

THE WOLF OF DORIAN GRAY

PURGATORY OF THE WEREWOLF

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DEDICATION

My thanks go out to my beautiful wife Rachel, the love of my life, who supports me in everything that I do. I would also like to thank my parents Mike and Terri, Joe and Paula, and my children Nathan and Lena for their never-ending support and everything that they do.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	6
A FRESH START	9
THE CRIME SCENE	14
NEW ABILITIES	24
LADY HELENA	30
AN ESCAPE PLAN	39
THE FULL MOON	44
H.M.S. VICTORY	48
THE DEMETER	56
VAN HELSING	65
THE DEMON EYE	75
A SEA VOYAGE	84
THE HUNT	93
ROMANI SECRETS	100
A WINTER TRYST	113
HUMAN PREY	117
THE DUEL	121
WHISPERED CONVERSATIONS	130
THE FOG	135
THE DOCKS	148
COUNTRY ESTATE	155

THE SOUL	159
THE PICTURE	164
EPILOGUE	171
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	172



PROLOGUE

Bright light—beams of painful whiteness penetrated the comfortable darkness and forced Dorian to open his eyes. He was in a thickly wooded area, encircled by a dense wall of trees. He was lying on the mossy ground with his arms flung over the carcass of a half-consumed deer. The forest floor was littered with bones and the air was filled with the foul stench of rotting meat. His skin felt raw and tender. It was completely covered by dried blood and gore. He was utterly naked, like some ghoulish infant at the time of its birth. That was impossible. His last memories were of his gruesome wounds inflicted by the wolf, excruciating pain, and the unpleasant feeling of being eaten alive.

Yet here he was, alive—apparently in the creature's lair. Taking stock of his body, he found he was amazingly uninjured. His hands explored the areas where massive gashes had exposed organs and torn his flesh, but found them all curiously sound and smooth to the touch. Had it all been some terrible dream? Then why was he bloody and in the forest? Whatever had happened, Dorian needed to be away from this place before the lycanthrope returned. Like a newborn fawn on unfamiliar and ungainly legs, he rose and moved

falteringly away from the rotting pile of venison. As his legs began to strengthen he stumbled across a small stream and used the water to wash away some of the blood staining his skin. He felt like a common beast as he stooped to slurp up a drink from the muddy water. With his mind somewhat steadied, he focused again on fleeing from the center of the forest in the hope of reaching some safe place.

He ran on, naked skin oblivious to the cuts and scrapes on his feet and arms as he traversed the landscape. He tried following small game trails to make his journey easier. It felt like he ran for hours, dodging amongst the trees. Unbidden, his path led directly to the one location he knew to be both close to the forest and currently uninhabited—Sage's country workshop. With no living relatives, it was unlikely that her recent disappearance would so quickly result in the sale of the property. Dorian approached the estate cautiously. He waited for a time to watch for any signs of life, before dashing to the back door and forcing his way in. The old wooden door seemed to break at the hinges immediately. They must have rotted thin with age.

The hearth was cold and everything remained covered and put away. The house was just as Sage had left it. He began rummaging through the corner closet. It was good fortune that he found a gentleman's coat that some patron or acquaintance must have forgotten there. Covering his nude and crimson form, he strode into the kitchen and began rummaging through the cabinets. There was an ample selection of cheeses stored in wax, dried fruits, pickled vegetables, salted meat, and even

some canned fare. However, none of it appealed. Dorian found that despite his desperate run through the forest, he was still quite full—though from what meal, he had no idea.

He settled on pumping several buckets of water and then scouring his skin clean in Sage's antique, copper tub. He exited the bath and tried not to look at the red-tinted water. With his skin returned to a healthy pink color, Dorian felt once more like himself. And yet, strangely not himself. He was changed and felt like an entirely new version of Dorian Gray. More complete perhaps. His mind was swimming with regret, shame, and fear—but also something else. Maybe, there was an inkling of hope there. He felt now that he had the strength to begin a new life. He would gather some meager resources and leave all the wealth and debauchery of his previous life behind him. Perhaps a grand adventure to places unknown in the world, or an excursion to India or the Americas. Any place that took him far away from that demon. It still haunted his vision every time he closed his eyes.



A FRESH START

Dorian awoke to the familiar whistles and clicks of a male starling singing outside the window to attract a mate. Mimicking the call of other birds as they flew from tree to tree, they competed desperately for the attentions of the more reserved females. He sighed and grinned at the thought of his first clumsy attempt to court the fairer sex so many years ago. He had been so innocent then, so naïve. It had been bliss. Then he had turned into a great horned owl, preying on the unknowing birds. He shook his blonde head and cleared the thought from his mind.

He felt uncharacteristically well rested after the night spent in Sage's musty, yet comfortable mahogany four-poster bed. The rusty springs were well worn but sagged in all the right places. Several layers of feather mattresses seemed to envelop his body with an inviting embrace. The goose down pillows were old and faded, but the feathers inside were still soft and smooth. In a bed like that it was easy to pretend that the events of the past week were simply some sort of nightmare. As the morning sun rose, the memory seemed to evaporate to one small corner of his mind like dew on the grass. He stretched his limbs and simply enjoyed the quiet solemnity found in the small country house.

His days there had become an escape from his former life. Instead of fighting his way through the crowded city, he spent his mornings marveling at the pure beauty of the green countryside. His blue-grey eyes took in the babbling creek that crisscrossed the property giving life to large oak trees, pale beech trees, and bone-white ash trees. Each sported a colorful array of leaves that slowly tumbled to the ground as the breeze shook them loose before they set out on a different adventure. Some thin, yellow leaves floated along the air for a time before landing in a new resting place. Thick red leaves found their way to the running water of the creek and were sent out to sea by the current. The tranquility of this place had given Dorian a restful peace that he had not experienced in far too long.

Dorian spent his afternoons were spent chopping firewood with the old steel maul he had found sunken into an oak stump. Once he had sharpened the edges, the ash logs split beneath his swing like butter. The repetition was cathartic and he continued for several hours. He felt like each block of wood was a terrible deed from his former life. With each downswing he smashed the memory into a thousand pieces. He cast his shirt aside, his muscles strained with each rhythmic blow until the hot rays of the sun pulled a sheen of sweat from his skin. In the evenings, he brewed a pot of black tea which he made using an antique Hester Bateman teapot. He found it hanging forlornly above the stove, tarnished and dented but it made the finest pot of tea Dorian had ever tasted.

Dorian wished he could stay in this simple life forever. He closed his eyes with a sigh of contentment. With a flash, there appeared a snarling face and hideous form of the monster. Its bloodshot eyes knew where he was hiding and the long claws extended towards him, dripping with blood. Dorian's eyes shot open. He had lingered here for too long. He needed to formulate a plan and escape before that beast found him again. He would wait to leave until nightfall. Then he would gather some resources and leave London immediately, before anyone discovered he was still alive. Dorian needed to somehow sneak into his own mansion. There he could gather any small valuables that had not already been spirited away by the servants upon hearing of his death. But the most important thing was the painting. That wretched painting that had been the source of all his pain and misery. Yet still it held his secret. To leave it behind and unprotected would be unthinkable.

Despite dear, departed Sage's attempts to explain it to him, it was still beyond his understanding how that painting had linked his soul to the wolf. She had started the process by dabbling in Romani magic and the spells of making to increase the realism of her painting. She told Dorian she had foolishly mixed his and the wolf's blood with her brushes and applied them to the painting. According to her, the biggest mistake had been combining these two actions with the third Romani art of naming. Sage had also named the wolf *little Dorian Grey* and put all of herself into bringing the canvas to life. She had succeeded and it had cost Sage her life. That very wolf had begun to change. It grew more gruesome and

violent as if the living embodiment of Dorian's many sins. In return, he had gained eternal youth and Dorian was beginning to suspect other strange abilities as well. But he had felt empty inside and had squandered his life in the pursuit of endless pleasure and twisted deeds.

Perhaps his soul had been taken from him. How else could he have committed all those terrible acts? But that was all behind him now. Before he had awakened in the forest, he had been the real beast. Whether it was a fevered dream or some trick of the imagination, Dorian could vividly remember the wolf devouring him alive. He should be dead—he just wasn't. It was as if he had been reborn with a second chance. He could feel the weight of his conscience and the fullness of his soul within his body again. He was a demon no longer.

There was still a very real demon out there somewhere. The sun had finally faded in the sky, casting a reddish light that played off the clouds and the dust of the fields. He slid back his chair and picked up the threadbare coat that he had found forgotten among Sage's other possessions. He walked through to the art studio where he and Sage had spent so many days in innocence and laughter. He remembered with a smile the image of Sage at her easel as he played with the small wolf cub. Dorian and Sage had been best friends once and could have been more had he not been so selfish and in love with material possessions. Sage had loved Dorian completely, maybe even more than her art. His eyes felt moist and blurry as he looked at the empty easel still there in the corner. She would never paint again.

“I’m sorry Sage. Please forgive me.”

Dorian turned and strode from the room. He locked and closed the door tightly behind him. He knew he could never return here again. Taking one more look around in the fading light, Dorian walked slowly to the wood pile and lifted the heavy handle of the steel maul once more. His thoughts went to the werewolf that prowled the night and his hands tucked the weapon into his coat.



THE CRIME SCENE

There were deep slashes in the wood floor that followed no discernable pattern. They were long and numerous, as if made by a deranged lunatic stabbing at the defenseless floor repeatedly. Splintered shards of glass and twisted metal littered the ground. The scene gave voice to the violent struggle that had taken place here. Interesting, there was far too little blood to suggest that the victim had met his demise here as *The Telegraph* and the local Constables had reported.

Detective Inspector Gerald Clarke removed his black-wool felt bowler and ran his sweaty palm over the rapidly thinning hair in the center of his head. He was a short and portly fellow, with long wispy sideburns. He assured his wife he did not grow them out to compensate for his diminishing hairline. No, the additional hair on the sides of his face merely added some warmth during the cold nights he spent in the service of Scotland Yard.

He was at a complete loss as to how Mr. Gray's assailant had entered or exited the second story room. The interviews with the servants all told the same story of an eccentric gentleman who regularly locked himself away alone at night. The five-centimeter thick steel bars on the door stood undiminished in a testament to their strength. Several constables had reported that the room

was discovered soundly locked and empty. The Valet had been found but swore that only Mr. Gray had the key that unlocked the bars to room—and he had vanished without a trace. A locksmith had been summoned but so far had been frustrated by the stalwart and expensive mechanism forestalling their entry. This had prevented him from making a more thorough investigation of the scene and limited him to observations that could be made from outside of the room.

With that entrance eliminated, the assailant could only have entered through the large window overlooking the gardens below. The glass was shattered and the metal frame bent and twisted outwards as if from an explosion. The lack of any burn marks made that theory unlikely. So what could have caused that level of damage to the window? He had already examined the soil below the window and the tile of the roof above. Regrettably, the steady rain that had begun falling two days before his arrival had mired any clear signs that might have been found there.

The only other items of note that could be observed in the room were a single overturned chair, a faded looking table, and a torn screen on the floor. That and of course the presumed murder weapon. It was a silver Garland knife and it was covered in dried blood. The small blade appeared to have an engraved handle and would be the sort of instrument that a gentleman would use for opening his letters.

An audible click sounded and a smile came over the locksmith's face. "Ah, that's got it. There you are,

Inspector. A fine piece of workmanship this was but no match for a determined mind.”

“Nor is any problem. Thank you for your service, my good man. One of the constables downstairs will have your fee for you. You have my personal thanks as well as that of Scotland Yard. Constable Mcdonaugh, please come in here immediately.”

The eager young constable bounded up the steps from his assigned post with wide eyes, thirsty to take in the details of the mysterious crime scene. He was a sturdy lad, well-proportioned and just under two meters tall. His constable uniform was clean and neatly pressed. His face held a strong jaw with a precise beard and mustache that contained a hint of reddish tint. He carried himself well, but it was the lack of confidence in his voice that identified him as newly trained by the Metropolitan Police.

“Yes sir, Inspector. What is your pleasure, sir?”

“Constable, I want you to set a tight perimeter with the other men below. The door is finally unlocked and I want no one coming in or out until my analysis is complete. Conduct a rotating patrol of the entire grounds with a sweep every quarter hour.”

