

VOEVOD WARRIOR PRINCE

PROLOGUE

It was a religious time, and like all other religious times, religion was the excuse for war but not the reason. Muslims and Christians fought against each other, invading each other's land, destroying each other's homes, causing utter devastation whenever they encountered their declared enemy.

The Muslim and Christian soldiers on both sides were hypnotised by their religious fervour and their religious leaders. Each side believed it was fighting the Devil's own warriors.

During this feral hostility there sprang up various warlords, usually rich men, who wanted to use their idle time either to become richer or to write themselves into the history books. One such rich man was Vlad Dracula, a young and vicious prince, whose brutality was renowned amongst his followers and his enemies, many of whom lacked the courage to face him.

The few who did regretted it.

This story begins over five hundred years ago, near the Romanian border. A battle had just been fought and a young Slovak soldier was wandering through the battlefield. With his raven hair and luminous, viridian eyes, he was quite a striking young man, not more than seventeen.

Behind him were the flickering lights of the campfires. There were fewer than there had been the night before, and beyond him lay the blood-soaked ground of the battlefield, where broken, battered, lifeless bodies stretched as far as his eye could see. In the near distance, the Danube glistened in the moonlight. It was the only peaceful view, untouched by the murderous events of the day.

The young soldier soon caught sight of a cart where two Wallachians were gathering up corpses for burial and looking for survivors. As he watched them, he saw one of the Wallachians try to remove a ring from a dead soldier's hand. The man seemed to be having some difficulty excising the ring. His compatriot handed him a shiv; the Wallachian then cut off the finger and took the ring.

The sight of this was not at all abhorrent to the Slovak; despite his youth, he was used to brutality like this. As far as he was concerned, the man was dead, no longer in need of trinkets—or fingers, for that matter. The young soldier started to look around, to see whether there might be anything he could salvage.

He quickly espied the body of a Boyar Knight. The Slovak approached the corpse slowly, not wanting to draw attention to himself or to the dead warrior. As he drew near, he was startled; not only were the Boyar Knight's eyes still open, he was looking straight up towards the young Slovak with an expression of terror. He almost seemed alive, with blood still gushing from an open wound on his neck. This man was dead, yet he hadn't been dead for long, and his death had come as a surprise to him. He was probably attacked from behind, unable to see the face of his killer before he died.

The Slovak's attention was quickly drawn from the Boyar's penetrating stare to

what he was wearing. An embroidered cloak of crimson velvet eclipsed the Knight's body. The Slovak looked at his own torn cloak and promptly decided to take the Boyar's garment for himself. As he untied the cloak and pulled it from the body, he uncovered the Knight's right hand, which still tightly clasped the jewelled hilt of a magnificent and imposing sword. It was the grandest thing the young soldier had ever seen and he felt compelled to take it.

He put on the cloak and strapped the sword to his body. Then he made his way back to the Slovak camp. When he arrived, he headed directly towards the first campfire he saw.

Three other Slovak soldiers were already sitting beside it. They were a strange mix and looked odd together. One was reading a book, which obscured his face. The second was a portly, rosy-cheeked individual who looked more like a farmer than a crusader; this man was chatting away to his two companions and being ignored by both. The third Slovak was sharpening his sword on a stone; he was a daunting and frightening sight. His arms, hands and face were covered in scars; he was missing an eye and a few front teeth. The mere sight of him would terrify the enemy, never mind having to face him on the battlefield.

The young Slovak stood and warmed his hands at the fire. The portly soldier, noticing him, stood and saluted to acknowledge the presence of a knight. The battle-scarred soldier simply grunted to acknowledge the young man, and the third did not even lift his eyes from his book.

At first, the young soldier was surprised by the salute, but then he remembered what he was wearing. The young Slovak was not afraid to explain his unintentional deception to his fellow countrymen. These men would find no fault with his conduct. They were not members of the privileged classes; in a similar situation, they would probably have done the same thing. The young man knew that only rich men would be repulsed by his actions. Men who had never wanted for anything, he had learned, found it easy to pass judgement on those who had.

The young Slovak sat and gestured to the other man to sit, also.

"That's quite a convincing disguise you have there," remarked the plump Slovak. "Did it fool you, Goran?"

Goran, still sharpening his sword, grunted again.

"That means yes. My name is Dmitri. This is Goran and Nicolae."

"Alexei," said the young soldier, and nodded to acknowledge the introduction.

