

# DHAMPIR



Barb & J. C. Hendee



A ROC BOOK



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# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Epilogue](#)

“*Dhampir* kept me turning pages . . . with its complex heroes, refreshingly multifaceted villains, and carefully choreographed fight scenes, this novel opened a broad new world. Well done.”—Mindy Klasky, author of *The Glasswrights’ Journeyman*

## IN THE HEAT OF BATTLE

Once more shifting to the far side of the bed, Magiere threw herself to roll across it. The nobleman made another dash to follow her across the room. When he did, she stopped short, crouched upon the bed, and struck out with the falchion so fast he didn’t have time to block.

Boots skidding on the floor, he tried to pull back, his torso leaning away from her swing. The blow missed his collarbone but sliced a shallow gash down his chest.

“What—”

The rest of his words were lost in a gasping inhale. His wide-eyed gaze shifted to Magiere’s sword. As his brow creased in pain, his teeth snapped together hard and clenched. Shock got the better of him and his grip on his own sword faltered as its point dragged through the debris of the desk.

Magiere couldn’t answer him, couldn’t remember how to speak. She didn’t want to cut him with the blade anymore. She wanted to rip his throat out. The front of her jaws began to ache and would not close completely, as if her teeth shifted, or grew. . . .

“*Dhampir* is a fabulous entertainment wrought with mystery, adventure, and sharp-toothed wit. Barbara and J. C. Hendee conjure a misty world populated with lively undead villains and an appealing pair of rogues-turned-heroes you’ll find yourself rooting for from page one. Fast-paced action and mounting suspense will keep you turning the pages long after the sun’s gone down. (Just be sure to hang the garlic by the window.)”—Mark Anthony, author of *Beyond the Pale*

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ROC

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For Jaclyn, our little starving artist  
raised by two starving artists

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## Prologue

The village appeared deserted but for thin trails of smoke escaping clay chimneys to drift up and dissolve in the darkness. All doors were barred, all window shutters latched tight until only the bare wisps of light from candles or lamps seeped between their cracks. There was no one in the village muddy center path to see the night-shadowed object flitter toward a cottage near the tree line.

The shadow stopped, hesitating next to the cottage. Slowly, its form shifted and expanded as it ceased to consciously hide itself. Nothingness became booted feet and reaching arms, a tall and slender torso, and a head with two pinprick glimmers for eyes. It scaled a tree rapidly and jumped onto its goal.

Settling upon the thatched roof, it slid on its belly to crawl headfirst down one wall. Then it stopped, poised at the top of a shuttered window. One finger extended to slip a clawlike fingernail between the shutters. Prying and pulling, it worked at the shutter until the latch finally gave with a sharp snap. The figure paused, waiting, listening for any answering sound from within the room. When none came, it pulled the shutters open.

On a bed inside lay a small, old woman. Long silver hair, tied in a braid, rested next to her head across a yellowed linen pillow. A faded patchwork quilt of carmine and teal squares covered her.

The creature hung its head down through the window. Its voice sounded like an echo across a vast plain as it whispered, "May I come in?"

The old woman moved slightly in her sleep.

Again the voice asked with a touch of yearning, "Please, old mother, may I come in?"

She moaned and rolled, her face turning to the window. On her wrinkled brow was a small, white scar half smothered by the creases of aged skin. Her eyes remained closed in sleep as she murmured a reply. "Yes . . . yes, come in."

The visitor reached one arm through the opening and upward to set its fingernails in the wall. It crawled over the upper edge of the window, letting its feet swing inward, then dropped soundlessly onto the bedroom floor. Crossing to the bed, it quickly reached out with one hand and clamped it down over the old woman's mouth.

She woke, eyes wide and frightened, but only for a brief moment. Then she stared with an empty gaze into the eyes above her. The night visitor relaxed its grip, lowering its head to her throat. All the room became still and quiet and timeless.

Then its head swung up to stare at the open window. A dark stain covered the side of the old woman's throat. The visitor began to lower its head again to the old woman, but paused. With an own tilt of its head, its gaze returned to the window as it listened.

Outside, someone was walking the village path. The visitor moved to the window.