The man saluted and allowed his eyes to stray from the inspector’s face to the room behind. “Right away. Erm, are you certain you won’t need my assistance with the crime scene?”

The notoriety of Mr. Gray coupled with the baffling circumstances of his disappearance had naturally aroused the curiosity of all of London. The police force was no exception. Nonetheless, the green constable

could not be allowed to distract Inspector Clarke from the task at hand.

“That won’t be necessary Constable. Now see to your duty.”

The man’s face fell visibly before being quickly replaced by the blank stare that only a previously enlisted man could master. “Yes, sir.” He turned smartly on his heel and hastily retreated down the stairs to establish a perimeter. It was best to keep the constables busy with patrolling rather than standing around. A man felt more useful when put to action.

Now alone, Inspector Clarke slowly slid open the gate and entered the room. Upon closer scrutiny, he found that his earlier observations still held weight. There were precious few new details to discover after examining the floor and the overturned furniture. The jeweled knife handle was scratched and bloodied but offered little more. He moved over to the purple screen lying on the floor. It was made of an expensive-looking fabric. It was thick and ornate, if not faded from age. This was the kind of material that might be used to cover a statue or work of art in a gallery. He raised his eyes to the wall. It had been hidden from view when he was outside of the room. As he saw the painting hanging there on the wall, he gasped in surprise.

There on the wall, hung the most marvelous painting that Inspector Clarke had ever seen. The colors were alive with life, a jubilant expression of passion and joy. The detail and brushwork were clearly the work of a master. He was no art enthusiast, but even his eyes could

appreciate the skill displayed in the creation of this portrait.

Given the handsome features, muscular build, and disarming smile of the man featured in the painting, he could surmise that this was the likeness of the victim and the owner of this home. Mr. Gray was renowned for his good looks and infamous to the women of London. A painting of this quality would certainly have been very expensive to commission. That could mean that the victim's wealth had not been exaggerated and certainly provided a motive for either kidnapping or murder.

He made a few notes regarding the appearance and stature of Mr. Gray, before reluctantly averting his gaze and once more considering the crime scene. He scanned the writing he had jotted down in the vellum and cloth bound notebook that never left his side. Suddenly, something caught his eye near the window. He moved over for a closer examination. There between the jagged glass and bent metal appeared to be a small clump of dark gray hair. The hair was matted and thick. He leaned in closer.

"Ugh, and foul smelling."

Inspector Clarke carefully removed an embroidered white handkerchief from his pocket and brought it to his nose and mouth. The cluster of hair smelled of death and decay. It could have originated from a man, perhaps hair that continued to grow on a corpse even after death.

Inspector Clarke had found it helpful to assist various doctors as they examined corpses during the course of an inquest. He had drawn several detailed

drawings of the human anatomy in his notebook while assisting in multiple dissections. The deceased human body could give so many clues about the last few moments of life. He found the process of *rigor mortis* fascinating. As he grew more experienced in murder cases, he discovered he could roughly estimate how long ago death had occurred depending on the state of contraction of the muscles and level of decomposition of the body. His train of thought was interrupted by a knock at the entryway.

Constable McDonough stepped into the room. "The perimeter has been set, sir. And there is a Lord Crawley here to see you."

Inspector Clarke frowned with annoyance. "I thought I said no visitors?"

The constable paused for a moment, unsure if he had made the wrong decision. "He says he knows the victim and has come on a matter of some importance."

Inspector Clarke sighed. It was clear the constable had meant to do the right thing. "Very well, send him in."

The constable dipped his head quickly and exited the room. A moment later, a tall man with short black hair and a thin mustache entered. He would have been described as handsome by some, in a dark and unconventional way. He wore a finely cut jacket and trousers that had seen some wear. They had once been expensive clothing but now were on the verge of becoming threadbare. It seemed that Lord Crawley had fallen on hard times.

The man smiled and gave a slight nod. "Ah, you must be Detective Inspector Clarke."

“At your service. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Crawley. I understand the victim was known to you?”

“Yes, Mr. Gray and I were once very close and had a number of business dealings together.”

“Once?”

“That was some time ago and I have since had some rather bad luck that has kept me preoccupied. However, we did occasionally run into one another at certain establishments.”

“What sort of establishments?”

“Err, I don’t see how that is relevant.”

“All details are relevant, Lord Crawley.”

“If you must know, we both shared an affinity for a particular imported whiskey that can only be found in certain exclusive clubs.”

“I see. Tell me, my Lord, did you run into Mr. Gray on the night he was attacked?”

“As a matter of fact, I did. But I remained at the club while Mr. Gray returned home around midnight, as was his custom. He was quite peculiar about not being long away from home.”

“There are witnesses who can corroborate this?”

“Yes of course.”

Inspector Clarke made a notation in his book. “Are you aware of anyone who might have wished Mr. Gray harm?”

Lord Crawley paused for a moment as if considering his reply. “A man of his notoriety and wealth naturally makes enemies. There have also been rumors of his involvement with several married women.”

“Yes, I have heard a great deal about such rumors. May I ask what is the matter of importance that you have come about?”

“Well, naturally I was quite concerned to hear of Mr. Gray’s fate and wanted to offer my assistance in any way possible.”

“That’s quite considerate of you.”

“Yes. I was wondering if Mr. Gray left a will of any kind behind or perhaps an accounting of debts which he owed?”

“Ah, now I understand the nature of your concern. But no, nothing of that sort has been discovered just yet.”

“I fear you have misjudged me, Inspector. I am sure those documents will become known in time. It is a small matter. Certainly, full effort must be made to bringing his killer to justice.”

“Rest assured that is my singular purpose. However, I am not fully convinced that he was murdered.”

“What do you mean? The man has disappeared without a trace leaving behind a bloody knife in a locked room. The papers have been going on about it for some time now.”

“I wouldn’t put so much stock in everything you read. The papers spend far too much time on sensationalism and very little on fact or science.”

Lord Crawley took a few steps forward and paused. “If I may?”

Inspector Clarke inclined his head as he intently observed the other man’s movements.

Lord Crawley carefully looked around. He made sure to avoid contact with all items in the room. He simply peered at everything around him as though creating a sketch in his head of the scene. His gaze finally came to rest on the portrait that hung on the back wall.

“So, this is the painting he so loved. I can see the beauty in it and why it was his most valued possession.”

The Inspector moved closer. “Is there some significance to this painting?”

Lord Crawley removed a letter from his coat. “That is why I have come, Inspector. I have a letter here from one of Mr. Gray’s closest friends, the Lady Helena Rivera, formerly Lady Helena Wotton.”

“Lady Helena? That name seems familiar to me.”

“Yes, she has been writing to you for days. She would have come herself, but the weather has weakened her constitution somewhat and she asked that I come in her place.”

“Ah, now I remember. Lady Helena requested that any paintings found in the locked room be given to her care for safe keeping?”

“That is correct.”

“Well, tell Lady Helena that she is mad if she thinks I will release evidence to her during an active inquest.”

“How is a painting evidence? The portrait is however, the greatest work of the artist Sage Holdsworth. She was also close friends with Lady Helena. The two were business partners and as the only surviving partner, ownership of the painting now reverts to her. She demands her property be returned at once.

She intends to exhibit the work in a gallery as a tribute to both of her deceased friends.”

“Once the inquest is concluded the legality of these claims can be proven and the painting will be released to the proper owner.”

“She thought you might say that.” Lord Crawley reached again into his coat and produced a second letter.

“What is this?”

“A letter from Chief Inspector Williamson requesting that you comply with her demand.”

“Let me guess. Lady Helena is also friends with the Chief Inspector?”

“Undoubtedly. She has far reaching connections to be sure.”

Inspector Clarke took the letter and opened it. He carefully read the message and scrutinized the signature and seal closely. “Very well, you may remove the painting. But I caution Lady Helena that this matter will be raised again. I may need to examine it further and interview her myself.”

“As you say, Inspector. We are happy to cooperate.”

It was only about an hour after Lord Crawley had wrapped up the painting and taken it away, when Inspector Clarke heard yelling outside, punctuated by gunfire.



NEW ABILITIES

Dorian had managed to make it undetected to his manor in Woodford. He had run most of the night, stopping only when he heard someone approaching. Each time he was relieved that it was only some passerby and not the monster he feared would be waiting for him in the empty places of the night.

Now he was faced with a dilemma. The grounds of the large country house were crawling with constables. He was crouched behind a large hornbeam bush near the southern gardens. From this vantage point he could count eight...make that nine, uniformed men patrolling the area. A large wall surrounded the east and west sides, leaving only two points of entry. He had already dismissed the main entrance, observing the lights and an additional set of men posted at the front door.

It was flattering to see so much of the police force turned out for his murder. It was, however, terribly inconvenient when it came to breaking in to his own home.

Dorian had expected to need a rest from his desperate dash through the night. Instead, he found himself breathing regularly and with energy to spare. That was strange. He couldn't think about that now, he

needed to focus on timing the movements of the patrol. He could see the men moved in groups of two in a rotating clockwise pattern. By counting his heartbeats, he guessed that they passed by his position every two minutes. That should give him enough time to make it across the gardens undetected. His goal was the white trellis that supported the vines climbing the stone walls of the main house. With luck, the thin wood should support his weight as he climbed to the second story.

A pair of constables walked by. One of them was solidly built and nearly two meters tall. The other was shorter and had a much less intimidating figure. He sunk lower and smiled when they did not see him. As they rounded the corner and vanished from sight, Dorian sprang into action.

Running hard, he sprinted across the soft ground. He covered the distance faster than he had imagined and surprised himself with the height of his jump. As he leaped up onto the trellis he grasped wildly for a handhold. The trellis shuddered as he crashed into it. For a moment, he thought it would separate from the stone wall. But the clinging climbers of the plant held fast to the porous stone beneath and it supported his weight. With a breath of relief, Dorian began his ascent towards the broken window above.

Once he reached the top, he began pulling himself up and into the room. Fortunately, he paused long enough to look inside and spotted a man in the room. This was a problem. How was he supposed to get the painting now? The painting! It wasn't there. The wall where it had hung now stood barren. How could this be?

If the painting wasn't here, then there was no telling where it was. How would he ever find it now?

The trellis shifted and his hand slipped. It was all Dorian could do to catch himself and hold on. He clung there for a few moments, hoping the man inside hadn't been alerted to his presence. How many heartbeats had passed since he left the cover of the bushes? Eighty or one hundred? He was running out of time. He began climbing down as fast as he could and jumped the remaining three meters to the ground. He had just risen to his feet when a voice called out from the edge of the garden.

"Halt! You there, stand and identify yourself."

Dorian took one look at the approaching constables and then turned and ran in the opposite direction.

"Halt I say! Mcdonaugh, Stoker, there's an intruder heading your way."

Dorian easily outpaced his pursuers but the shorter constable that he had seen earlier was planted firmly in his way. Dorian charged him and dropped his shoulder into the man's chest. He skidded to a stop as the constable was flung back nearly two meters and crashed to the ground. There the man stayed without moving. That was when the larger constable grabbed him from behind with powerful arms.

Without thinking, Dorian lashed out with his elbow and struck the man in the face as he twisted in his grasp. The constable was momentarily stunned by the blow, allowing Dorian to wrench open the strong arms. The constable recovered and grabbed Dorian's forearm while throwing a quick jab with his right hand.

Time seemed to slow as the meaty fist approached his eyes. Before he knew what was happening, Dorian ducked under the punch and struck the constable in the stomach.

“Oof.” The man staggered back a few steps and doubled over in pain. His face was red and it looked like the wind had been knocked out of him but he wasn’t finished yet.

The constable rushed forward and spread his arms and shoulders wide in an attempt to grapple. Dorian responded in kind and grasped the man’s hands in his own, pushing him backward. Despite his smaller size, Dorian could feel the constable’s muscles giving out as they strained to contain him. He slowly bent the larger arms out and downward. He was winning. His opponent slowly sunk lower, fighting back for every inch. Then Dorian paused to look over the man’s shoulder. The other constables had nearly reached them. Of course, this man knew if he could hold him long enough, his fellows would end the contest with sheer numbers.