"We were just talking about Vlad, our eminent leader," said Dmitri. With pride, he pointed to a figure standing with his back towards them, a hundred yards or so in front of the camp. "He has been standing there for three hours. I have seen him stand in that manner all night and then be able to fight all of the next day like the most courageous and strongest of soldiers. He never seems to rest," Dmitri said with a sense of awe, his admiration for the man clearly apparent.

"They say he is descended from Attila," remarked Alexei.

"He says he is descended from Attila? He is no Szelely," Nicolae muttered under his breath, not even bothering to lift his eyes from his book.

Dmitri ignored him and continued: "The Wallachians call him Dracula. It means great warrior."

Closing his book, Nicolae fully joined the conversation. "It is also the word they

use for the Devil,” he said.

“Forgive my friend,” Dmitri interrupted, worried for Nicolae, for to speak out against Vlad meant death by impalement.

Nicolae continued anyway, not caring who was listening. “There is no need to ask forgiveness of anyone for me! I will not sit here and listen to praise for any of us who fight for such ignoble reasons!” Nicolae sighed. “Ten years ago I was a farmer. I cared nothing for war. The village where I lived had arranged a hunting trip. We left the women and children behind to prepare for our return. But the Turks invaded as soon as we left. Every woman and child in the village was brutally slain. We could not even give them a decent burial; the bodies had been stacked up and burnt. Many of us were made ill by the stench. That day changed our lives forever. Some stayed behind and tried to rebuild their broken lives, but I could not. I couldn’t face life without my family—I left and joined the Crusades. When I started fighting, I was filled with hatred for the Turks, but since I joined this war I have seen many brutal acts, most of which were performed not by the enemy I have been fighting against but by the men I was fighting with.”

All four men sat in silence for a few moments and then Alexei turned to him: “If you are so disheartened, why are you still fighting?”

“What else do you suggest I do, go back to my family?” Nicolae retorted sarcastically. “This is the only thing I know how to do anymore. I joined this war to avenge my family, and every day I have become more like the men who killed them.” He lifted his book and started to read again.

Alexei interrupted Nicolae’s reading one final time: “Who taught you to read?”

“My wife.” With this said, Nicolae closed his book and walked off towards his tent. Goran also removed himself, leaving just Alexei and Dmitri beside the fire.

“My young friend, pay no attention to Nicolae. We have all seen many horrific things which we would have chosen not to see, had things been different. Let us discuss your situation, instead. If I were you, I would use your good fortune at finding that sword and cloak to your advantage. I would use this opportunity to go and talk to Vlad. For ordinary soldiers like us, this could be the chance of a lifetime, a chance to be close to greatness, to converse with our noble leader as an equal. This could be a story to tell your grandchildren.”

Alexei did not respond to Dmitri’s comments. He simply got up and left the Slovak camp in silence.

Alexei had always admired Vlad from afar. Indeed, everyone admired him. He was not more than ten years older than the young Slovak, but it seemed to Alexei that he had been hearing of Vlad’s exploits for as long as he could remember. Alexei was from a village in Transylvania. He could see the prince’s castle from where he lived. A year ago, he had left home and followed Vlad into his first battle. He remembered how his mother had been, the day he left. Tears trickled down her cheeks as she begged him not to go. His father had been killed in battle, and even Vlad himself had been captured and imprisoned, along with his brother. Alexei’s mother was convinced that she would lose her son, as she had lost her husband.

But Alexei had been determined to follow Vlad into war. He was mesmerised by Vlad and the tales of his adventures, how he had escaped from a Turkish prison and returned home to take back his kingdom from the Turks and to avenge the deaths of his father and younger brothers.

Alexei was not discouraged by what Nicolae had said. The young man had met a few men who talked like Nicolae, men who had once been farmers, who would have been happy to live out the rest of their lives with their families, had not tragedy struck. These men had become bitter and angry at the world. The only thing they could do was kill and weep for their lost lives.

The other soldiers he met were often just cold-blooded killers who would kill anything or anyone for the sheer pleasure they got from it. But this was war. Each soldier had a different reason for fighting, and all soldiers, no matter what their reason for killing, were needed to win a war.

Alexei had witnessed Vlad's treatment of the Turks who were captured alive. He did not envy them their fate. He always remembered something his father had told him: "To win a war, you have to be just as brutal as the enemy. To show mercy is to show weakness."

It was rumoured that Vlad had received firsthand experience of just how brutal the Turks could be when he and his brother were captured. The Turks' methods of torture had proven to be too much for his older brother—he had become a Muslim and an enemy.

There were also stories of Vlad's brutality towards his own men. One of the stories that Alexei heard most often was that of a Boyar Knight who complained about the screams of the Turks that Vlad had impaled. In response, Vlad impaled him on a higher stake than anyone else.

