters thundered heedlessly over. Unwilling to get too close to either, she finally yelled a question. The wind stole it immediately. With great reluctance, she drew closer to him.

“What are we doing here?”

“I need to show you something,” he shouted back over the roar.

She looked down at the rushing water, framed by pine trees that must have been hundreds of feet tall. Swirling winds laden with snow hastened to meet her gaze as she glanced over the edge.

“I can’t see anything. Can’t it wait?” Abrielle asked with a measure of trepidation.

Grenier shook his head, knelt down then began to clamber over the edge. Was he mad?

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“It’s the best way.”

“Do you have ropes?”

Again Grenier shook his head. He was mad.

“This is the best way to avoid their wolves. I can’t show you if we go through the camp. This is much shorter and there are good grips. I’ll guide you. Now hurry.”

He vanished.

Abrielle hated heights.

“Grenier!” she said in a low voice, but there was no response.

For God’s sake, why couldn’t he just tell her what was so important? Or at least, why couldn’t they wait until after it stopped snowing? Could this be how they planned to eliminate her? If she didn’t go was the mission over? No, it couldn’t end. Not like this. She hiked up her dress, knelt, and lowered herself slowly until her feet located a narrow purchase on the cliff. Grenier was there, affixed as a spider is to its web. The winds howled and buffeted them. And for the first time ever, Grenier actually smiled. He was having fun. Abrielle was not.

The distance, though not great, was agonizing. What on earth could have inspired him to attempt this in the first place? Her hands and feet fought her mind. They wanted to remain where they were. Her mind, however, realized that numb extremities could only result in the very outcome she was determined to avoid. She blinked snow from her eyes, her nose ran, and icy gusts swirled up into her clothing, but she ignored these and concentrated on succeeding each perch that Grenier abandoned as he moved further along the cliff. Only once did her foot slip, but her heart hung in her throat for the rest of the unpleasant journey.

Finally, Grenier began upward again. He pulled her the last few feet, and at last, they stood together on a firm outcropping just below the edge of the cliff. He leaned close to her ear.

“Commit everything you see to memory. Pay close attention to anyone you see. Notice the details for the tents surrounding the one with the guards. Watch for any wolves lurking about the camp. If they spot us, we might as well jump.”

He grinned tightly and motioned for her to stand fully upright. Abrielle gingerly raised herself and tried to ignore the obscuring snow as her mind sought details to commit to memory. Several figures darted among the tents, including the one under guard. She tried to establish what might be significant about them, but abandoned the task the moment she spotted a wolf walking beside one of the figures.

Grenier steadied her as she sank back down and again held a finger to his lips. She nodded. With no apparent alarms raised, they took a moment to warm themselves before resuming their journey back to the waterfall. When they were once again by the pool in the stream, Grenier hurriedly issued instructions.

“Meet me in my tent in an hour. They’ll want us to leave. Find some way to keep us here. Tell no one what you have seen or that we’ve spoken.”

His orders complete, he disappeared among the snow and the gathering twilight.

Abrielle returned to her tent but dedicated most of her time to figuring out a new excuse to escape it. Chloe was already paranoid about leaving her alone. Cleaning the cooking ware and locating a private location to relieve herself were viable explanations once, but using something similar was bound to raise their suspicions. Besides, how long would her conference with Grenier last? She had to think of something else the others would not want to witness or do.

Much to the consternation of Berryer, she began to play Ailis’ flute while she meditated on the problem. While she sat thinking, a Moon Shadow stopped by and suggested that if Spain remained their goal, then leaving in the morning would be advisable. He explained that snows like this could last for many days and make the passes inadvisable for travel. In that case, they’d be snowed in for an unknown period of time, perhaps even the remainder of winter.

“I’m not staying here ‘til spring,” Berryer declared the moment the gypsy left.

“I’m sure he’s exaggerating,” Chloe replied diplomatically.

“And if not, we’re stuck here with ... shut up that damn noise!” he yelled at Abrielle, who had resumed playing. Actually she’d been playing the same notes over and over again for the last half an hour as if she were trying to recall a tune. It took long enough, but the ploy was finally eliciting the response she’d hoped for.

“Orfilia, please,” began Chloe.

“No, it’s fine, I can practice outside,” Abrielle declared as she threw on her cloak.

Chloe made to follow her lead, determined not to let her slip away again. Or perhaps she was simply anxious not to be left alone with Berryer, a sentiment Abrielle could more than understand. From personal experience, Abrielle knew that Chloe liked to create, what she considered a balanced team for each mission. In light of this fact, Berryer seemed an odd choice from the beginning, and with each of his outbursts, the reasons Chloe selected him became more elusive. Was he simply a convenient asset or were there other reasons? Perhaps this mission was less official than Chloe made it out to be. That would certainly account for the unusual choices in personnel. Maybe Berryer and Grenier were also in trouble with Imperial Intelligence, their presence not by choice.

“Oh, no. Someone is talking to me about leaving or I’m gonna start packing up right now,” Berryer affirmed. Chloe was obviously torn. She wanted to keep an eye on Abrielle but was anxious to avoid another scene for the neighbors.