With a crack, he smashed his forehead into the face of the constable. The man’s nose gave way and his grip immediately loosened. Dorian took his opportunity to untangle himself and then ran towards the tall firethorn hedges growing on the edge of the estate. He crashed through the shrubbery bristling with thorns just as one of the other constables opened fire with a revolver.

“Mcdonaugh are you okay? I’ve never seen any man outmatch you before.”

Constable Mcdonaugh spit blood and put his hands to nose, which was rapidly turning blackish-purple. "I think so, Cunningham. Blazes he was strong."

"Damnation, he'd have to be." Constable Cunningham bent to check on the unconscious man on the ground. Satisfied he was breathing regularly, he turned to the others. "Mcdonaugh was a champion brawler in Her Majesty's Royal Sappers."

"Eeh 'roke iy 'ose," Mcdonaugh struggled to speak with blood pouring from his face.

"My word, he broke your nose."

Safely away from the sounds of pursuit, Dorian retrieved the steel maul he had stashed nearby in a pile of leaves. As he stood from bending to recover it, he saw with a shock that his shirt and hands were covered in blood. His blood. Dorian crashed to the ground. That was it. He was done. He had been shot and would die alone in the night.

He ripped open his shirt and put his hands to the wound, trying desperately to staunch the flow of blood. Except there was no wound. Nor any pain. His chest was bloody but whole. There weren't even any scratches from the long thorns of the firethorn hedge. There was no gaping hole left by a bullet. That was impossible. Then his memory struck home to the last time he had been shot.

It had been a duel between gentlemen over his involvement with the man's daughter. He remembered the feeling of his shoulder being torn open by the lead ball. Even more terrible, was the pain of the soft ball flattening and exploding out his back leaving a gaping,

bloody wound. He had passed out and thought it all some terrible dream. But he had miraculously healed that time as well. To have the same thing happen twice was undeniable. What had given him the endurance to travel such a far distance that night and still fight off the constables? That larger one should have easily bested him. He needed help. But who could he trust to assist him in finding the painting and making sense of these strange manifestations?



LADY HELENA

Lord Crawley entered the mansion of Lady Helena by the back gate. The metal thatch-work barring the passage was almost entirely obscured by a thick grape vine. This entryway to her property was known to only a select few. It was used to conduct secretive business or for deliveries that needed to go unnoticed, such as with the painting that Lord Crawley held under his arm. He had carefully covered it with a thick canvas, which had been oiled to protect against the damp air.

He fumbled with the overgrown vegetation for a few moments before uncovering the latch. After glancing around him, Lord Crawley produced a key and turned the lock. The heavy gate swung open on well-greased hinges. He moved inside the dark tunnel and closed the iron gate carefully behind him. A few seconds later, a torch flared to life in his hand and he proceeded down the narrow stonework path.

He traveled for nearly thirty meters before coming to a heavy kingwood door. Once there, he placed his torch in a waiting sconce and knocked loudly using the metal knocker. He re-adjusted his grip on the canvas and was surprised at how quickly the peephole slid open in response to his knock.

A set of beady eyes scrutinized him for a few heartbeats before the bolt slid across and the entryway was opened. The pale light from behind illuminated the grizzled outline of Lady Helena's gardener, Lucious MacIllian. In the few months he had worked for her, Lord Crawley had never once seen Lucious tend to the garden or any other plants for that matter. He was convinced the foul-tempered servant took care of much more unpleasant tasks for his employer. The role of gardener was merely a contrivance to explain his presence. The man spoke in a grinding tone with a heavy Scottish accent. "Come along, yer Lordship. Must'nt keeps th' Mistress awaitin'."

Lucious turned his face down in the sour look that was most often found there. Somewhere between a frown and a sneer, the expression barely hid the man's contempt behind a thin veil of servile submissiveness. It was an ugly face, pockmarked and weathered from age and hard labor. Long sideburns concealed a set of scars, and the face ended in a long hooking nose. It was bent in the middle, likely from a break that had healed poorly. The face sat upon a wiry frame that still had some strength, despite its age. The man wore the common clothes of a laborer with worn brown boots that had a military cut to them. His balding head was obscured by a dark-wool Scottish cap, tilted slightly to the side.

Lord Crawley had learned not to be baited by this cur, so he simply smiled and pretended not to notice the disrespect he had been shown. "Lead the way. My Lady will be most pleased to see I have returned victorious."

Lucious harshly shut the weighty door and then hurried down the stone hallway and up a flight of red brick steps. He didn't bother to pause and see whether the other man followed or not.

Lord Crawley cursed under his breath and followed the man up the steps and into the main house. How rude that he not offer to unburden him from his package. Once up the steps, he passed through a series of richly appointed rooms, stopping finally in a drawing room warmed with a roaring fire. Under a pile of plush blankets and soft furs sat Lady Helena.

Despite her advanced age and weakened condition from a recent sickness, the eyes were still fiery and mischievous. Though wrinkled and thinning, it had once been a beautiful and regal face. The figure before them was still graceful in defiance of the onslaught of time.

"Ah, My Lord Crawley. I see you were successful in the small task I set for you."

Lord Crawley inclined his head and put on his most charming smile. "I would hardly call it a small task, My Lady. The Detective Inspector was loath to release this painting into my custody and required a great deal of persuasion."

She laughed in a silvery tone, which turned suddenly into a coughing fit. Lord Crawley dutifully ignored it. Once she mastered herself, she proceeded on as if no interruption had occurred. "Fancied it as evidence did he?"

"Yes, and I can see why. You didn't tell me what an exquisite work of art it is. It must be very valuable."

“I would call it invaluable. A good thing I thought to call upon the Chief Inspector for his support in this matter.”

“A brilliant move, My Lady. Your resourcefulness was the prod that allowed me to maneuver him to release it into my care.”

“If only I were a decade younger, I would have better use for that silver tongue of yours, Lord Crawley. Now, unwrap the painting over there in the light and let me take a good look at it.”

With a slight blush on his cheeks, Lord Crawley moved over to the table and carefully unwrapped the painting. He set it on the waiting wood easel and stepped back.

Lady Helena gasped immediately. “It’s changed.”

Lord Crawley peered closer and spoke in a confused tone. “What do you mean changed? That is a spitting image of Dorian.”

“Oh yes, Mr. Gray is the same as always. The painting captures his sculpted figure and timeless youth perfectly. When I last saw this painting however, he wasn’t alone on the canvas but was holding a small wolf pup.”

“Perhaps it is a different painting?”

“Oh, no. True, Sage painted many images of Mr. Gray, but this was the only one that was so alive with realism. Shortly after its creation, he stopped sitting for her and Sage never painted another of Mr. Gray before her death. This is that same painting. I was there when it was finished and my memory is still as sharp as it ever was. Somehow the wolf cub has been removed.”

“So Dorian had it painted out. Perhaps his vanity couldn't suffer to be upstaged by the charm of some tiny animal. Why was it so urgent you have it in your possession?”

“My reasons are my own. Now please recount to me the room exactly as you found it and leave no detail out.”

This was why Lord Crawley had examined the room so carefully. He had committed every detail of the scene to memory as Lady Helena had commanded. He related the details to her as best he could.

Lady Helena considered his description of the room carefully. She closed her eyes as if reconstructing it in her mind. “How much blood did you say was on the floor?”

Lord Crawley performed some mental calculations. “About a pint or so but spread evenly around, with only a small portion in any one area.”

“And the knife?”

“Bloodied as well, though the blood on the blade and around it seemed considerably darker.”

“Strange. The window seemed blown out as if by an explosion?”

“What else could explain it?”

“You have done well, Lord Crawley. You will find a most generous payment there on the table.”

Lord Crawley quickly scooped up the purse lying nearby the wooden easel. After a brief inspection of the gold coins inside, he disappeared the purse into his jacket. He quite preferred gold coins to bank notes. Banks had a way of seeking to settle their own debts first, which tended to leave little left over. This arrangement had proved quite profitable. Though Lord Crawley was still

woefully short of repaying his many financial obligations. If he continued in the service of Lady Helena he may one day amass enough to repurchase his father's house. Living as a Lord in title only had been difficult after growing up in luxury. If only he had never met Dorian Gray.

"When you are done reminiscing, you may visit the kitchen. The cook may have some hot stew ready for you and my steward will provide you with some wine."

He gave her his most gracious bow. "Thank you, My Lady."

As the younger man left the room, Lady Helena turned her gaze back to the painting. "Where have you gone Mr. Gray?"

Several hours passed and the fire had died down. Lady Helena was dozing and having a most rousing dream—reliving some of the debaucheries of her youth. The rest of the house was quiet as well, with most of the staff either dismissed or in bed for the evening. Even Lord Crawley had gone abed after indulging in two bottles of the finest red wine the house had to offer.

Only Lucious remained awake and he was certain something was amiss. With a low whistle, he summoned his faithful dog to his side and the two began to patrol the grounds outside. The Scottish Deerhound had bristly gray hair. He was nearly a meter tall and weighed almost fifty kilograms. He was a hunting dog that Lucious prized for his keen sight and speed. His ability to kill silently had earned him the name of Wolf. Lucious turned the dog loose with a command to find prey. "Wolv, FAH-ee shin." Immediately the animal ran off through the garden and

headed towards the outer wall. Lucious followed slowly behind while loading his double-barreled flintlock shotgun.

Dorian peered through the darkness. He knew there must be very little light outside the high wall surrounding the estate and was amazed that he could see so clearly. His eyes had adjusted to the black night and he could make out the familiar walls and garden of Lady Helena's estate as if it was daylight. The grounds were silent and he could see no movement. The house he had entered many times before was now sealed tightly. Dorian would have to find another way in. He remembered his desperate leap onto the trellis of his own house. His jump had been much higher than should have been possible. Could he repeat that same jump here and make it over the slanted top of the wall? It was over three meters high. He would have to try.

He measured the distance with his eyes and took a deep breath. Taking three quick strides, he threw himself up and forward with all his might—and bounced off the porous stone of the outer wall. With a curse, he crashed back to the earth. He rubbed his bruised shoulder and whispered absent-mindedly. "Less forward and more height then." Dorian looked around for a moment to make sure no alarm had been raised. Then he walked forward until he was almost touching the wall. This time he crouched down, bending deeply at the knees. He

sprang upward with all his might. Dorian's eyes widened in surprise as the wall flew by his face, his entire upper body clearing the top of the wall. Unprepared for this result, he flung out his arms wildly as gravity smashed him onto the slanted stone below. He began to slide backward until his hands found purchase and he pulled himself up. With a breath of relief, Dorian planned his landing before pushing off and sliding to the garden on the other side of the wall. This time he landed in a balanced crouch.

Suddenly, a dark gray dog burst from the opposite side of the yard. The animal had a growl in his throat and was coming on fast. Without thinking, Dorian exploded toward the animal. The hunting dog was momentarily confused by his prey charging him and slowed down. Just before slamming into the dog, Dorian suddenly changed direction and headed straight for the side entrance of the house. Happy to be back in pursuit, the dog let loose a series of barks and resumed running at full speed. The animal was fast, but still unable to catch Dorian as he reached a gate. Without breaking stride, Dorian jumped onto the bars of the metal gate and used the rungs to pull himself upward. He pushed off the top of the gate and began climbing the wall towards the window two meters above. Now out of reach of the snapping dog below, Dorian planted his feet on the ledge and seized the wooden pane of the closed window. It was locked.

Looking down into the garden, Dorian saw a man approaching. He was still far away but had a shotgun leveled and was preparing to fire. Dorian's arms strained against the wood and metal lock. With a deep grunt, he put all of his strength into lifting and was rewarded with a crack as the lock and wood split apart. He immediately slammed open the window and dove inside. So much for entering undetected.



AN ESCAPE PLAN

Lady Helena's dream had turned very naughty indeed. The room was filled with candles that twinkled seductively. She could feel the cool feeling of silk sheets as she rubbed her smooth legs together. She was young again and abed with one of her many former lovers. In fact, several of them were there in her chambers and they each came forward, one after the other, to take their turn in pleasing her. A French businessman kissed her neck and breasts delicately, a hard-muscled laborer lifted her off the bed to new heights of passion, and a dark and exotic steward took her from behind with powerful thrusts. Last of all came Dorian Gray. The very sight of him made her wet with longing. He kissed her deeply and stroked her hair and cheek. His kiss was urgent and forceful. Much stronger than she remembered. His lips pressed deeper, she—she couldn't breathe.