Strolling along the village path was a young woman wearing studded leather armor and high, scuffed boots pulled over earth-colored breeches. In one hand she held a short pole, and in the other a long

knife with which she worked at sharpening the pole's end into a crude point. At her side hung a short falchion in its worn leather scabbard. The night was too dark for most eyes, but as the woman passed between moon-shadows of cottages and nearby trees, the visitor saw her dark hair with hidden shimmers of red that offset smooth, young skin little more than two decades of age. No true fear or wariness showed in the woman's posture as she moved through the village, fashioning the wooden short-spear.

"Hunter," it whispered to itself with amusement.

The pathetic humor of what it saw was too much to hold in, and it laughed under its breath as it leaped out the window to spider-walk up the cottage wall onto the roof. The dark form shrank and vanished into the night forest.

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## Chapter One

Long past sundown, Magiere walked into another shabby Stravinan village without really seeing it. Peasants lived the same way everywhere. All their bleak, shapeless huts began to blur together after six years, and Magiere only noted their number as a gauge of population. No more than a hundred people lived here, and perhaps as few as fifty. None showed themselves this late in the night, though she heard the creak of a door or window shutter as she passed by, someone peeking out when she wasn't looking. The only other sound was the scrape of her hunting knife on hard wood as she sharpened the end of the short wooden pole no longer than her arm.

Darkness didn't frighten her. It suggested to her none of the fear-conjured threats that made the peasants shudder behind their barred doors. She checked her falchion in its sheath, making sure she could draw it out easily if needed, and continued her stroll toward the far end of the village. A drizzle of rain began, which soon matted down her black hair, smothering any crimson tint it might have shown in the light. With her pale skin, she must look as baneful to the villagers as their visions of the creature they'd hired her to eliminate.

Not far outside the village she stopped at the communal graveyard to survey the fresh mounds of earth, each surrounded by tin lanterns put there to keep evil spirits from seizing the bodies of the dead. There were no headstones or markers as yet on these new graves—they had been buried in haste before such could be prepared. She turned back through the village again, studying the buildings more closely this time as she looked for the one most likely to be the common house.

Most of the peasants would be gathered in some communal building, seeking safety in numbers. She glanced around for anything large enough, but all the huts looked the same—drab, weatherworn timbers with thatch roofs and clay pot-chimneys. They were dismal and silent, like everything else in this hope-abandoned land. Garlands of dried garlic bulbs hung across the few windows. The only signs of life were the few streams of smoke rising into the night sky. Slight tinges of iron and char scented the wet air. An unattended forge must be smoldering somewhere nearby. People dropped everything at dusk in times like these.

Movement caught Magiere's eye. Two shivering figures ran across the muddy road. Their tattered rags exposed filthy skin. Magiere absently slipped her knife into its sheath, then gathered her own warm cloak a bit tighter. The figures scurried toward the graveyard, trying to keep the gusting breeze and rain from snuffing out their lanterns.

"Hello," Magiere called out softly. They both jumped and whirled toward the sound.

Thin, wretched faces twisted in alarm. One of them backed away, and the other jerked up the wooden pitchfork he was carrying. Magiere remained still and let them see what she was, but she gripped the wooden pole a little tighter. Understanding the mentality of these people was a large part of her job. Very slowly, beneath her cloak, her free hand settled on the falchion's hilt, ready to draw. She was paid to take care around panic-stricken peasants.

The man holding the pitchfork peered uncertainly through the rain at her studded leather armor and wooden pole. The fear on his face changed into a vague semblance of hope.

“You are the hunter?” he asked.

She gave a slight nod. “Have you more dead?”

Both men let out a slow breath of relief and stumbled forward.

“No . . . no more dead, but the zupan’s son is close.” The second man gasped, then beckoned with his hand. “Come quickly.” The peasants turned and fled back up the muddy center path.

She followed, stopping when they did at a door with a small sign above that had been worn unreadable long ago. This rough building had to be their common house, since the village was far too remote to have an inn catering to travelers. “Zupan” was their name for a village chief. He, along with some of the villagers, would be waiting inside for her.

An expectant sigh slipped through her lips as she wondered what this zupan would be like—a cold hard sell she hoped. The ones who fawned over her, in hope that she wouldn’t suck the village dry, were the most repulsive. It was easier when they resisted, until she made them realize there was no other reasonable prospect than to pay her price or wait to die. The quietly agreeable ones were the most dangerous. Once the job was finished, she would have to watch for unexpected company in the shadows on her way out of town, ready to reclaim their payment with a harvest blade or shearing knife through her back.