“We’ll need more firewood anyway,” Abrielle stated as she ducked through the entry before any discussion could take place. Fortunately, no one followed. Still, she gathered firewood as she worked her way to Grenier’s tent. For the deception to work, she’d need some when she returned.

“You’re late,” Grenier observed when she arrived.

“Family matters,” she replied by way of explanation. His tent barely looked lived in or was he already packed for a hasty departure? Could he be expecting trouble soon?

“Quickly, tell me what you saw earlier.”

Abrielle described the number and arrangements of the tents, and began to provide details about the people she’d seen. Grenier stopped her.

“I’ve been observing them while they’ve been busy observing you. A group came in this morning on the far side of the encampment. They bore two prisoners and one body. Their arrival caused quite a stir; soon after they began to patrol the grounds with the wolves.”

“Prisoners? Locals?” she questioned.

“No,” was the blunt reply.

She was convinced there was more, but Abrielle was also certain Grenier wasn't ready to divulge his secrets regarding them. She switched subjects.

“I haven't seen or heard any wolves.”

“They appear well trained, but they have made an effort to keep them away from our area. Probably don't want one of them getting shot or questions raised.”

“Why didn't they use their wolves to keep us away initially?”

“I overheard an argument about that, too. There is an enclosure further down on the far side of the mountain. Apparently, the clan leader doesn't like to have them loose; something about a past incident involving an injury to a child. The man you saw leaving the tent, the one with the wolf at his side, also brought the prisoners in and was greatly annoyed by our presence. I have a feeling that had he been present when we arrived, they'd have used the wolves to chase us away. They still might.”

“You were right, they did suggest we leave.”

“You must prolong your stay?”

“Why should we?” Abrielle challenged, suddenly tired of his ambiguity. “I hung off the side of a cliff for you today, and I'm here at my own peril because I think you've got something important to tell me. Now, what's going on Grenier? I know it has something to do with those prisoners, what is it?”

His eyes departed from hers for only an instant.

“What do you know about the Wild Rose clan?”

Abrielle's lips parted in bewilderment. She'd never mentioned them to anyone in her party. How could Grenier know anything about them?

His face was a mask.

“Why?” The question seemed the safest option, though she was certain her delay had been telling. Grenier paused and checked outside for a moment before continuing. Did he hear something?

“The prisoners, you must talk to them,” he declared.

“How?”

“I've shown you the way. They rotate the guards, just watch for the wolves. Have you found an excuse to remain, yet?”

Abrielle shook her head. Grenier retrieved a water bladder and handed it to her.

“Don't drink from it, but make sure at least one of the others do. Hide it or destroy it after you've done so.”

Abrielle locked her eyes with his.

“Why are you helping me?”

His secrets remained guarded.

“You should get back,” was the only answer she received. He held the tent's flap open. “Make sure you're not observed by your companions, anyone else will just think you've been discussing leaving with your guide.”

“Can you spare some firewood? I'm supposed to be gathering some.”

He pointed to a stack nearby.

“Take it. I won't need it.” The flap descended without further preamble.

He wouldn't need it? By now nightfall, the snow pack, and the winds conspired to send the temperatures plummeting. Abrielle planned to sleep as close to the fire as possible tonight. How exactly did Grenier plan to avoid freezing to death? She hid the mysterious water bladder on her person, took what firewood she could carry, and began a circuitous route back to her own tent. She

hoped that Chloe and Berryer were settled down.

Questions raced through her mind. Why were Wild Rose clan members here in France? Ernest said they lived in Hungary. Were they here by accident or had Jack been captured and revealed her plans to infiltrate the Moon Shadows to them? She thought back to the gypsy who spoke to her in French the night Tara was taken. Could these Wild Rose prisoners actually be spies? Why hadn't Grenier simply slipped into the camp and talked to the prisoners already? He certainly possessed the skills to do so, yet he'd entrusted this task to her. Could all of this be part of a set up?

Before putting it away, she sniffed the contents of the water bladder and was again unable to ascertain what drinking the contents might do. Would she poison someone if she gave the contents to them? If she did, and she was being watched as Chloe warned, what happened to her then? Would Chloe have actually risked her life and her career on a mission unsanctioned by Imperial Intelligence to enable Abrielle a chance to clear her name and find her niece?

Why was Grenier so determined that she talk to the Wild Rose gypsy prisoners? What was his hidden agenda? Was he spying on everyone? Again Bellange's cryptic warnings about conspiracies flashed through her thoughts. Alone, uncertain of her own actions, surrounded by potential enemies, and confronted by a host of questions impossible for her to answer, while the lives of both she and her niece hung in the balance, his warning was never more vivid.

*

Nicabar rubbed the polished wood between his fingers. He'd put so much care into shaping it, dedicated his heart to the task, and she had loved it. She had loved him. His daughter had been such a sweet child. His fingers traced the solid form of the toy wagon he made for her so long ago. He'd used one of the fragments from the project to carve her a little wooden rose, which he attached to string and fashioned her a necklace.

In a state of abject despair when he retrieved her body from the river, he'd searched for it. He'd been frantic to find the necklace. It was a symbol of the special bond between him and his child. But it was lost forever, either during her descent or to the churning waters of the river. Just like his daughter. It was strange that the loss of such a trinket should still disturb him. But it did. He carefully replaced the cloth around the toy before he returned it to the chest and locked it securely within.