Her eyes shot open as the hand pressed tightly over her mouth. Her first instinct was to fight but what could an old woman do? Then she saw who the hand belonged to. There was Dorian Gray, alive and in her room. He was whispering for her not to scream.

"Mmffrrrh."

"What?"

“Mmffvv-yyrr-hnnd.”

“Oh, sorry.” Dorian took his hand away from her mouth. “Ouch!” She smacked him again to underscore the point.

Dorian was rubbing his arm when Lady Helena suddenly pulled him forward and into an embrace. They hugged each other close and both remembered the bond they had once shared.

Her eyes came away slick with tears. “I knew you were still alive. But why didn’t you send word? What on earth has happened? Who is trying to kill you?”

Dorian shook his head. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. I am sorry to steal in here like this but I am desperate for your help. My life *is* in danger. I need your help to leave London quickly and quietly. More than that, I need your help to recover the painting.”

Lady Helena put her hand to her lip and tapped it in feigned confusion. “What painting?”

“You remember. It’s the one Sage painted of me and the wolf pup.”

“Ah, you mean the one on the table behind you.”

“No not the one on the table behind me—err, yes.” Dorian had just turned around and now stared silently in a moment of shock.

He tilted his head to the side. “Strange, the wolf pup is gone.”

“Then you didn’t have it painted out?”

“No, but how did you manage to get it here?”

“Oh, a woman has her ways. Your old friend Lord Crawley was of some assistance.”

“Lord Crawley?”

CLICK—the sound of a pistol being cocked made Dorian freeze.

From the corner of the room another voice spoke. “Yes, Lord Crawley. Should I shoot this intruder for you?”

Dorian turned to confront the man as he stepped out from the shadows.

Lady Helena’s voice took on a playful tone. “Very tempting but no. In fact, I think it is time that you and Mr. Gray put the past behind you and help each other.”

Lord Crawley still had not lowered the pistol. “I’d much rather shoot him in the face.”

Dorian’s complexion reddened. “You don’t have the tallywags for it.”

“Now, now. There is no reason for you two gentleman to have a pissing contest just because there is a lady present. Besides, I am not so easily impressed. Lord Crawley, lower your weapon NOW.”

He begrudgingly obliged.

Just then, the door flew open and Lucious burst in, pointing his shotgun first at Lord Crawley and then at Dorian. “Mistress dis ‘ere’s da vermin. Brok’ yer windae da bawbag did. Shuid ah gie ‘em som’ new air holes?”

“Not now, Lucious. We are all friends here. What is it with you boys waving your guns about?”

Lucious quickly lowered his shotgun and fired a vicious look in Dorian’s direction instead.

“That will be all, Lucious. See to fixing the window and go...*garden something.*”

He reluctantly turned to leave. “Aye, Mistress.”

“And Lucious?”

He paused.

“Tomorrow we will discuss how it was that an intruder so easily entered my home.”

Lucious’ face turned reddish-yellow in fit of fury. He nodded and stormed out of the room.

Lady Helena folded her hands and smiled. “Now, as I was saying the two of you can help each other. Mr. Gray will need safe passage out of the city as soon as possible.”

Lord Crawley crossed his arms. “Good riddance.”

“Not quite. You will be going with him.”

“What?”

“Your particular talents will be needed to help forge the necessary documents. I will use my influence where I can but the two of you will be traveling together and you will be entrusted with protecting Mr. Gray.”

“I most certainly will not.”

“In return, Mr. Gray will sign a revision to his will. After the inquest is concluded and all other matters settled, all of your debts will be paid in full by the late Mr. Gray. Is this satisfactory?”

Lord Crawley’s eyes gleamed at the thought of regaining his fortune and standing in society. He smiled. “Quite satisfactory. I was only kidding, old boy. A fine joke between friends wouldn’t you say?”

“Hardly. Lady Helena, I thank you for your help but I do not need a traveling companion.”

“That part of the deal is non-negotiable. Lord Crawley will act on my behalf and report to me regularly while I investigate things further here. If you agree to these conditions I promise to keep your secrets hidden and under my protection until you can safely return.” She pointedly looked at the painting on the table.

Dorian considered for a moment. It would only slow him down to flee with the painting. He thought he could trust Lady Helena to keep it safe. "Very well, but we must leave immediately."

"I will do my best. Lord Crawley, please pour us some wine. We have much to do and very little time."



THE FULL MOON

The plans had been set in motion for Dorian to leave the city. Lady Helena was working on securing passage on a ship and Lord Crawley was in the process of obtaining travel papers under an assumed name. The next day Dorian moved into a small cottage on the outskirts of town. Lady Helena provided the key and said her associates would not mind him using it for awhile. He promised to stay out of sight until he was sent for.

That evening, Lady Helena was enjoying a glass of Vin Mariani wine as she looked over prospective ship manifests. The important part would be to transport Dorian on a ship where few questions were asked and where it was unlikely that his notable face would be recognized by any of the passengers. She drained the last of her glass and looked out admiringly at the full pale moon. A flicker of motion brought her gaze to the painting on the table. Her glass shattered on the floor as it slipped from her hand and she gasped in disbelief at what her eyes saw.

The figure on the canvas that had been Dorian was now replaced with a snarling and vicious demon-wolf. It was much larger and covered in dark hair. Sharp claws and long fangs warned of death. The most terrible part

was the red eyes that were filled with equal parts malice and intelligence. Surely it was the wine or some remnants of her sickness that brought such horrible visions. She felt faint from exhaustion. She would go to bed immediately and inspect the painting tomorrow.

Dorian's dreams that night were filled with terrifying memories of the beast that hunted him and the horrendous acts it committed. They were dark and ruthless dreams of vile pleasures and unquenchable bloodlust.

A bright light insisted he wake up. He groaned and rolled over to his side, throwing his arm over the woman lying next to him. Woman? Dorian sat up immediately. He had taken no one to bed with him last night. The bed felt wrong. Dorian blinked rapidly to clear the sleep and blurred splotches from his eyes. He is outside. In the forest—again.

“No. No, no, no.”

He is naked and covered in blood once more. For the second time, he has awoken in the den of the werewolf. He is deep in the protective center of the forest. This time there is a corpse of a naked woman next to him. He doesn't want to look. Dorian stands up and begins running blindly away. He follows the familiar path that leads him to Sage's home. There he cleans himself frantically, borrows what little clothing he can find, and rushes back to the cottage on the outskirts of town where he had been hiding out. How can this be? He must leave London tonight.

Lady Helena was kind enough to provide him with a fresh pair of clothes. Dorian changes into them and

leaves at once for town. Eventually he makes his way to the side gate of Lady Helena's home. A reluctant Lucious ushers him into the kitchen where Lady Helena is having her breakfast.

"Good morning Lady Helena."

"Dorian, are you alright? You look quite pale."

"I must leave immediately. I can wait no longer."

Lady Helena put down the wheat bread with strawberry jam she was enjoying and looked at Dorian calmly. "You must understand, if you leave so soon it will not be under ideal circumstances."

"Whatever it takes. But I must be as far away from this place as possible."

"Very well. Is China far enough?"

"China? Yes, fine."

"I had hoped to find some other plan, but on short notice, this was the best I could do. Lord Crawley and you will leave with the Royal Navy on Her Majesty's Ship, Victory. Your vessel will rendezvous with the French Navy and sail for China."

"Why must we rendezvous with the French Navy?"

"I suppose you have been out of touch with world events. There is another dispute over trade routes. A second Opium War is brewing and the fleet has been ordered to attack if the Qing Dynasty does not surrender."

"That sounds dangerous."

"You and the other seamen should be perfectly safe once you reach China—assuming there are no storms along the voyage. Most of the fighting will be done by the

army and the French. My military contacts assure me it will be a short campaign.”

“The other seamen?”

“You’ve been enlisted. Congratulations Seaman Lynch. I have purchased a commission for Lord Crawley. He will be your superior officer.”

“My superior—this is outrageous!”

Lady Helena beckoned him to come closer and took his hand in hers. “I am sorry Mr. Gray. Please understand that I did not intend for you to suffer these humiliations. Anything higher ranking would raise suspicions and bring unwanted scrutiny to the validity of your documents. This way, Lord Crawley can look after you and we can get you as far away from London as soon as possible. At least until we have some answers.”

Dorian nodded his head once in agreement. Lady Helena was the only friend he had left in this world and she was doing her best to see him to safety. The least he could do is accept the help being offered.

Lady Helena embraced him warmly. “I will stay here and see if I can uncover the truth of what is happening to you. Maybe there is some way to undo what has been done. Now get some sleep. The captain of the Victory has ordered all hands aboard by dawn. The ship will sail with the morning tide. Goodbye, Mr. Gray.”



H.M.S. VICTORY

Dorian stepped from the simple carriage that had carried him to the waiting Portsmouth docks before dawn. The air was brisk and frigid. The scene before him bustled with activity. Seamen in groups of two or three hurried towards their waiting ships. Last minute deliveries of provisions were furiously underway. The giant wooden crates and heavy oaken barrels required teams of men to unload and transport them to platforms by the waiting ships. There they were covered in netting and hoisted aboard before being stowed below deck.

He paid the driver and lowered the one small, simple oak chest of belongings allowed to the low-ranking seamen. He was dressed in the crew's standard issue slops. These consisted of loose white trousers that ended just above the ankle and a matching white linen shirt. The uniform was finished with wool-grey pea jacket, black scarf, and a brown round top-hat that immediately identified his lack of rank or position.

He looked to the side and saw Lord Crawley arriving in a separate, more luxurious carriage. Lord Crawley pointedly avoided his gaze. The two men would keep their distance and pretend not to know each other at first. As a Midshipman's mate, Lord Crawley would be

berthing in the officer's quarters rather than with the lower crew members. That meant he was allowed two large mahogany trunks and would be afforded much more comfortable sleeping quarters. The dress of the Midshipman's mate was a finer linen breeches cut to a knee high length, which Lord Crawley had adorned with several gold buttons. He wore a fringed linen shirt and a deep-blue frock coat with white trimming and several more gold buttons. His collar and sleeves were decorated with white half-stripes that indicated his rank. His uniform ended in a blue, cocked officer's hat that was also lined in gold.

The sun continued to rise in an ominous ball of fire as the light reflected off the water to illuminate the H.M.S. Victory. She was nearly seventy meters in length with three sails and a beam measuring over fifteen meters in width. Her hull was made from thick, dark-brown oak wood and was trimmed in a fresh yellow paint. The top of the mainmast was over sixty-two meters above the waterline. The vessel could reach a speed of eleven knots and hold eight hundred and fifty men.

He had read about the ship's impressive one hundred and four gun compliment. The Victory was a first-rate ship of the line with a fearsome reputation in battle. It was not hard to see why. The gun deck held thirty of the two and three-fourths long pattern Blomefield cannons. These each shot a fifteen-kilogram cannon ball. They were commonly referred to as 32-pounders. The middle gun deck held twenty-eight of the two and one-half ton long guns which each shot an eleven-kilogram shot. The upper gun deck held thirty of

the one and seven-tenths ton short guns. These would fire a five-kilogram shot. Twelve more of these were placed on the quarterdeck. The forecastle held two medium length cannons of the same and two of the devastating thirty-one-kilogram carronade.

These large-caliber cannons were cast iron and could deal terrible damage at short-range. The shot was packaged for maximum destruction and could fire a combination of round shot, bar shot, grape shot, and canister shot.

Lifting his chest, Dorian moved down the quay and towards the ship. As he drew closer, the air filled with the smell of tobacco and tar. A seaman passed by and took a quick swig from a weathered cask that held the sweet aroma of rum.

He approached a table where the Paymaster and Clerk sat with the ship's register. The Paymaster had a grizzled face, darkened and weathered by many years at sea. He wore long sideburns and a short beard which was still mostly black with a smattering of gray hairs. In his left ear was a simple loop of gold. His broad shoulders were covered in a blue frock coat with gold buttons and two white stripes on his sleeve and collar. These indicated his rank as a warrant officer, though his coat was currently opened wide to expose his linen shirt and ample midsection. As Dorian approached, the Paymaster produced a pair of French pince-nez glasses. They had no earpieces and were held on the nose by the curvature of the metal center piece. He had removed the cocked officer's hat from his head to expose a balding dome of hair.