“Open up!” one of her escorts shouted. “We have the hunter with us.”

The door creaked inward. The orange-red glow of firelight spilled out, along with an overwhelming stench of garlic and sweat. Magiere glanced down into the eyes of an age-stunted woman clutching a stained shawl, face drawn and sallow as though she hadn’t slept in days. At the sight of Magiere, the woman’s expression altered to one of desperate hope. Magiere had seen it too many times.

“Thank the guardian spirits!” the woman whispered. “We heard you would come, but I didn’t . . .” She trailed off. “Please come in. I’ll get you a hot drink.”

Magiere stepped into the thick heat of the small common house. One thing she hated most about her vocation was all of the traveling in the cold. Eight men and three women were crowded into the tiny room. On a table to one side lay an unconscious boy. At least two people at any given moment hovered close to the boy in case he died.

A superstitious lot, these peasants believed that evil spirits sought out the bodies of the newly dead, using the corpses to prey upon and feed off the blood of the living. The first thirty-six hours were the most critical for a malevolent spirit to enter a corpse. Magiere had heard all the other legends and folk stories; this was just one of the more popular. Some thought vampirism spread like a disease, or that such creatures were simply evil people cursed by fate to an undead existence. The details varied; the results were the same—long nights spent shivering from fear more than the cold as they waited for a champion to save them.

A huge, dark-haired man, like an ancient grizzly with a gray-stubble beard, stood at the table’s head, watching the boy’s closed eyes. It was a long moment before he lifted his gaze to Magiere and acknowledged her presence. His clothing looked similar to everyone else’s, perhaps with one or two less layers of grime, but his bearing marked him as the zupan. He pushed through the overcrowded room to face her.

“I’m Petre Evanko,” he said in a surprisingly soft voice. He motioned to the woman who had

greeted Magiere. "My wife, Anna."

---

Magiere politely nodded, but didn't introduce herself. Mystery was part of the game.

Zupan Petre stood for a moment, taking in her appearance, one that Magiere had carefully tailored long ago for her work.

Studded-leather armor marked her as warrior too much on the move for anything heavier or bulkier. The volume of her cloak made it uncertain what might be hiding beneath. Her thick black hair with its red accents was bound in a long, plain braid, sensible and efficient. Around her neck hung two strange amulets no one would be able to identify, and which she only left in view when working a village. She carried a short, pointed pole made of wood, with a leather-covered handle.

Magiere swung the pack off her shoulder, its top flap swinging open as it settled at her feet. Zupan Petre looked down at the mixed contents of unlabeled jars, urns, and pouches, some of which were filled with strange herbs and powders. These were all the accoutrements expected for someone who battled the undead.

"I'm honored, Zupan Petre," Magiere said. "Your message reached me two weeks ago. I regret my delay, but there are so few hunters and so great a demand."

His expression changed to gratitude. "Don't apologize. Come and see my son. He's dying."

"I'm not a healer," Magiere quickly interjected. "I can remove your undead, but I can't cure the damage already done."

Anna reached out to touch her cloak. "Please just look at him. You may see something we cannot."

Magiere glanced at the boy, and then moved closer. The other villagers shuffled out of her way. She was always careful to explain her limitations and give no one open cause to accuse her of making false promises. The boy was pale and barely breathing, but Magiere grew puzzled. There were no sores or fever, no sign of injury or illness.

"How long has he been like this?"

"Two days now," Anna whispered. "Just like the others."

"Were they all young boys?"

"No, one older man and two young women."

No pattern. Magiere stared intently at the sleeping boy and then turned to Anna. "Take off his shirt."

She waited quietly for Anna to finish before examining the boy's arms and chest. Then she inspected the joints of his limbs. His flesh was intact but so pale it seemed almost blue, even in the amber firelight from the hearth. She lifted his head. Her eyes narrowed slightly at the sight of two oozing holes under his left ear, but she kept her expression guarded.

Her gaze shifted quickly to Zupan Petre's face. "Have you seen these?"

The zupan's bristly brows wrinkled in a frown. "Of course. Is that not the way of a vampire, to bleed its victim through the throat?"

Magiere looked back at the holes. "Yes, but . . ."

The holes were large, but perhaps it had been a large snake or some kind of serpent. Powerful venom could account for the pallored skin and shallow breathing.