Perhaps the loss of the necklace still troubled him because trinkets and memories were all that were left of Jucika. Nicabar reflected on all the lonely years of pain and loss. All the miseries the war had unleashed. But if the Master was successful in his great purpose then such sacrifices would be rewarded. A new reality would be born, one which promised to banish his grief and to finally heal both him and Tasaria.

It was their inability to move beyond Jucika's loss at the hands of her cousin which troubled him now. His wife's hatred of her sister's family became more embittered over time. Nicabar would never forgive Baseria, but he could not bring himself to condemn her fully. She too had lost a sister that day, and Tasaria's actions towards her niece were shameful. Her relationship with her mother had been equally unbalanced, both craving her approval and guidance while rejecting them. Yet, Nicabar never doubted that somewhere, deep within her, his wife loved them both. But which of the conflicting emotions would she embrace in the end?

There was no longer a choice to be made regarding her mother. Pias' killing of Nasi left Tasaria as the lone Seer. Or she should have been. She'd never completed her studies. After Baseria healed Nasi, he'd tried to barter a peace, to enable the knowledge of the Seer to be passed on but those talks

had failed. There was too much resentment on both sides to make it feasible. It was impossible to comprehend all that was now lost with her death.

Time and time again, the Master asserted that the Seer would play a vital role in creating what must be, but now the true Seer was gone and the burden fell to Tasaria. Was she ready? Did she have the knowledge, skills, and natural abilities to ensure that providence was properly fulfilled? Or would all that they had fought and suffered for perish now that Nasi was dead? Nicabar rubbed a hand over his bald head. The future was coming too fast. He was losing control.

The problems were now coming more rapidly than he could calculate solutions. After years in hiding, members of the Wild Rose clan had located them, and there was no way of knowing if some had escaped to seek re-enforcement. Fear of an attack ran rampant through the encampment. His nephew still refused to say anything. It could cost the boy his life. Pias and Tasaria were particularly adamant that he talk and were prepared to use any means necessary to pry vital information from him. Nicabar, though sympathetic to both the plight of his people and Espen, had even larger problems to worry about than the discovery of the raiding party or the presence of his nephew.

A directive had arrived from the Master several days before Pias brought in his prisoners. It instructed him to locate Jal and somehow safely retrieve the infant daughter of Ernest Frankenstein from him. The message provided no insights into why Jal took the girl, but insisted that the matter be dealt with immediately.

Why did the Master continue to trouble himself with this Frankenstein? They'd secured the journals the Master sought by using him, but that should have been the end of it. How was he to make decisions without any information? It was maddening.

Communications with the base in the north often grew erratic during the winter months. That was not unusual, but other trends were beginning to alarm him. He hadn't seen the Master since before the raid on Jal's camp. He sent word of Nasi's death, but received no response. Before their attack, the Master repeatedly ordered that communication and even contact be carried out only in the direst emergency. The loss of the Seer would seem to qualify as it directly threatened their plans, but he took no apparent notice of it. Instead, he was suddenly concerned about the fate of some insignificant infant. And there was still more.

Nicabar could not recall the last time one of his people had returned from the fortress in the Arctic. What was going on up there? In the early days of establishing the outpost, there was a shared sense of purpose and free movement between the Moon Shadow encampment and the fortress. Nicabar had been there himself several times, but now he'd lost track of nearly a fourth of his clan. They were spread throughout Europe on missions, sailed ships into battle, or remained in the frozen wilds of the Arctic serving the Master's will. Moon Shadow losses in recent engagements in Hungary, Slovenia, and other raids were mounting rapidly. After the battle in Hungary, his men scattered and several parties still hadn't returned. Were they still eluding pursuers or could they have been captured or killed?

And now, with the threat of an imminent attack, he was supposed to again seek out the Wild Rose clan and involve his people in some cryptic rescue mission? Nicabar was short of men, material, and time. It could take months to locate where Jal had taken refuge, to say nothing of how he might secure Frankenstein's offspring if Jal was reluctant to bargain for her safe return. To even invite such a discussion meant he would be negotiating from a weakened position. Pias asserted that they could trade Espen for the child, but Nicabar knew better. Espen and Jal were of the same ilk. Each would rather sacrifice himself than endanger others. Jal would not bargain for his son. They might at least be able to get Espen to tell them where the Wild Rose clan was hiding and attack the camp directly,

however, that might produce unfortunate consequences. Why would Jal take the baby? Did it have something to do with the women they'd taken from the Wild Rose clan? Probably. Pias was trying to discover that now. He and Tasaria would join him as soon as she completed the mixture for her truth potion.

"Excuse me, Tasaria?"

The voice came from just outside the tent's entryway. Both Nicabar and his wife uttered a collective sigh. What could be wrong now?

"Enter," Tasaria said simply.

Hebba entered with a hasty bow of acknowledgement to them both. She was definitely agitated about something.

"Well?" Tasaria was anxious to return to her work.

"One of the Rom women came to see me about twenty minutes ago. Wanted to know if I had any medicine she could use."

"They haven't left?" Nicabar asked incredulously.