He placed the glasses on his face and looked down at the register with a bored expression. "Rank and name?"

Dorian floundered for a moment as he struggled to recall his new surname.

"Be quick about it seaman! I don't have all day."

"Yes, sir. It's Seaman Dorian Lynch, at your service."

He marked an 'x' by the name in his register and gestured to a contract that the clerk next to him had unrolled. The clerk was a much younger man with only the beginnings of a beard on his face. He was dressed similarly but with only one white stripe on his uniform. He still wore the cocked officer's hat and had on a set of thin metal spectacles that went over his ears.

The clerk turned the contract towards Dorian with a cautious smile and offered him a wooden dip pen with a metal nib. The contract seemed of the standard sort, with the seal of the Royal Navy affixed at the bottom.

The Paymaster sighed and spoke as if reciting a speech too-often rehearsed. "If you are unable to read, the Articles of Agreement simply state that you agree to serve under the command of the Lord Captain Elgin for the period of one year. You agree to be subject to all laws, regulations, and punishments governing the crew. You will perform all duties as ordered. You will defend the honor of the Victory, the Captain, the Royal Navy, and Her Majesty the Queen. If called upon to fight, you will do so including offering your life in service to the Queen. You will be assigned to the rigging and stand the third watch. Your pay will be twenty pounds fifty, which I as

Paymaster will hold for you until the end of your service. Sign here if you agree to these terms.”

What had he gotten himself into? Dorian thought it best to remain silent and simply sign his name with an ‘x’.

“Welcome aboard Seaman Lynch. You will address me as Lieutenant Paymaster Blundell. The clerk here is Sub-Lieutenant Purcell. He will issue you one seaman’s kit and a standard issue mattress. You will also receive a signing advance of four pounds twenty. I strongly advise you to refrain from betting with the crew. If you need anything, speak to Purcell here and he will record your request in his ledger.”

“Thank you, sir.” Dorian clumsily made a salute by touching a clenched fist to his brow as he had seen other seamen do when addressing an officer. That earned a satisfied look from the Paymaster. Dorian took the coins that Sub-Lieutenant Purcell counted out and continued along the pier towards the brow to board the vessel.

Lady Helena looked on from the window of a lavishly appointed, four-horse carriage. She had ignored Lucious’ plea to stay inside this morning. Instead she had ignored her lingering cough and bundled up as much as possible. Lucious begrudged followed her orders to follow Dorian’s carriage from a distance. She needed to make sure with her own eyes that Dorian boarded the ship and left port.

On her lap sat the morning issue of *The Telegraph*. Lady Helena had just finished reading about the recent murders that had taken place in the city. One in particular had caught her attention. A neighbor of a small cottage on the outskirts of town had heard some strange

noises and had called a constable to investigate. At first, it had seemed deserted but then the constable went around to the back of the small building. The back door had been ripped off. Upon entering the constable had found the inside nearly destroyed and the mutilated body of a naked woman in the bed. The same cottage Lady Helena had given Dorian the key to. There was no way to connect her as the owner of the cottage, unless someone were to sort through the several layers of middlemen and businesses that bought and managed her properties for her. But that didn't matter now. Lady Helena's thoughts went back to the night of the full moon when she had seen the painting change. She wondered if it wasn't her wine-soaked imagination after all.

The previous night, Lady Helena had drafted a new letter to Lord Crawley. It had contained a detailed list of questions and instructions. She held his hastily-penned response in her hand.

My Dear Lady Helena,

I understand your instructions and the information you require. I will watch him very closely and report to you all that I observe. I will do my best to keep the man from harm until we know the truth.

If your suspicions prove true, I will wait for an opportune moment to arrange for an unfortunate accident.

Your humble servant,

Lord Herschel Crawley

Lady Helena looked up from the letter as the ship disembarked. With a tear in her eye, Lady Helena watched as Dorian sailed out of her life forever. She wondered if the terrible killings would end now. She half-hoped she had been mistaken.

Lucious cleared his throat impatiently. "Dae we return hame noo, Mistress?"

Sometimes she wished she hadn't saved the man from the executioner's noose. The Scotsman had no decorum. However, the convicted killer had proved his value many times and was as loyal as a dog.

"No, we have much work to do. I intend to uncover the truth in these rumors we have heard about Mr. Gray. We have several inquiries to make at the British Museum Library and I have an appointment with the historian Thomas Carlyle at the London Library."

"Whit guid kin some dusty auld books dae 'nyhow?"

"There is no greater source of knowledge of mythology and the occult than in books. Did you know the Romani people believe in a creature called the *Vircolac*? The creature supposedly returned from the grave and took the form of a giant wolf. The saliva of the undead creature spreads the curse, condemning any surviving victims to eternal life as a beast."

"Ah dinnae ken, sounds like yer aff yer heid"

"Perhaps, but that is a mystery that only Mr. Carlyle can unlock. I intend to track down the Romani relatives of the late Sage Holdsworth and find out for myself. Oh, and Lucious..."

“Aye, Mistress?”

“See if there is still time to inform the monster hunter that his services are no longer required.”



THE DEMETER

It had been a long voyage from the port of Thessaloniki for the crew of the merchant's vessel *Demeter*. She was a two-masted schooner with a length of thirty-nine meters and a beam of over ten meters wide. The ship could reach a speed of thirteen knots and was home to a crew of sixteen souls plus the occasional passenger—most of which were currently miserable.

Captain Price had done his best to keep his crew occupied and their minds off the misfortune they had suffered on the journey towards England. Unfortunately, the infestation of dark rats aboard the ship had now become nearly unbearable. The destructive vermin had made their way into the food stores and were slowly chewing the boat away to nothing as they built their filthy nests. The running theory amongst the crew was that Black Tom, the ship's cat, had caught the scent of something evil aboard the ship and had abandoned it at the last port.

The Captain had set the men to repairing the rigging, oiling the masts, and mending the sails. He had instructed his mate Weddall to play his violin as often as possible to soothe the spirits onboard. The grumbling had died down somewhat—until the cook fell ill with a

case of dysentery. Old Macks was beloved by the men for his ability to stretch the provisions with his famous vegetable and spiced-beef stew. For dessert, he would serve a savory pudding that was fit for Her Majesty the Queen. No other man on board could cook worth his salt. It was really no one's fault then when the remaining beef spoiled. The Captain had doubled the crew's ration of grog after that.

Even then, the captain was still hopeful. He had been happy to take on the strange passenger and his several mysterious crates of cargo. It was a small matter that the extra space needed for the cargo had come at the expense of room normally used for storing salted pork or rolls of cheese. The Russian gold he had received in advance payment would serve to outfit a second ship and double his business.

Then the sails lost the wind for several days. The Captain had no choice but to cut rations in half and the crew turned their grumbling towards the dark and silent passenger. His arrival had coincided with the departure of Black Tom and the start of all their problems. Despite the heavy gold coins in his purse, the Captain was beginning to regret ever granting this man passage.

The Captain turned to consider his passenger. He was a lean, tall man at nearly two meters in height. He spoke like an educated man might, obscured with a Romanian accent. His coloring was dark, with brooding eyes and an eternal frown on his face. He had a thin mustache and a beard which was trimmed short. His dress was black trousers, a charcoal waistcoat, and long ebony-slate cape. Even the man's wide-brimmed hard-

felt hat was dark. The only color could be found in a single feather stuck in the hat and in a brightly colored wool sash that the man wore diagonally from his left hip and around the right side of his chest. The most striking feature, however, was the black patch that he wore over his right eye. He had introduced himself only as Doctor Nicolai Van Helsing. There had been no negotiating over costs, with the stranger simply placing a heavy purse of Russian gold in the Captains hand. He instructed the captain to take care with the heavy crates and chests he needed transported. Then he had retreated to his cabin and for the duration of the voyage had not spoken another word. Now was one of the few times when the mysterious doctor came above deck. He was silent as always and merely stared out at the water.

“Sails to the stern!”

The Captain pivoted on his heel in response to the lookout’s call. Finally, their luck had turned. Hopefully, it was another merchant vessel that they could barter with for water and food. He moved closer to the side rail and pulled out his brass three-draw spyglass. The main tube was encased in treated leather that the Captain oiled and cleaned daily. He extended the instrument to its full length of ninety-one centimeters and put his eye to the glass.

The white sails of a single-mast sloop snapped into focus over the blue-green water. They had hoisted a square topsail, which was taut and full with the wind. The Captain glanced at his own ship’s sails above his head with annoyance. They flapped loosely in a headwind that

gusted and died moments later. It was as if the *Demeter* was sailing in a different world.

He looked again through the spyglass at the sloop rapidly gaining on them. The deck of the smaller ship was swarming with activity. With a start, the Captain realized the men were moving cannons into a position to fire. His eye caught sight of a tattered black flag rising slowly from the deck.

His voice boomed across the deck in a commanding baritone. "Pirates! Trim the sails and turn to starboard. Make ready the guns."

The crew leapt into action at his call. Most had served aboard the ship for ten years or more and they worked well together. The mate began spinning the wheel as the ship started its turn. Half of the seamen began working the rigging to tighten the lines while the other half set to un-lashing the ten four-pound guns and rolling them in to place. The experienced gunners were already loading them with powder and inspecting the gun locks. Several of the cannons were already loaded with wadding and shot and a few seamen were currently ramming the balls in preparation to fire.

The lookout yelled out another warning. "Two sails to starboard!"

The Captain cursed his bad luck. "Damnation! Two more ships and we've turned right into them." The two additional pirate sloops must have been waiting to spring this trap—and they had played right into their hands. They might have been able to handle one ship but with three bearing down on them, they were outnumbered and outgunned.

Suddenly their passenger strode forward. He spoke with a grim determination and confidence in his voice. "Căptăin, grănt me two seămen ănd I will retrieve from below ă weăpon that will prove more deădly ănd ăccurate to those ships thăn your cănnons."

The Captain stared into the face of the man. His one eye was dark and focused in a way that made him consider the idea. "My duty is to protect this ship and its cargo—and that includes you. Now get below deck."

The man refused to move. "Whăt ăbout this voyage măkes you think your men will be ăble to successfully repel three ships?"

"Now listen here, Doctor..."

"Căll me Văn Helsing."

"Listen here Van Helsing, I am Captain aboard this ship and you will obey my orders. My men can handle these sea brigands."

The sloop to the stern fired two of their guns and the aft part of the ship exploded in splintering wood as the shot raked the deck. Two of the gunners fell down screaming from their injuries. The Captain and Van Helsing each ducked but were quickly back on their feet.

"Bollocks of the Beast! Thompson, Teague, help Van Helsing here retrieve his weapon from below deck. Finnerty and Murphy tend to the wounded. The rest of you lazy dogs quit mucking about and return fire."

Finnerty and Murphy glanced at each other and then the Captain with a questioning look.

"Go, damn you!"

A stream of expletives falling from the Captain's mouth set the two seamen running after Van Helsing and the guns roaring to life.

The three men reached the hold of the ship in moments. Van Helsing pointed to a large crate marked with an 'x' and produced a crowbar from beneath his cape. They ripped open the side of the crate. Gobs of hay packing fell to the ground revealing a metal device.

Finnerty had never seen anything of its kind. He reached out a hand to touch the bent-metal contraption. "Wot is that?"

Van Helsing reached down and began unpacking boxes with strange-looking bolts inside. "It is called a Cheiroballistră. This one is an explosive ballista of my own design. It can launch these metal bolts over one thousand meters with deadly accuracy."

Murphy looked doubtful. "What's wrong with yer bolt heads?"

"Also my own design. They contain a mixture of petroleum, sulfur, nitroglycerin, and a few other elements contained in a breakable glass broad head. I call it Demon Fire. I suggest you don't drop any—unless you want to find out why."

Both men nodded their agreement and assisted Van Helsing in unpacking the ballista and boxes of bolts. The metal was light-weight and the three men were just enough to bring the weapon and ammunition above deck.