Alexei, however, chose to ignore these stories, or at least tried to rationalise them and think of them solely as acts of war. He had been willing to make excuses for Vlad in the past. He had said that the Boyar must have been a traitor and that had to have been the real reason for the impalement. He wanted, no, he needed, to believe in Vlad.

Alexei himself believed he was fighting for the greater good, and that the end justified the means. He wanted to know what sort of man Vlad truly was. He knew he was courageous...he knew he was strong. But were the stories really true? Was he a devil or a warrior? He had to know.

Alexei found himself walking towards Vlad.

When Alexei was just a few steps behind Vlad, he stopped to examine the figure who stood with his back to him. He had never been so close to Vlad before. This was how Alexei would remember him in the future, the picture that would come to mind when he remembered Vlad Dracula.

Vlad's long, dark, tousled hair and scarlet cloak billowed in the night time breeze. Vlad's hand clutched his sword, which was still in its sheath. He gripped the hilt firmly, at a slight incline away from his body, and his head was held high. He had an air of superiority about him, and he made an intimidating yet glorious sight.

This was a leader Alexei could be proud of. He moved in a little closer and attempted to gather the courage to speak to Vlad. But before he could, Vlad started to speak to him.

"I thought you were going to stand there all night. Have you gathered up the courage to speak to me now?"

Alexei was struck dumb. He did not know what to say.

"Or, have you just come to marvel at the sight of the great Prince Dracula?" Vlad turned around to face him.

Alexei could now see Vlad's face. His eyes were dark, almost black. His skin was darkened by the sun. His features were rugged, but not coarse. He looked like a god among mere mortals.

Alexei realised that this was not the sort of man with whom he could just simply talk, so he came straight to the point. "Why do you fight?" he blurted out.

"If you are anything, you are blunt," Vlad said with a slight smile. "Why do *you* fight, my young knight?"

Alexei felt compelled to answer, as if Vlad's every word was a command that he had to obey. "I fight because my father fought before me, and because I believe I am fighting for a good and noble cause. I believe the Muslims to be infidels and the Christians to be worthy of God's absolution."

Vlad smiled at him. "You have answered my question honestly, so I will pay you the same courtesy. My reasons are much the same as yours. Like my father before me, I am a member of the Order of the Dragon, a holy order in which each member has sworn to protect and uphold the beliefs of the Christian church." Vlad paused for a moment as if he heard something in the distance, and then added, "I would leave now, my young Slovak friend. A Boyar Knight is approaching and he may well wonder how you acquired that cloak and sword."

Alexei was startled by the remark. He removed the sword and cloak and ran to hide behind a nearby tree. From there, he watched and listened as a Boyar Knight approached.

The Knight began to speak to Vlad: "Who were you talking to?"

"Just a Slovak soldier who wanted to converse with his leader," replied Vlad.

The Boyar stood in silence for a moment and then continued, "Anyone could lead these peasants. I have found my brother's corpse, but his cloak and sword are missing."

Vlad did not answer him.

"Did you not hear me?" the Knight demanded. "My father's sword is missing. I demand that the thief be found and impaled. I demand justice!"

Alexei listened in terror. He was sure that he would be dead before the morning, impaled as an example to all looters.

Vlad said calmly, "Your brother came to me last night and told me that you had threatened him. He told me that you wanted your father's sword, which he had rightfully inherited. I told him that not even you would kill your own brother—not because you loved or even respected him, but because you lacked the courage to confront him. I was right. You did lack the courage to face him. Instead, you sneaked up behind him and slit his throat. You demand justice? Then you will receive it!"

Vlad unsheathed his sword and swung round, sword in hand. The traitor's disembodied head hit the ground before his body did. His eyes were blinking and his mouth open, as though still trying to gasp for air.

Shaken, Alexei left his hiding place and approached Vlad with the intention of giving back the cloak and sword.

"No, keep them," Vlad said. "You are more deserving than he ever was. Nobility is not something that is in the blood. It is in the soul."

The two Wallachians whom Alexei had seen earlier pushed their cart up to the body. One of them picked it up while the other knelt before Vlad and said, "A message has arrived from the Carpathians, my Lord."

“What is the message?” Vlad asked.

The Wallachian took a nervous breath, “Your wife has killed herself.”

Alexei shuddered, and a silence seemed to fall instantly upon the whole camp as they watched.

All of Vlad’s men, all of Vlad’s enemies watched in disbelief as the warrior? the Devil? swayed. His legs gave way beneath him. His hands clutched at his face, and he fell to the ground in anguish.