"No, sir. Well, that is to say, not all of them."

"Go on, Hebba," Tasaria instructed.

"Woman said her husband is too sick to travel, but their guide left sometime in the night."

"Incredible," Nicabar shook his head. As if he didn't have enough problems.

"How long has he been sick?" Tasaria's eyes narrowed.

"He seemed well enough all day yesterday but kept screaming about all sorts of things, even last night. My husband did as you asked and suggested they leave, then suddenly this morning, she shows up insisting he might be dying. I told them I'd ask around for medicine."

"Dying of what?" Nicabar questioned.

Hebba made a face.

"He is in a bad way. Probably best if one of you just comes and sees."

"How soon until you are ready, my wife?"

"I am ready now," Tasaria declared as she closed a pouch containing her mixture.

"Deal with the situation, Hebba, as best you can. Keep them outside of the encampment. We can't risk something spreading. We'll come see for ourselves after we've completed our talk with the prisoners," Nicabar commanded.

*

Nicabar and Tasaria entered the guarded prison tent eager to finally complete the interrogation. Decisions needed to be made and quickly. To their mutual surprise, Pias was not there, nor was one of the prisoners, but a generous trail of blood bore testament to his ultimate fate. Espen was obviously beaten badly and was barely conscious. A gasp escaped Tasaria at the sight of his beleaguered condition.

"Nicabar, there was no need for this," she bit, angrily shaking the pouch she carried. "How could you order it?"

Nicabar was silent. He hadn't ordered this, and such an act infuriated him.

"I'll find Pias," he declared, resolute in his purpose.

"No, stay," his wife commanded. "In his present condition, this will not take long. And I don't want Pias here when he speaks."

Nicabar nodded as she set the pouch alight. They vacated the tent for several minutes while the

smoke took effect, then returned after ordering the guards to send Pias to their tent immediately. Talaria knelt beside Espen who was shackled and bound to a tent pole. His head hung to one side; she leaned in close and began to speak.

At first the voice didn't touch him, he was too traumatized, but slowly he became aware of its existence. It was a voice he recognized, but the accent puzzled him. Who was speaking? It was a mixture of the east and the west.

"Etolie?" he asked weakly.

She must know that Kely was dead. Thank God she was safe. How could he begin to explain? It was his fault. She would hate him, forever.

"No," the voice said gently, "I need to know where Etolie is."

That's right. She'd been taken.

"I don't know," he cried, "We must find her."

"We will," the voice said reassuringly. "Is she with your father?"

"She was taken. I promised I would find her," he frantically explained.

"We must tell your father that she is not here. Help me to find him."

It was difficult to think.

"I don't know where he is," Espen confessed.

"He is not with his people?" the woman's voice inquired.

"No."

"Where then?" the other pressed.

"I don't know. He left."

There was a pause. Espen tried to raise his head, but the motion made the world spin. One eye seemed to be swollen shut. He could only make out two murky outlines hovering nearby. The air was thick with smoke.

"Why is he not with his people? The infant?"

Espen's head drooped again.

"What? There is no infant. We have to save them."

He heard a whisper.

"Why is your father not with his people?" The voice was more forceful this time. Espen tried to remember.

"He left to get her back."

"Etolie?"

"Yes. No. Not ..."

It was so hard to focus. Espen struggled to remain in the moment.

"The infant?" the other pressed.

"No. Baseria," that was it. "She was taken. He left to get Baseria."

The name breathed in the silence for a moment, and then he heard a frantic whispering. Was it angry? Scared? He couldn't focus. Who was talking to him?

"Etolie? Baseria?" he asked.

But there was only silence, and when he was again able to lift his head, the figures had fled.

*

They managed to retain their composure long enough to re-enter their own tent a short distance away.

“It can’t be true,” Nicabar muttered frantically as the flap closed behind him. He would never be as foolish as to get Baseria directly involved. The end result could only be something disastrous like this. In fact, he’d made a point, even with the Master that she was not to be taken with the others. There were simply too many negative variables regarding Jal’s reaction, and too many unknowns about the Master’s ultimate purpose concerning them.

His goal with the raid in Hungary was to secure Nasi and to bring her here to complete Tasaria’s training. The abduction of the women was to have served as a distraction while they secured and escaped with the Seer. But the Master needed them for another purpose as well and had taken at least two to the fortress in the Arctic. Could he have somehow taken more there without Nicabar knowing; and if so, for what intent? The Master never violated his trust like this. It was not his way. But it was Pias’. The thought suddenly burned like a flame within him. Tasaria paced feverishly too angry to speak.

The tent flap was barely opened when Nicabar lunged at the visitor and hurtled him to the ground. He kicked Pias viciously, who gasped for air as Nicabar repeated the offense.

“You murderous traitor! You’re no better than your wolves. What have you done?!”

Nicabar struck him again. Pias shielded his mid-section to a degree before he attempted to reply. His voice was hoarse.

“You wanted information. I did what I had to.”

“No, you did as you wanted to, as you always do!” Tasaria charged.

“One less enemy,” he defiantly asserted.

“Is that what you thought when you arranged to kidnap my niece and the others?” Nicabar asked before he struck him again. Pias tried to laugh, but it quickly deteriorated into a fit of coughing.