“Has someone been with him all the time?” she asked.

Petre crossed his arms. “Anna or myself. We would never leave him like this.”

Magiere nodded. “Anyone else?”

“No,” Anna whispered. “Why are you asking such questions?”

Magiere checked herself and quickly salved their uncertainty. “No two undeads kill in exactly the same way. Knowing the details will help me prepare.”

The old woman relaxed visibly, looking almost sheepish, and her husband nodded in approval.

Magiere returned to her pack by the door. Two villagers, who’d been carefully peering over its contents, quickly stepped back. She laid down her pole and from out of her pack pulled a large braided container, its shape somewhere between a bowl and an urn, with a fitted hard-leather lid. All over the lid and bowl were scratches and scribbles of unintelligible symbols.

“I need this to catch the vampire’s spirit. Many undeads are spirit creatures.”

Everyone watched in rapt interest, and when she knew she had their complete attention, she changed the subject. It was time to talk about price.

“I know your village is suffering, Zupan, but the costs of my materials are high.”

Petre was ready and motioned her to a back room. “My family went door-to-door last week for donations. We are not rich, but all have helped by giving something.”

He opened the door, and she glanced inside at goods piled upon a canvas quilt spread over the dirt floor. There were two full slabs of smoke-cured pork, four blocks of white cheese, about twenty eggs, three wolf pelts, and two small silver symbols—perhaps for some deity who had not answered their prayers. All in all, it was a very typical first offer.

“I’m sorry,” Magiere said. “You don’t understand. Food is welcome, but the quilt is of no use to me, and the rest won’t cover my costs. I often work and gain no profit, but I can’t work at a loss. Without enough coin, I at least need goods I can sell to cover what I spend to make ready for battle. Most of my materials are rare and costly to acquire and prepare.”

Petre turned white, genuinely shocked. He apparently had thought the offer quite generous. “This is all we have. I sent my family out begging. You cannot let us die. Or are we now to bargain for our lives?”

“And what good would it do the next village if I left here unable to prepare for their defense?” she returned.

This exchange was customary for Magiere, though Zupan Petre appeared to be more intelligent than other village leaders she’d dealt with in the past. She kept her expression sympathetic but firm. Villagers almost always had some little treasure hidden away where tax collectors couldn’t find it. It might be a family heirloom, possibly a small gem or some silver taken off a dead mercenary, but it was here.

“You’ve come all this way, and you’ll do nothing?” The flesh beneath his eyes was turning gray.

Anna reached out and touched her husband's shirt. "Give her the seed money, Petre." Her voice was quiet, but quivered with fear.

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"No," he answered sharply.

Anna turned to the others, who so far had watched in silence. "What good is seed if we are all dead before spring?"

Petre breathed in sharply. "How long will we live with nothing to eat next year? How long will we live in the lord's dungeons when we cannot pay the tax?"

Magiere stayed out of this predictable bickering. They would go back and forth, for and against, until their fears began to win over. Then would follow the hope that if they could just overcome the terror, something would come later to see them through the next year. She knew these peasants too well. They were all the same.

A short flurry of arguments ensued, but Magiere busied herself inspecting the contents of her pack and ignored the discussion, as if the outcome was obvious. Those in favor of keeping the seed coins and taking a chance with the vampire were soon squelched. The argument faded so quickly it would have been startling, had Magiere not heard it so many times before.

At first no one spoke. Then a lanky, middle-aged man stepped from the corner of the room to face the zupan squarely. From the char smudges on his leather apron, he was likely what passed for a blacksmith in a village of this size.

"Give her the coins, Petre. We have no choice."

Petre left the hovel and shortly returned, panting. He stared at Magiere with burning eyes, as if she were now the source of their suffering and not the one summoned to save them.

"Here is what's left after this year's taxes." He threw the bag to her, and she caught it. "Next year there may be no crop."

"You are free to watch," she replied, and several villagers cringed back into the room's shadows. "I will control the undead. Stay in your homes and look through the shutters to see how well your seed coins are spent."

The hatred in Petre's eyes faded to be replaced by defeat. "Yes, we will watch you destroy the monster."

The rain had subsided slightly. Magiere knelt in the center of the village path, illuminated by two torches, hafts stuck in the ground to either side of the path. She placed the brass urn firmly on the wet soil and twisted it a few times until satisfied it was securely settled and would not tip over. Beside her she set a small wooden mallet.