The scene was chaotic and the air hazy with smoke. The two other ships had also fired upon the *Demeter*. Three more seamen had been hit and the mizzen-mast

and its sails had suffered major damage. The crew had managed to return fire twice, once to the ship to the stern, and upon one of the ships to starboard. They had then turned back to port and were attempting to run for deeper water.

Van Helsing latched the ballista to the side rail and began working a series of hand cranks to draw back the mighty firing mechanism. It could be fired with a flint gun lock and series of charges that would propel the bolt much faster and farther than the typical ballista. He carefully loaded one of the Demon Fire bolts and began the complicated process of aiming at the closest ship to starboard. Finnerty and Murphy rushed to the aid of their fellows and fell naturally in place reloading the guns. For several minutes, Van Helsing and his bizarre weapon were forgotten as the crew fired, were once more fired upon, and then reloaded.

"Lă năibă!" Van Helsing cursed in Romanian as a cannonball ripped into the forecastle. The flying shards of wood disturbed his carefully calculated aim. He looked through the metal aiming mechanism and re-adjusted the dials to his satisfaction as the three ships closed on their prey.

The Captain was bloodied and limping as he called out in a strained voice. "Damn it Van Helsing. If you are going to do something, do it now!"

All the other men onboard were to his back. This meant they did not see as Van Helsing lifted the patch to his right eye and aimed once more at the closing pirate ship—not with an empty socket, but with an enlarged red eye that was too diseased and hateful to be human.

He fired the weapon with a mighty 'thrum' and series of small explosions. The long bolt was propelled, almost too fast to see, towards the mast of the pirate ship. The glass broad head struck the wooden beam and shattered, releasing the Demon Fire contained within. The effect was immediate. Liquid-red flame shot around the mast and exploded violently with the air itself. The pirates on deck were showered in flame that glowed bright red and burned with a hellish heat and ferocity. The sails were instantly torched and consumed along with clothing and tender flesh.

The cannon fire ceased and the only sounds to be heard were the screams of dying men and the sound of Van Helsing cranking his ballista. He swiveled the base of the weapon to take aim at the second-closest pirate ship. Survivors from the first ship jumped into the water, some still alight and screaming.

The captain of the second pirate ship stared in disbelief at the fate of his fellows. His eyes grew larger as he spotted the metal ballista now pointing directly at him. "Change course ye cow-poxed powder monkeys! There be a demon on yon ship. Hard to port an' stand down."

The third pirate ship broke off her run as well and a relieved cheer went up from the crew of the *Demeter*. The crew nursed their wounds and were thankful that their luck had finally changed. Despite his miraculous victory, the crew was relieved when they finally made it to the East India docks at the London port. As they watched Van Helsing disembark, they wondered if the

pirate captain hadn't been right about seeing a demon
aboard their ship.



VAN HELSING

Nicolai Van Helsing was born in a small village near the Carpathian Mountains in Moldavia. His home was a small, wood and clay-brick house. It had a low, slanted wooden roof covered in hay that kept the cold out. There were only two rooms inside, affording his parents some small measure of privacy. Behind the house was a small barn of similar construction. The remaining land cleared of trees from the nearby forest was taken by sheep pens. Nicolai slept in the corner of the main room. At a young age, he had taken to helping his father with the sheep and general care of their family *ferma*. Anton Van Helsing's knee had been ravaged by an errant canister shot in a battle with the Ottoman Empire. He would have lost the leg entirely, had the metal not passed cleanly through and the wound been cauterized by the village doctor. Still, the leg could not bear his full weight, limiting his movement and placing the burden of herding the sheep on his young son Nicolai.

Anton Van Helsing was otherwise a strong man with broad shoulders and a deep, soft voice. Calculating eyes sat above a thick beard and long mustache that was curly and half-grey. He loved his son dearly and showed him every day through biting criticism to sharpen his

mind and hard labor to strengthen his back. Nicolai tried to be an obedient son. He awoke every morning before anyone else was stirring and the sky was still dark to release the sheep from their pens. Then he would begin the daily journey with the sheep, patiently directing and retrieving any strays, as they made their way to the lush pastures to the east of the village. With his father's staff, he stood guard over the animals as they fattened themselves on the soft grass. When Nicolai performed his role particularly well by finding an escaped lamb or helping a struggling ewe give birth, he would be rewarded with a sip from his father's *Țuică* brandy cask.

In the evenings while his wife cooked the meal of *Stufăt* stew, Anton schooled his only son with lessons in swordplay or in marksmanship with his old smoothbore musket. The ancient weapon had once been used to kill deadly marauders in war, it now served to protect the family livelihood against a new sort of marauder. Every year, an increasing number of the sheep were killed by the vicious wolves of the night. The neighboring villagers suffered the same fate and soon a bounty of three rubles was placed on the head of any wolf. The village Wolverers known as *Lupări* regularly hunted the beasts. They brought in many heads, but the killings continued.

Anton thought one large wolf; more cunning than the others was to blame. He said as much as the family gathered around the table. "I have seen a great *lup uriăș* in de night, lurking beyond de forest edges. Trei times have I fired. Only once has my musket ball found its mark. Now the *vârcolac* is wary of de weapon."

Nicolai became curious. "Father, what is a *vârcolac*?"

Anton was somber and thoughtful. "An undead man who has become a wolf."

"I'll have no talk of *vârcolac* at my table." Nicolai's mother Stefania was the exact opposite of his father. She was kind and joyful, with an easy laugh and a song on her lips as she worked. Stefania was younger than Anton by half as many years. Her hair was light brown and still free from any grey. Her hazel eyes brimmed with love for her family as she scolded her husband. At the same time, she gave him an extra helping of stew and placed her hand on his arm. Her warm smile easily distracted Anton. "Husband, tell us the story of your first battle. I do so love that one." She knew her husband well and Anton's mood brightened as he spun his tale of military strategy and unparalleled bravery. Many nights passed in the same way, with Stefania's cheer fending off the dark threat that lurked outside.

When Nicolai was fourteen, the same number of sheep were taken that year. Stefania feared for her son's life when he was alone with the sheep in the pastures. At her urging, Anton agreed that Nicolai would take his father's musket each day in place of the staff. Anton took his son aside and spoke to him in a grave tone. "You are a man now. Remember, only fire if there is no other way and you have a clean shot at de *vârcolac*."

Each day Nicolai set out with the musket in his hand, a wheel of *Cașcăvăl* cheese, and his mother's *Virșli* sausage. Stefania would kiss him and secretly hand over a few extra hard bread rolls left over from the

evening meal. These he tucked into his cape. Once in the pasture, he would patrol with the musket over his shoulder. He was the picture of military discipline. After a few days with no incident, he fell to reenacting mock-battles of his father's war stories. Before long, the musket was left leaning against a rock as Nicolai began daydreaming of hunting for wolf heads with the village *Lupări*.

He could see it now. With one amazing shot, he would shoot the wolf through the eye and return triumphantly the village a hero. His bravery would save his family and earn him a kiss from the baker's beautiful daughter, Catina. Suddenly, Nicolai looked up and noticed the fading light. He whispered to himself with growing dread. "Oh no, it's almost dark. *Tată* will be so angry." Quickly, he began rounding up the sheep and drove them towards home as fast as their short legs would allow. The musket sat forlornly against the rock where Nicolai had left it.

It was well past sunset when he reached home with the sheep. His father was waiting on the porch of the small farmhouse with his crutch under one arm and a deep scowl on his face. "Nicolai! Why are you so late? Your mama is beside herself with..."

A terrible howl interrupted him and pierced the silence of the nearby forest.

Anton's face changed from anger to worry. "Where is de musket?"

The image of the musket propped up against a rock flashed into Nicolai's mind. "I'm sorry, I must have left it in the pasture."

“*Lă năibă,*” he cursed under his breath. “*Nătărău* boy. Run and fetch it now. I will pen de sheep. Stefania come and help me!”

His mother rushed outside. She had been standing just outside the doorway and heard the entire conversation. She shot Nicolai a reproachful look spat on the ground. “*Vâlvă* protect us from de Evil Eye. Go Nicolai! *Dumnezeu* grant you speed.” She moved towards the pens to help her husband with the sheep.

Nicolai saw the fear in his mother eyes and turned and ran. He ran until his lungs burned and his heart pounded in his chest like an angry drum. Then he ran more. The moon had risen full in the night sky and provided ample light to see. Finally, Nicolai reached the rock with the musket. He snatched it up and paused, his body heaving for breath.

Another terrible howl sounded, this time closer to his home. Nicolai’s feet began moving of their own accord and he ran as fast as he could with the musket in one hand. A sense of dread began to rise in his chest. He pushed his body to greater speed and ignored the pain in his legs. The journey home from the pasture had never seemed longer.

As he neared the ferma, he knew at once that something was wrong. The sheep were still out of their pens and were clustered together by the barn. The house was unusually dark and he couldn’t see his parents. Where were they? He closed the distance and began calling out nervously for them. “Mama, *Tată,* where are you?”

A choking cough came from the herd of sheep near the barn. His father was lying on the ground covered in blood. Nicolai rushed to his side, tears already forming. “*Tată*, did you fall? Get up. Where’s Mama? What happened?”

His father lifted his head, then groaned and lowered it. His body was covered in blood and dirt. There was a gaping wound in the side of his father’s neck, seeping an alarming amount of the dark red fluid. Nicolai froze. He had seen the carcasses of devoured sheep and even slaughtered lambs before—but nothing prepared him for the sight of his father wounded and hemorrhaging blood.

Anton’s eyes focused on his weeping son. He lifted one grisly hand to staunch the flow of blood from his neck. He struggled against the pain and drowsiness in an attempt to speak to his son. “Nicolai, it was de *vârcolac*. Stefania was behind the barn when it leapt on her. I tried to save her, my poor *soție*, but it had already torn out her throat when I got there. I tried to kill it with my staff, but I fell—*înjurătură* this leg of mine.”

Nicolai stared at his father in disbelief. “No, it can’t be. I will help her.”

“No. Listen to me. I am dying. The *vârcolac* dragged her body into the forest. It’s the only reason I still live.”

“I will bring her back!”

“Nicolai, listen. It isn’t your fault. It is my sins during the war that has brought the Evil Eye upon us...” He broke off in a coughing fit wet with blood.

“*Tată*, I will kill the *vârcolac*.”

“Yes...yes you must. However, the musket will not be enough. You must outsmart it. Come...closer; it is hard to speak...I will tell you what you must do.”

Nicolai listened desperately as his father gave him his final set of instructions. The hero of his life told his son how proud he was of him and how much he and his mother loved him. They held each other until the affection in his father’s eyes slowly faded into a blank stare as he died in his arms. Nicolai wept bitter tears of anguish. Despite his father’s words, he knew his carelessness had caused his parents demise. He spent that night surrounded by the sheep and lying by his father’s body—not caring if the wolf returned or not.

The next morning Nicolai woke before the dawn. At first, it all seemed like a horrible dream. Then he looked over at the corpse next to him. He slowly got to his feet and began ushering the sheep back into their pens. Nicolai retrieved his father’s pickaxe and shovel from the barn. Then he started digging. When the hole was deep enough, he carefully lowered the body in and tearfully began covering his father with dirt.

Next, Nicolai walked behind the barn, pointedly ignoring the areas of ground stained red with his mother’s blood. He walked halfway between the forest and the barn and began digging a second hole. He dug until his hands were covered in blisters. He continued to dig as the blisters broke and bled. Even as new blisters formed, Nicolai didn’t stop digging until he hit hardened rock. He paused to wipe and bandage his hands; he would need them for the work ahead.

After a brief rest and a lunch of cold *Virşli* sausage and hardened rolls, he bent to pick up his father's pickaxe. He worked late into the afternoon making the pit deeper and wider. He broke and moved the stone out until it was about two meters deep and three meters in length and width. As the sun traveled lower in the sky, Nicolai covered his work with thin branches and hay from the roof of the barn. Then he retrieved his father's axe and set to work felling several small trees. These he hauled into the house, ruining his mother's floor. As the night grew later, he barred and locked the door. He continued working through the night, splitting the trees into long beams. Finally exhausted, he fell into his small bed in the corner and cried himself to sleep.