“How many were taken?”

“Five. The Master ordered it.”

“You lie,” Tasaria proclaimed glaring down at the prone figure beneath her.

“No,” he wheezed, “there is a step which must be taken if the Master’s promise is to be fulfilled. Your husband would have impeded it, so he entrusted the task to me.”

“You lie.” It was Nicabar’s turn to make the accusation.

“Do not ... blame me for your self-deception. The Master believes that one of them has been trained in the knowledge of the Seer.”

“I am the Seer!” Tasaria shouted. “There is no other now than me.”

A strange, disquieting smile crept across Pias’ face.

“Are you willing to sacrifice the future because of your pride?”

Tasaria stormed from the tent after issuing a final, vicious curse. For several minutes neither spoke nor moved, but gradually, Nicabar’s anger abated a degree. The leader of the Moon Shadow clan considered this new information. If it was true, it explained much. Pias slowly sat up.

“Do you want me to get her back?”

Nicabar turned his head slowly to face his disgraced lieutenant, who spit out a small amount of blood.

“Your niece. Do you want me to go to the fortress and retrieve her? By now the Master must know if she is the Seer or not.”

After a moment’s consideration, Nicabar turned away from him.

“We need you here. If the others should attack ...”

“They won’t,” Pias waved a hand dismissively. “At least not immediately. The other one said enough before the end to convince me.”

There was no reaction from Nicabar. Pias pressed the matter.

“The Wild Rose clan is in disarray. We should strike. End it, now.”

“No.”

“Nicabar ...”

“No,” the Moon Shadow leader said adamantly. “The Master sent me a pressing directive several days ago. Jal has taken Frankenstein’s daughter. He’s ordered we secure her. Until that is accomplished an attack is out of the question.”

It was Pias’ turn to think.

“Why should the Master care if Jal has ...?”

“I don’t know,” Nicabar cut him off harshly.

Pias paused before asking his next question.

“Then why would Jal take Frankenstein’s daughter?”

Nicabar smiled tightly. Now that he knew Baseria had been taken, the answer was relatively obvious.

“There are ancient traditions among my people, Pias, regarding honor, which Jal adheres to quite seriously.” His gaze drifted to the younger man, “If you were not an outsider, it would be easier to explain.”

Pias chose to allow the insult to stand unchallenged. There would be another time.

“Trade him his son for the infant then,” Pias advocated with strained patience.

“No,” Nicabar nodded to himself. “No, it must be Baseria. It is the only way.”

Pias shrugged.

“But what if she is a new Seer?”

“Then Tasaria is best qualified to deal with her,” Nicabar rejoined. “Besides,” he added hastily, “if the Master’s work has successfully progressed, she will be needed there anyway.”

Nicabar worked to suppress his fears. Of all his options, this seemed to present the least amount of risk, which wasn’t saying much. He should be the one to go, but current circumstances made that impossible. He was the clan’s leader, and despite his compatriot’s reassurances, the Moon Shadow camp remained vulnerable. If the gypsy Pias had killed was lying, then Jal could appear at any time. He could not abandon his people, nor could he consign them to the protection of another. Pias alone could not be trusted to return Baseria safely, but could Tasaria? What choices would the battle within her soul lead her to? Which emotion regarding Baseria was the stronger?

In their absence, he would have to continue to pursue other options to secure Frankenstein’s child. There must be another way, but for the moment, it eluded him. Pias broke into his thoughts.

“What of Espen?”

“He will remain here as our prisoner.”

“A fine plan, and if he should escape? Jal will bring whatever is left of his forces and annihilate this camp.”

Nicabar smirked.

“For the time being, we will use my wife’s skills to gain as much information from him as we can. If your mission is successful, he will be useful to us as a guide or emissary when we seek out Jal.”

“And if he has already killed Frankenstein’s child, we waste precious time and resources for nothing. There is too much at stake for this nonsense.”

“This,” Nicabar paused to emphasize the word, “is the Master’s command. Our faith demands that we obey it. After you leave, I will pursue arrangement for the trade with Jal. You’ll have to keep in close contact if this is to work.”

“A thing not easily done from the Arctic,” Pias observed.

The Moon Shadow leader nodded.

“Yes, but everything now depends upon it. When can you be ready to leave?”

Pias considered the question a moment.

“In two days, if you send a messenger ahead to my ship immediately. Your wife must be ready to depart.”

“I will speak with her,” Nicabar promised.

*

“Don’t touch me! I know one of you did this ...”

Berryer never finished his thought as another wave of the inexplicable illness again overtook him. His muscles locked in a spasm, and he clawed for the bucket. Abrielle handed it to him just in time. She turned away from her crime. She’d known whatever was in the water bladder would likely make anyone who drank it sick, but she hadn’t expected it to be so severe. In fact, at first, she found it rather amusing, after all Berryer’s posturing and abuse, to see him suffer a little. But now she worried that he might not leave this tent alive. What had she given him? And where had Grenier obtained it?