Anna and two village men were watching from narrow openings in the common cottage's shutters. A few other eyes peered from window shutters in hovels and huts around the village. But the zupan would not be satisfied with a voyeur's view. He stood within shouting distance, just outside the door where he'd surrendered the future of his village to a killer of the undead.

Magiere took a bottle from her pack and poured a fine white powder into one palm. She then sifted



it back and forth between her hands. With a sudden flourish, she threw the handful high in the air and waited. The tiny particles didn't fall but hung in the air like a vaporous cloud, creating a wondrous glow all around her as the particles caught the torch light. Gasps from the peasants reached her ears.

From another bottle, she poured red power into her hand and threw that aloft as well, with a wild flourish of her arm. It danced between the white particles, contrasting and moving like sand-grains and fireflies.

Magiere stood in silence, eyes closed for a moment. She opened them again without looking at anything particular. Amid the hovering powders, her pale skin and dark hair made her seem a wrath of light, unliving, as if she were transformed to something kin to the night creatures she hunted. Each time a swirl of red power in the air drifted by her head, its sparkling reflection of the torchlight echoed in her tresses with streaks of crimson. She reached down and picked up the stake, holding the leather grip tightly.

"The red calls the beast, like blood," she shouted. "It can't resist." She lowered herself to a crouch, braid falling forward over her left shoulder, and stared up the path where she knew the creature would come.

A pale flicker darted between the buildings.

Her finger pointed to a decrepit hovel ten paces down the path ahead of her. "There! See, it comes!"

With the fingertips of her free hand, she flipped the lid off the brass urn and grabbed another bottle of red powder, flinging the contents into the air around her.

Without warning, something solid collided with her back, knocking her forward with enough force to daze her. Behind her, Anna screamed. Magiere spit out mud and spun on the ground out of the attacker's way. She scrambled back to a crouch, turning in all directions to see what had hit her. The path lay empty.

For long moments she turned from side to side, watching between the huts of the village for any sign of movement. The zupan had backed up against the common cottage door, eyes wide, but he remained outside, watching.

"What in—"

It hit again from the side, pitching her back down. Water soaked through her leggings and washed over her armor as she skidded across the mud, until her shoulder struck the haft of one torch stuck in the ground. The torch toppled and sizzled out.

Magiere was up again, searching. The shadows around her deepened with only one torch still burning.

She could hear window shutters slamming closed amid shouts and wails as the villagers panicked. A passing glimpse as she spun about showed that even Petre had now stepped inside the door, ready to slam it shut if need be. The zupan shouted, "There, to your left!"

A blur appeared in the corner of her sight, and she ducked a swinging arm. She made a grab for it, but it passed. "No more games," she hissed under her breath.

Her hand closed over woolen material, and she jerked back.

There came a sharp tear as her own force strained against that of her attacker, but the fabric held.

Unable to keep her balance, her body twisted to the side as she and her opponent both spun about where she refused to let go of its garment. They hit the ground together, each scrambling in the mud for a foothold. She turned on one knee to face it and readied the stake. Its head lifted in the torchlight.

Thin and filthy, its flesh glowed as white as the first of her floating powders. Silver-blond hair swung in muddied tendrils around a narrow, dirt-splattered face with slanted amber eyes and slightly pointed ears. The cape she had managed to grasp hung in rotted tatters around its shoulders.

Magiere scuttled back two steps, still gripping the leather-handled stake, and tried to find better footing without taking her eyes off the white figure.

It charged again, moving fast. A claw hand slipped inside her guard and snatched the tail of her braid. They were both soaked in rain and mud, making all movements slick and desperate. She fell to the ground, on purpose this time, and rolled. When their tumble finished, Magiere came up on top and rammed downward with her stake, holding it as tightly as possible.

Blood sprayed upward from its chest as it thrashed on the ground, screaming in a keening wail. Magiere bit down on her own tongue by accident in an effort to hold the thing down, stake securely in its heart.

The creature thrashed wildly, clawing at the stake. Its torso arched, half lifting Magiere off the ground, and a guttural scream came up from deep in its throat. Then its body went slack and splashed back down in the mud.

Magiere held on until the creature was completely still, then quickly scrambled to the brass urn. Picking it up, she snatched the mallet and swung it hard against the container's side.