In the morning, the work continued until the pit was even longer and enough trees had been cut down and split into long beams. He retrieved his father's knives and began witling the ends of the beams into spear points. By midday, he had enough to fill the bottom of his pit. He dug a small hole for each spear, their points facing towards the greying sky. He secured the spears with the rocks he had broken apart with the pickaxe and then covered the top of the pit with a thin lattice of sticks and hay.

Next, Nicolai tore open the back wall of the barn that faced the forest, leaving it exposed to the elements on one side. He herded most of the sheep inside and tied them by the neck with rope to the heavy support beams. Those that didn't fit, he slaughtered and spread their blood upon the ground and over the pit. He had followed his father's plan and he would have his revenge on that

accursed wolf. When it was dark enough, he cleaned and loaded the musket. Then he hid it on the floor and covered it with hay. Nicolai sat down to wait with the sheep in the barn, his eyes trained on the dark trees of the forest.

He must have dozed off, but the bleating of the sheep alerted him to the wolf's arrival. They were skittish and on edge from the smell of the sheep blood that still lay thick on the ground. When they caught wind of the predator, the fuzzy animals panicked and began straining against the ropes in an attempt to run.

Nicolai could see the large wolf out of the corner of his eye as it crept from the edge of the surrounding forest. He stayed still in his sitting position on the floor of the exposed barn as the beast approached. The wolf must have weighed over sixty kilograms. It was the largest one Nicolai had ever seen at around one hundred and sixty centimeters long and ninety centimeters tall. Its coat was black, with a grey face and grey paws. The pink tongue came out to lick its muzzle, exposing razor-sharp teeth and long canines. The wolf could smell the blood and the sheep. The keen eyes were cautious however, and Nicolai was sure the animal could see him. It moved closer, only a few meters short of the spiked pit.

As the wolf came closer, the sheep grew frantic in their attempt to escape, but Nicolai had tied the knots well and they held. The wolf grew excited by the screams of the herd and padded forward to the edge of the pit. Suddenly it paused as if sensing something wrong.

Nicolai rose to his feet and bared his teeth. “Here *vârcolac*. I am here. Come and finish your killing or I will grow into a man and one day kill you.”

The wolf growled in response to the challenge. Nicolai stared into his enemies eyes and saw his own death there. “*Pulă meă!* Come, I am here!” He bent down and pulled the musket from beneath the hay on the barn floor. That caused a flicker of recollection in the *vârcolac*’s eyes and it leapt forward—nearly clearing the pit in front of it. His mother must have been looking down upon him that night, for the edge of the pit collapsed and the hindquarters of the wolf fell downwards and onto the sharp spikes below.

The creature let out a high-pitched growl of pain and whimpered as its front paws struggled to pull itself forward. Nicolai strode forward three strides, aimed his musket, and fired between the wolf’s eyes.



THE DEMON EYE

On the day he killed the wolf and avenged his parents, Van Helsing became a man. Though he searched the woods for many days, he never found his mother's body. This filled him with a hatred of wolves, and he swore to continue to hunt them. He sold the remaining sheep and his family's land and began hunting the bounties on the heads of wolves with the other *Lupări*. He used what money he had to purchase a Prussian, bolt-action Dreyse rifle. This rifle was breech-loaded and could fire up to twelve rounds per minute, even while lying on the ground.

He soon became an expert hunter of wolves and quickly outpaced the others in claiming bounties. He was fiercely dedicated and became known to lie under cover for days, waiting for an opportunity to kill a wolf. The skill and fame of Van Helsing grew until neighboring villages began sending him letters. They would beg his help to kill troublesome wolves that had taken children or continually eluded other hunters. The rubles began pouring in and he could soon afford better clothes, equipment, and weapons. Van Helsing eventually expanded his prey to include the huge brown bears that were even harder to kill.

His favorite technique was to conceal several double-spring steel bear traps at the base of a tree. He would then lure the huge bear in with half of a deer or other bait hanging from the tree. He would lie in wait until the bear went for the bait and one or more steel traps sprung to cripple the bear. Then he would quickly end the animal's life with a shot to the head or heart. He lived this life for many years, becoming hardened by the hunt. Van Helsing did not hate the bears as he did the wolves, they could actually be quite gentle and generally avoided humans. However, he would answer any summons to kill any beast that killed a person—even monsters.

Most of these 'monsters' ended up being rabid wolves or dogs. Van Helsing didn't believe real monsters existed in the world. That was until he received a letter about a *diǎvol* that was reported to have killed two families in eastern Transylvania. The rumors claimed the demon entered both homes silently in the night and brutally murdered all men, women, and children inside. No animal tracks of any kind could be found around the homes and all traps and hunting parties had come up empty.

Van Helsing had recently modified a repeating *Zhūgé* crossbow of Chinese design. The composite-recurve design featured a magazine of bolts, which instantly reloaded by working a lever back and forth. This single movement tightened the crossbow string and dropped a new bolt into place with the next ready in the magazine above. This weapon allowed him to shoot up to forty of the deadly bolts in a single minute. It was much

faster than any other weapon and was deadly up to eighty meters. Van Helsing had also added another weapon to his arsenal for close-quarters fighting. The Damascus-steel, double-edge long sword he now carried had a brass pommel and had served him well in dispatching a wolf that had taken him by surprise. He took the repeating crossbow, Prussian rifle, and Damascus-steel sword with him as he traveled to the small village in eastern Transylvania.

He came to the small village where the two families had been killed. Most of the villagers had abandoned their homes, but a few stalwart families remained. Van Helsing didn't bother to speak to any of them. Instead, he dug a shallow hole, lay down in it, and covered himself with brush. He waited like that, repeating crossbow at the ready, for three nights. During the days he scoured the surrounding woods for signs of any large predator but found none. These woods were strangely empty of any animals, as if they had been driven away by wildfire. The moon was full on the evening of the fourth night. Van Helsing had nearly given up when he noticed something strange about the small house on the edge of the village.

It wasn't obvious at first, but the home was too dark and too quiet. Most of the villagers kept candles burning through the night and hung charms to ward off evil spirits. The windows were completely dark now and nothing moved. It was as if the breeze had died completely in the area surrounding only this house. Van Helsing slowly moved aside the brush and raised himself to his full height. He spent a few moments stretching his muscles and letting the blood flow throughout his body.

Then he silently made his way towards the darkened house. He delicately opened the wooden door and slid inside. The house was only a single room, with a cold hearth at one end. In the center of the room was a low table where the family of three shared their meals. A wife, husband, and small girl shared this home.

It was almost too dark to see, save for the light of the full moon that reluctantly entered through the windows. Van Helsing paused while his eyes adjusted to the shadows in the room. As his eyes focused, he saw the young mother and her daughter. They were in the corner of the room on their knees, as if fervently praying—but their hands were not clasped together and their heads were not bowed. Their eyes stared blankly at the darkest spot of the room. They were looking towards the husband, who was also on his knees. No, they were looking past the husband and into the darkness above him. Something was very wrong here. He could taste a foulness in the air. Time seemed to move more slowly, as he raised his crossbow. He looked again at the husband. Was that blood flowing down the man's head? His gaze kept passing over the dark spot in the room without quite focusing on it. Van Helsing strained his eyes and concentrated on the shadow.

It was no shadow, but a hideously horned demon from the pits of hell. The creature was half animal and half man, with the hooves and legs of a stag and the torso and chest of a man. The face was fanged and pointed, misshapen and unnaturally human. At the top of the head were two horns, curved like those of a ram. The demon stood above the man kneeling at his feet, moving its long

arms that ended in sharp talons. He was devouring the scalp and brains of the man in front of him as his wife and children looked on.

Van Helsing's instincts kicked in and he aimed his crossbow, preparing to fire. The demon casually raised one clawed hand and spoke a curse in Van Helsing's mind. "*Imobilă inima si membrele*". His muscles froze in place. The curse had stopped his every move just as the demon had done to the family. His body wouldn't budge. His hand was on the firing mechanism and he had already begun to fire the repeating crossbow—if only he could squeeze the release mechanism a little harder, the bolt would fire. This was not any normal crossbow bolt. Van Helsing had been raised on his mother's stories of the Evil Eye, so he had covered this bolt in holy water mixed with his own spit. He said a silent prayer, asking for his mother's help as the demon continued his meal. The monster's arrogance was astounding as it casually ignored the threat of the crossbow.

Almost...he could almost move. He saw a gleam in the corner of his eye coming from the bolt. A tiny drop of water reflected the moonlight as it perched on the back of the feathers of the bolt. A drop of his saliva mixed with the holy water. It fell and landed on his fingertip. Lightning shot up and down his body as his muscles strained against the demon's curse. He fired the crossbow.

The demon flung up its hand and another curse reverberated through Van Helsing's mind. "*Mizerie și chin să fie peste voi*". The metal string of the crossbow snapped, the sharp edge of the longer piece ricocheting

back and towards his right eye. Searing pain burned in his eye and brought him to his knees. Van Helsing screamed in rage as he realized his eye had been put out. The demon smiled, exposing pointed teeth--until it's large red eyes looked down at the crossbow bolt sticking from its chest. Just as the Holy water and spit had released his body from its paralyzed state, so had it allowed the bolt to fly true and embed deep in the black skin. The creature's distorted human face changed to a look of disbelief as foul-smelling dark blood spurting from the wound, steaming and sizzling as it hit the cold ground.

Van Helsing wasted no time, gritting his teeth against the pain and drawing the long sword from the sheath on his back. As he strode forward, the monster once more raised its terrifying hand--only to have it sliced cleanly off with a mighty swing of the sword. Hot blood splattered on Van Helsing's face, burning the spot where his right eye had been. The demon screamed and spoke the next curse out loud with a raspy voice that came from everywhere at once. "Foolish man. My death will seal your fate and my blood will bind this curse to you forever. Misfortune and misery will follow you wherever you go. Whatever you seek shall be hidden from you, your mind will be paralyzed with terror, and failure and pain will impede your every move."

With a defiant yell, Van Helsing swung his sword with two hands and separated the unnatural horned head from its body. Only when the lifeless body of the demon hit the ground, did the family finally regain the ability to move. Now released from the curse, the father's

kneeling body fell over sideways. The mother and daughter immediately began screaming and Van Helsing was unable to comfort them as the sound brought the other villagers running. They all watched as the dead form of the creature suddenly caught fire and began burning. Van Helsing extinguished the fire on the severed right hand that had cursed him. This he kept as a trophy of his kill.

Van Helsing was rewarded generously with the villager's silver for his efforts, though it seemed a poor trade for the loss of his right eye. The wound continued to pain him as he covered it with a patch and set to repairing his repeating crossbow. The pain was a constant dull throb and he traveled to a nearby doctor to see if anything could be done to ease it.

Doctor Ivan Vladimir was an elderly Russian doctor with a long trailing beard and squinty eyes behind a pair of bifocal spectacles. He examined his patient carefully. "A very strange injury this is. How did you say it happened again?"

Van Helsing thought it better to keep his response free of as much detail as possible. "A broken crossbow string."

Doctor Vladimir ran his fingers through his beard thoughtfully. "Yes, that's right. Very unfortunate that. I have a special ointment which may help it to heal somewhat. The damage doesn't appear as bad as you described. It is possible you might eventually gain partial vision in the eye. You said you have silver, yes?"

"That's impossible. I felt the eye crush and die. Yes, I have silver for all the good it does."

The Doctor chuckled quietly to himself. "Best to leave the medicine to me my boy. The damage isn't as bad as you think. I can already see new tissue forming around the wound."

"Pass me a mirror, I want to see it."

"As you wish, but the area is still irritated. I have cleaned out the infection as best as I can. The ointment will help, but the healing is up to your body now. It's amazing really, the resilience of the human body. I have studied it for some time and am still unlocking new mysteries every day. I have successfully treated even the most terrible injuries."

The Doctor reached over to a side table covered in dusty books and strange instruments. After a moment he found a small mirror and passed it to Van Helsing as he continued speaking in his slow and rhythmic way. "Why, I even was able to save a young girl from a ghastly bite to the neck from a bear. She was bleeding everywhere and I was able to slow the bleeding enough to stitch the bite closed."

Van Helsing paused with the mirror half-raised to his face. "What did you say?"