She’d managed to substitute her water bladder with his and stayed awake late into the night, feigning sleep, waiting for him to rouse and take his nightly drink. After she felt certain he again slept, she tossed the bladder into the fire, along with several logs. By now, all that remained of it was ash. Still with the onset of both dawn and Berryer’s violent illness, Chloe took the time to check the water bladders. Her earlier admonition of Abrielle seemed to indicate that a similar substance was most likely hidden in one. She’d either been verifying that the contents of her water bladder could be accounted for or making certain that they couldn’t be used against her; ultimately, she dumped the contents outside and burned the container. To make matters worse, Grenier had apparently vanished in the night. His sudden absence was ominous.

Berryer’s head flopped back down onto his bedroll. The stench from the bucket was overwhelming. Reluctantly, Abrielle grabbed it and made to dump its contents outside. She was leery of again setting foot outside should the man with the wolf reappear. He’d come from the woods an hour earlier when Chloe and Abrielle were outside. His eyes were piercing, delving into them, cruel. Only once or twice before could she recall being casually studied by eyes so malicious. His wolf did not approve of them either, and only its growls broke the hypnotic embrace of his gaze. She couldn’t be certain, her mind too preoccupied by the encounter to know for sure, but had she seen Chloe give the slightest nod towards the man? A nod of familiarity? Could he be one of her secret observers? Could he have been searching for the missing Grenier? His eyes paused for a time on Abrielle’s scarred right hand; had he been marking her for some purpose?

Despite her misgivings, the fresh air outside did revive her. Chloe was returning from her conversation with the abrasive woman from the Moon Shadow camp. A look of annoyance was etched upon her features.

“Vile woman,” she spit contemptuously.

“Is she their doctor?”

“More than that I’m sure; more importantly she also seems to be the only one who might help us. How is he?”

Abrielle lifted the now empty bucket and shrugged.

“About the same.”

They slipped back inside. Berryer was fast asleep.

“What did you tell her?” Abrielle asked quietly.

“That my poor sister’s husband would die without aid,” Chloe responded as she cast about for something.

“She didn’t want to examine him?”

“No, she was too suspicious of us to come inside alone, but she did promise to make some type of medicine to treat the symptoms I described. She was quite adamant that we remain here until she’s ready.”

“I guess that makes sense. Are they looking for Grenier?”

Chloe ignored the question as she located a small pouch.

“We’re going through firewood too quickly. I’ll gather some more before it gets dark. If this Tasaria should reappear while I’m gone, explain to her where I’ve gone and that I’ll be back soon.”

Abrielle nodded, Chloe paused in the entryway, the pouch in her hand.

“Orfilia, I needn’t tell you what must be done if they come for you and your husband?”

No, there was only one option if the gypsies acted on their suspicions. Whether she died by her own hand or died fighting them, she and Berryer, must surely die rather than be coerced into revealing their true identities.

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Abrielle wrapped the scarf more tightly around her face. Too much of her breath was still being made visible in the frosty night air. By now she was anxious for this to be over. She’d waited for hours, but Chloe hadn’t returned to their tent. Berryer seemed closer than ever to achieving his final reward, which meant that tonight might be her last opportunity to gain access to the prisoners.

Though she’d managed to return to the cliff side perch Grenier had shown her, she still didn’t have a real plan. Abrielle should have felt relieved that she’d made it even this far, but her success only deepened her doubts. It was too easy. With the mysterious Grenier, Chloe’s unseen observers, the now missing Chloe, and an armed encampment of gypsies, someone should have happened to stop her, but they hadn’t. Could anyone observing her leaving actually believe she was simply gathering firewood?

After resolving to go, she gathered a few supplies, mindful to limit herself to the basics: matches, a knife; she’d looked for a pistol but been unable to locate one. Naturally, Chloe hid them somewhere outside to prevent her reluctant charges from gaining any tactical advantage. She tied a measure of rope around her waist and affixed Tara’s blanket beneath it. Her attire was dark in color, heavy, but not so much that it restricted her movements. After careful consideration, she stowed Ailis’ flute beneath a rock near the tent as she left. Any flash of light off the metal might reveal her. It should be safe until her return, and she could now retrieve it without re-entering the tent. Any food or water would freeze outside, and she was unwilling to have any on her lest the sound of sloshing water or scent of food betray her to the wolves.

Abrielle’s fingers caressed the cold rock at the lip of the cliff as she tried to reassure herself. This was something she must do. In her mind, she’d already selected the route she could take to the prison tent. Now she would have to see if fate would permit it. Slowly she drew herself upward and began to cautiously survey the Moon Shadow encampment. To her great relief she saw no wolves stalking around the encampment. Even more encouraging, she did not see the dangerous man with the piercing gaze. However, to her surprise she saw no guards outside the tent, which was supposed to house the

Wild Rose prisoners. Few gypsies lingered outside. Most darted among tents, happy to remain inside on such a frigid night. But her instincts and experience made her wary. It was too easy, and she did not trust coincidence. Still, if she didn't try she'd probably never have another chance to speak to these men, and she might lose Tara forever.

Her muscles tensed at the thought. Her fears evaporated. Abrielle took a moment to breathe and was just about to raise herself up onto the frosty ground when she saw the smoke and dim light. Her body froze. The prison tent flap opened and a bald headed man and the intense woman who'd promised Chloe medicine emerged along with a thick haze of smoke. Both coughed as they drew in the cold night's air. Were they tending the prisoners, giving them medical attention? Could that explain the woman's delay in returning to give Chloe medicine? Even more importantly, could this somehow validate Chloe's own absence? Why was there so much smoke? She dimly overheard a remark between them about time before they unexpectedly walked away and disappeared into another tent nearby. Without further hesitation, she rose and began to delicately make her way towards the unguarded prison tent. She met no resistance and withdrew her blade only when she was two steps away from the tent's flaps. If another guard remained inside, he would have to be dealt with swiftly. As she drew back the flap, Abrielle suppressed the urge first to cough and then to scream.

Her foot hovered a moment over the object of her terror, but there was no reaction from it to her presence. Her heart raced as it sank. The tent was not unguarded. Through the haze she now perceived more of them strewn about inside, along with a single, semi-conscious prisoner tied to a pole in the center of the tent.

A mad determination surged through her as she willed her foot to gingerly complete the step over the sleeping wolf. The animal stirred minutely as the tent flaps closed behind her. Whatever happened now she was committed. The smoke stung her eyes and sapped her strength. Each measured step became increasingly difficult as her focus and will abated in the haze. What could this miasma be? She looked down at her feet. Whatever it was, the wolves must be drugged in some manner. It seemed the only rational explanation for their behavior. Her thick scarf must be protecting her to a degree but it was only a question of time before she too succumbed to the smoke's effects. Each step portended doom. The wolves shifted their bodies, ears twitched, soft whines escaped them, and one even bared its teeth briefly. Abrielle pressed on knowing it would take only one to bring about disaster.

When she finally reached him, she made a quick assessment of the man's status. He was badly beaten; his mind and energies seemed to slip in and out of focus as the smoke worked on his senses. Talking to him here was out of the question. Any utterance could awaken the powerful canines all about them. But could she get him out of here safely? And if so, what then? Her pulse thundered in her ears. Awkwardly, her fingers reached under her garments and began to loosen the rope about her waist. The process seemed to take an eternity. When would the others return? At last it was free, and she set the coiled mass over one of her shoulders as she retrieved the object beneath. Abrielle pressed Tara's blanket to the man's face and prayed it could filter the smoke's effects swiftly enough for him to regain his senses.

She heard the noise outside a few seconds before the tent flap was drawn open. Without thinking she hid the rope and blanket beneath her as she pressed herself immediately to the ground. A slumbering wolf lay mere inches from her face. The Wild Rose prisoner's body hid most of hers, but if someone entered, her attempt to pass herself as a wolf wouldn't last long.

As the figure in the door hovered in the entry, the wolf before her slowly opened one yellow eye. She stared into it, frozen in terror, certain it would strike. Her soul cried out, unwilling to embrace death, but she remained motionless. Endless seconds passed. Then, casually, the wolf's tongue

worked a measure of moisture back into its mouth as it lazily resumed its tranquil state. The shadow disappeared from the entry and the flap closed. Abrielle shook with fear, but she managed to gingerly raise herself back up.

The fresh air let in by the now-absent visitor and Abrielle's own efforts prior to their arrival seemed to have revived the prisoner to a degree. His lips parted to speak, but she pushed Tara's blanket roughly against his face and shook her head. She motioned for him to breathe deeply as she resumed the rope over her shoulder. The gloss in his eyes began to clear. As he regained lucidity, his manacles rattled, but she lacked the means to remove them. He'd just have to hold the chain joining them taut to silence them as best he could. She took her knife and deftly sliced through the ropes binding him to the pole.

Abrielle tied Tara's blanket to her midsection again then helped the gypsy to stand. They began their treacherous journey toward the entry. Twice wolves sat up. Apparently the fresh air had also revived them to a degree, but each time, they bedded back down without further menace.

Upon reaching outside, both she and the prisoner replenished their lungs with clean air before racing for the cliff's edge. She all but jumped back down to the small ledge. The gypsy followed at a less suicidal pace, shaking in the cold night's air. Again she indicated he be silent as she raised herself up and surveyed the camp.

Nothing, neither man nor beast, stirred. They'd done it. She settled back down and a quaking breath finally escaped. The man squeezed her forearm in gratitude. She nodded in relief then indicated the direction they must travel. She began to loosen the rope, but the gypsy touched her again and shook his head. He could make it without assistance. Ten agonizing minutes later they crawled back over the cliff's edge by the waterfall. There, they rested a moment.

What now? She hadn't gone intending to free anyone nor would she entertain his inevitable request to return and free his companion. She certainly couldn't remain with the others now, but could she risk returning to the tent for supplies? Time was essential. Frigid air teased her senses. No, they'd die in the mountains without food or water. But where could they go? The man asked her a question, but she couldn't understand him. He tried again in English.

"What now?"

She swallowed before answering the question echoed by her own thoughts moments earlier.

"I have to get supplies. Wait here."

He gripped her.

"I need a weapon."

"Find a rock," she replied sarcastically. She certainly wasn't going to arm this man. He, however, took the suggestion literally and quickly secured a formidable rock in one of his hands. It seemed desperate, but then again, after what he'd been through though, Abrielle couldn't blame him. Any defense was better than none. She nodded and began to make her way back toward her tent, oblivious at first, that he'd begun to shadow her. His iron manacles betrayed his presence to her.