"It was a matter of slowing the beating of her heart and replacing the lost blood while I sealed the damage. The very same ointment I am giving you helped to stop the wound from fouling."

Van Helsing's thoughts went back to his father dying slowly in his arms. "You could teach this knowledge to others? Could you teach me to save those who are dying?"

The Doctor's face brightened with the prospect of having someone to do the heavy lifting and cleaning. He smiled at the thought of having someone to listen to his many theories and experiments. "Why yes my boy, of course. I will make you a bargain, keep your silver for now and become my pupil. Help me with my experiments and the cleaning and I will teach you everything that I know."

"You will teach me to save people?" Van Helsing considered the Doctor's words as he viewed the reflection of his swollen and ravaged eye. The aged man was right. It didn't look quite as bad as he had imagined.

"I will if you follow my instructions carefully and dedicate yourself to learning. I will also provide the ointment for your eye at no cost."

"You are very kind. Consider the bargain struck."



A SEA VOYAGE

Dorian had never worked so hard in all his life as he did aboard the H.M.S. Victory. His hands were raw from scrubbing the deck and working the sails and lines in the rigging, his skin was burnt and cracked from long hours in the sun, and his body was exhausted from constantly climbing up and down the masts of the ship—or they would have been if not for his amazing ability to heal. He went to bed each night with his quarter ration of grog, exhausted and physically drained. Each morning he awoke completely healed and refreshed. Unfortunately, his resilience had only served to convince the ship's Boatswain Angus Cain that he was shirking his duty.

Bo'sun Cain, as the men un-affectionately called him, was a hard man to please. He was tall and well muscled from a life at sea, with a bald head and two giant, gold earrings. He wore a mustache, carefully curled with the same oil that was used on the mast. He rarely wore his officer's uniform or hat, preferring the standard slops that the rest of the crew wore. His collar and sleeves were decorated with a full white stripe, but his true marks of office were the pipes around his neck and the cudgel in his hand. The Bo'sun used his pipes to send high-pitched commands to the crew when the sea drowned out even the loudest voice. His cudgel he used continually in disciplining the crew. Dorian had become quite intimate

with the Bo'sun's cudgel and had even come to consider it a friend. Mild beatings with soft, wooden stick were easily endured. To see the Bo'sun without his cudgel in his hand meant that it would only be replaced with the lash or the dreaded cat o' nine tails.

"Seaman Lynch, should I have the ship's boy show you how to tie the knots properly on the aft rigging? Seaman Lynch!"

A stinging blow across the back of his legs reminded Dorian of his assumed name. He responded in the way that would infuriate the Bo'sun the least. "No Sir, I will re-tie them at once." He ran over to the mizzenmast and quickly scaled the rope ladder to the rigging. He set to untying and resting the complicated sheet bend knots. It didn't matter that they were perfectly done—the Bo'sun wanted them re-tied. The other men thought Dorian a lickspittle, but he was simply afraid of anyone discovering his ability to heal after having his back shredded into weeping meat by repeated whipping with the cat o' nine tails.

The real motivation for his fellow seaman's jealousy came from the agility that Dorian displayed in maneuvering among the masts and top sails of the ship. They envied his strength, balance, and comfort when climbing the swaying masts. He was far too young to display this level of seamanship and that earned him the worst watches at night. Dorian took it all in stride, finding that he needed sleep less and less, his body healing any exhaustion that would cause other men to fall asleep on their watch. His keen eyesight, particularly at night, had won him the begrudging respect of the other seamen—

although they were quick to cover it up with insults comparing him to a tavern wench or young farmer's daughter.

During the third watch, Dorian was often the one chosen to make the high climb up the mainmast to the crow's nest and serve as the lookout. This was a particularly important role when the Lord Captain Elgin decided to make up for lost time by sailing at night under the light of the huge oil lamps mounted on the bow. It was risky to be underway at night, but they were behind schedule after several days of a calm sea. The Captain had deemed the risk necessary and ordered half-sails, effectively cutting the ship's speed to about five knots.

Lord Captain Elgin was a middle-aged man of average height who had seen his fair share of war. His shoulders were still broad and muscular and he carried himself with confidence. His very look demanded respect and the hard lines of his eyes expected every order to be carried out flawlessly and immediately. He wore a long, brown beard and mustache with tufts of grey hair at the sides of his short hair.

The Captain's uniform was an expensive, white linen waistcoat with trimmed breeches laced with gold. Over this, he wore an elaborate dark-blue captain's coat, gleaming with a double row of gold buttons and decorated with white tassels and a gold sash. His collar and sleeves displayed his rank with three gold bars and her majesty's crown.

"Sub-Lieutenant Purcell, the watch is yours until the Boatswain relieves you. I will be in my quarters if the need arises. Good night." The Captain turned on his heel

without waiting for Sub-Lieutenant Purcell's salute, which the young officer gave a few moments too late.

"Yes sir," he said as he stood sharply at attention and raised his fist to his brow to salute the now empty deck. "Seaman Lynch, please climb aloft to the crow's nest."

Dorian stretched his aching muscles briefly before responding. "There's nothing out there but empty water. Is it really necessary?"

Sub-Lieutenant Purcell bristled. "That's no way to speak to your commanding officer. Now jump to it Seaman or I'll wake up the Bo'sun and give him your name as the reason."

Dorian's eyes grew larger at the threat. "Yes, sir!"

Sub-Lieutenant Purcell's face softened. Dorian was much older in age, but by appearance, the two were very close in years and might even have been friends if not for their difference in stations. The officer glanced back at the way the Captain had gone to make sure he was out of earshot and smiled. "In truth, Lynch, I have never encountered more than a few floating bits of wood when sailing at night. Nevertheless, the Captain demands a man in the crow's nest and you have our sharpest eyes—so up you go. I'll see if I can requisition an extra share of grog for you."

Dorian grinned at that. "Thank you, Purcell." He turned and quickly began to scale the rope ladder upwards, entering a new world ruled by the wind and colonized by the massive sails that rode them. High aloft, the sway of the ship became more pronounced. A large wave could make holding onto the mast or rigging more

like riding an enraged bull. Many a man had fallen to his death while trying to trim the sails in a storm, but for Dorian it was an exciting challenge of his newfound strength and agility.

He reached the top in a few exhilarating minutes. The climb put him nearly sixty meters above the deck below. Unlike the crow's nest of other ships, this one was more of an open platform. The sides were exposed to the air, with only a few ropes and pulleys in some areas and was wide enough to walk around easily. While on the night watch, he was expected to regularly patrol all vantage points while keeping a hand on the rigging or mast. It was freezing with the wind whipping across the night sea, but the biggest challenge was staying awake. The unending black water stretched out endlessly in a way that clouded the mind. Dorian had made the mistake of falling asleep on duty twice already. The first time the Bo'sun had mocked him relentlessly as he woke him with a rough kick to the ribs. "Oh, pardon me yer lordship, I didn't mean to wake you. Check out this arse bandit here lads, adrift like he's nursing at a babies ration packs." It was several days later when he had fallen asleep the second time. The Bo'sun's cudgel did the waking and Dorian was left with a cracked rib and several bruises by the time the beating was done. The Bo'sun spoke only a grave warning, "Fall asleep on watch a third time and I'll lash all the skin from your back with a cat o' nine tails."

After that, Dorian resolved to stay awake on watch no matter what it took. He began to imagine shapes out in the dark sea and guess as to their origin. Soon Dorian realized the shapes were not his imagination. Most men

could see nothing beyond the light that the large lanterns cast out over the water, but if Dorian shielded his eyes from the lanterns, his night vision would snap into focus, allowing him to see in kilometers in every direction. He could make out giant, scaled fish swimming in the waters surrounding the boat. Sometimes he would see a large sea turtle, briefly returning to the surface for air and exposing a moss-covered shell. Other times he could make out groups of glowing jellyfish or squid, shimmering with bright blue lights to lure in schools of fish.

He was watching this peculiar site to starboard for several minutes before turning his gaze towards the bow. There, lying in the path of the ship was a huge, floating object surrounded by the fins of sharks. He squinted against the light from bow lanterns and realized in shock what it was—the great carcass of a whale.

Dorian cupped his hands and called out in a loud voice. “Turn to port! There’s something in the water ahead!”

Sub-Lieutenant Purcell looked up with a confused expression. “What’s that?”

Dorian yelled as loud as he could against the wind. “Turn to port! Whale in the water!”

Understanding dawned on Purcell’s face as he called out to the ship master behind the giant knobbed wheel to make the turn. “Hard to port! All hands to the bow with hooks to repel debris!” The officer blew three shrill notes on his pipe and then rushed to the front of the ship to help the other men in readying to push the carcass away from the ship and avoid a potentially

deadly impact. Dorian began descending the ladder rope as fast as he could. The ship was moving too fast and the whale was too close. They would be unable to turn in time. His hand missed a rung on the ladder and his foot slipped and shot through the narrow square made by the rope. He felt suddenly weightless as his second hand grasped at thin air—he was falling.

The side of the ship struck the bloated whale carcass mid-turn and the impact likely saved Dorian from landing on his head and breaking his neck. As the hull ground against the slick blubber of the whale, it abruptly shuddered to a stop. This caused some of the rope to sway under Dorian and break his fall just before he slammed into the deck. He was able to twist his head to the side slammed to the wood on his shoulder, shattering the bone.

With a loud cry, he blinked through the tears in his eyes, suddenly fuzzy from the pain surging through his body. Dorian could just make out the now dark lanterns on the bow—something was wrong. The lanterns had been extinguished as water sprung up as two behemoths collided. Where were the five men with hooks who had been standing there a moment ago? Purcell was gone.

“Man overboard!” The call rang out from the ship master behind the wheel of the ship. Suddenly, Dorian remember the fins that had been circling the whale as they feasted on its rich flesh. With a groan, he pulled himself up to a sitting position. His right arm hung limply at his side, but already he could feel the bone beneath knitting itself back together. It was excruciatingly painful. Dorian Lurched to his feet as other men began

streaming up from the deck below. They had been alerted by the ship master's call, but with the lamps extinguished, they were unable to see the men in the cold water below. Between the freezing water and the feeding sharks, they would not survive long enough for the lamps to be re-lit.

Dorian shook his head to clear it and ran towards the bow. His sharp eyes searched desperately in the water below. He could only see three bodies below. Two were clinging desperately to the floating whale carcass. The third was thrashing in the water in an attempt to gain a handhold to the slippery blubber. Purcell's panicked splashes had attracted the attention of the sharks and they were circling him slowly. Dorian saw the largest of the predators swim behind Purcell. The shark whipped its tail fin and the jaws surged forward as the creature exploded towards Purcell. Dorian had no time to think and leapt with all his might from the side of the boat. He landed on the back half of shark, which suddenly seemed twice the size now that he was up close. The shark immediately rotated back with razor teeth spread wide. Dorian had only enough time to put his left hand between his face and the shark's snout before it clamped down and immediately released, before retreating to assess this new threat. He cried out in pain as the flesh gaped wide and blood poured out of his forearm. The bite had cut down to the bone and had nearly split his arm in half.

In seconds, the other sharks in the water went into a frenzy, the smell of the fresh blood exciting them. One of the other seamen holding onto the whale began

screaming as a smaller shark began ravaging his leg. The large shark had recovered from its surprise and was now circling Dorian. The wound was healing very slowly. Too much blood must have leaked out, or perhaps his ability to heal had been overwhelmed from mending his shoulder. Dorian felt light headed and struggled to turn in the water as the fish circled him. He had only moments to prepare. With a grin, he thought to himself, *at least I know what it feels like to be eaten alive.*

It was not long before the cloud of blood convinced the giant shark to attack. With his left arm a gory mess, Dorian kicked his legs with all his might and swam just enough to the side to avoid the jaws of the shark. He slammed his weakened right hand into the gill slits that flashed in front of him, pulling with all his might. The tough skin of the shark ripped open and the fish flung its head backward. Blood gushed from the side of the fish and it swam away, gasping as if to catch its breath.

Dorian managed to make it over to Purcell and hauled the wet body onto the whale carcass. He was able to do the same for the second man, but the third seaman had already been dragged to the watery depths below by the smaller sharks. The ship's lanterns sprung to life as Dorian collapsed and lost consciousness.