"Go back," she whispered, angrily. What did he think he was doing?

He continued to follow her almost to within sight of her tent. She rounded on him furiously.

"Take one more step, and I'll kill you myself. You're not that valuable to me. No one must see us together or we'll both be killed, understand?"

"You're not that valuable to me either," he chided. "I want to know what's going on."

"There isn't time to explain," she blinked and shook her head, "And if you want to escape, you'll just have to trust me."

"You're not Moon Shadow?"

“No.”

“Or Rom?”

She drew down the heavy scarf, which largely obscured her face.

“No. Now shut up and wait here.”

He shifted, clearly at odds with himself. He didn't trust her and she didn't have to time convince him. But if he followed and was spotted, all of her efforts and hopes would be wasted and she would still lose Tara.

“Dammit,” she withdrew her knife. He raised the rock to bludgeon her but stopped mid-motion as she held the hilt towards him.

“We have to leave here. Take it and stop wasting time.”

The man hesitated only a moment before he dropped the rock and took the proffered weapon. Abrielle cut him off before he could say anything.

“At least cover me if anyone follows,” she admonished as she stalked away. Their short argument cost her valuable time. As soon as she could get information from this man, she was going her separate way.

As she approached the backside of the tent, she became aware of raised voices outside the entrance; one of which she recognized as Chloe's. Had the gypsy woman come to deliver the medicine she'd pledged only to discover the sick man's wife was missing? Where had Chloe been and what type of story might she be using to cover Abrielle's actions? Would her sudden reappearance help or hinder the unfolding situation?

A flicker of motion in the nearby woods caught her attention, but as she studied it, Abrielle could detect no further movement. Her nerves danced in the icy night air. She should leave. The voices in the front were becoming more intense, but she couldn't make out the words, which were obscured by the intervening tent. She began to back away. Perhaps she could at least locate Chloe's weapon's cache before departing. It must be around here someplace.

Suddenly a hand gripped her forearm. Stunned, she turned to find Berryer clasping her. Both his iron hold and sure stance offered no testimony to his recent, and by all appearances, near fatal illness. How was this possible?

“Here,” he bellowed into the night with a deep, steady cry. It was cut off almost immediately. Abrielle viciously throttled his windpipe, silencing him and knocking him panting to the ground.

But the damage was done. She looked up to see Chloe, the cruel-eyed gypsy, the Moon Shadow medicine woman, and several others staring back at her. The silence echoed between them. Then the unthinkable happened.

“She's a spy!” Chloe cried out, triumph etched upon her false sister's face.

Abrielle heard herself gasp. Berryer lunged for her leg and, she pivoted to avoid him, while striking him in the head. She heard a pistol ball whistle past her ear and pass through the spot where she'd stood a moment earlier. Smoke swirled from a spot in front of one of the gypsies while another now tracked her movements. A shot from the woods unexpectedly dropped him dead. Only chaos could follow.

The cruel-eyed gypsy whistled and several wolves raced from behind the tent toward her. Before she turned to flee she heard more shots being exchanged between the gypsies and the attacker from the woods, several wild shots also impacted off rocks buried in the snow near her.

The snow hindered her progress, but it also slowed her inhuman pursuers; however, the ultimate outcome was obvious. They would overtake her. Her only chance was to go back over the edge of the cliff. The prisoner she'd freed must have come to the same conclusion for he waited only long enough

to hurtle the blade at the lead wolf's hind leg before he too began to flee back to the cliff. Though the injury to the leader slowed him down, the other wolves never broke stride. Twice she nearly lost her footing, a move which would surely prove fatal, but she managed to keep moving.

They were beyond the pool now and nearing the waterfall rapidly. Abrielle's lips felt frozen to her teeth as the frigid air raked her lungs. There wouldn't be time to secure the rope to anything on the top of the cliff. How far was it to the bottom? Would the gypsies follow and simply pick them off from atop?

She could hear the wolves closing behind her, but she didn't dare turn to look. If she did, they would have her. The lone figure on the edge of the abyss before her suddenly turned, stooped, and held aloft a large rock. He apparently intended to use it to cover her when she reached the edge rather than save himself. The thunder of the waterfall now filled the air, and she could no longer hear the wolves. The next few seconds would bring either life or death. She slowed a degree as she reached him.

A flash from the woods across the wide mountain stream appeared seconds before something impacted directly into her back. She never heard the gunshot. She only felt its results, and for a moment, knew its tragic consequences.

The wolf must have been leaping up to finish her when the shot killed it. Its momentum, however, carried the body onward. The dead weight pushed her off her feet and into the gypsy. The rock he bore in her defense now sealed their mutual fate as he toppled backward.

For a moment they clutched frantically for each other in blind horror, but their fingertips never met. Her body touched only air as she sailed over the cliff's edge. The winds buffeted her as they fell towards the waterfall, framed by its towering wood sentinels. Impenetrable mist swirled below them. Then Abrielle's head struck an outstretched branch, and her senses tumbled into blackness.

[1] Rom/Romi/Romani – collective terms for primary group of Gypsies in Europe.



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