A piercing clang reverberated in the air. Magiere dashed around to the far side of the body, striking the container again and again. Standing in the cottage doorway, the zupan clapped his hands over his ears against the painful clamor. As the last clang faded, Magiere slapped the lid tightly over the brass jar, sealing it. She stood there, the village quiet except for her own panting.

Zupan Petre started to rush forward, perhaps to see the monster close up, or to offer some assistance, but she held out her hand to keep him back.

"No," she gasped, weaving back and forth in exhaustion. "Stay where you are. Even slain, they can be dangerous."

"Hunter . . ." Petre searched for words, his expression a mix of emotions. "Have you ever seen such a beast?"

Looking at the blood-soaked form on the muddy ground, Magiere shook her head. "No, Zupan, I have not."

As the zupan watched in stunned silence, Magiere pulled a rope and dusty canvas out of her pack. The canvas was mottled with dark stains long dried into the fabric. She wrapped the corpse in it, tying a rope loop around the ankles of the bundled body. Then she quickly gathered her equipment into the pack and slung it over one shoulder. The sealed brass jar was cradled under her arm.

"It is over then?" asked Petre.

"No." Magiere took hold of the rope. "Now I must properly dispose of the remains and send its spirit to final rest. In the morning, you will be free."

“Do you need help?” Petre Evanko seemed hesitant to ask, but would not let his fear hold him back.

“I must be alone for this,” she answered bluntly, making her answer a command to be obeyed. “The spirit will not go willingly. It will fight to live again—fight harder than what you’ve seen here—and should there be another body nearby to take for its own, all of my efforts will be wasted. No one enters the woods until morning, or I won’t be responsible for what happens. If all goes well, we will not see each other again.”

Petre nodded his understanding. “Our thanks, Hunter.”

Magiere said nothing more as she headed into the woods, dragging the corpse behind her.

Mud had seeped into every available opening in Magiere’s armor and clothing. The grit against her skin, combined with the long walk hauling the body and her equipment deep into the woods, put her in an irritable mood. She stepped out of the trees into a small clearing and looked behind herself one more time. It would be a shame to have to kill some foolish villager, but she saw no sign of anyone and could hear nothing but the natural speech of the trees in the wind. She dropped her burdens.

A low rumble of a growl came from the bushes at the clearing’s far side, and Magiere stiffened. Leaves shivered, and a huge dog stepped out into the open. Though he was tall and wolfish in build and color, his grays were a little bluer and his whites a little brighter than any wolf’s. Strange eyes of near silver-blue glittered back at Magiere. With a low grunt, the animal looked toward the bundle of sticks on the ground behind her.

“Oh, be quiet, Chap,” she muttered. “After all this time you ought to know my sound.”

Magiere’s spine arched suddenly as she felt two feet slam into her back. Her eyelids snapped wide open in cold surprise and she slid across the clearing’s wet mulch floor, thumping up against the base of a maple. She scrambled to her feet. Across the clearing, thrashing its way out of the stained canvas, stood the white figure with the stake through its heart.

“Damn you, Magiere! That hurt.” He reached down to grip the butt of the stake. “You didn’t oil it properly, did you?”

Magiere rushed across the clearing and kicked his feet out from under him. The slender figure dropped on his back with a grunt, and she was on top of him, pinning his arms to the ground with her knees. Both her hands wrapped tightly around the butt of the stake.

Anger swelled up inside her like a fever. Strands of muddy, rain-soaked hair clung to her face as she glared down at the white figure beneath her. She jerked the stake up.

“You irritating half-wit!” she snapped. “If you’d stuck to the plan and not sent me rolling around in the muck, maybe the sheath wouldn’t have jammed with grit.”

Where there had once been a point on the stake, there was now nothing. The stake stopped at the bottom edge of the leather-wrapped butt. Magiere gave a quick glance into the hollow bottom of the stake, then banged it against an exposed tree root. There came a sharp *snap-knock* as the pointed end sprang out of the hollow and back into place.

“What were you doing back there?” She grabbed the front of his shirt. “You know better than that, Leesil. We do it the same way every time. No changes, no mistakes. Just what is your problem?”

Leesil's head dropped back to the ground. He stared up into the canopy of trees with a melancholy sigh that was far too exaggerated for Magiere's taste.

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"It's the same thing all the time," he whined. "I'm bored!"

"Oh, get up," she snapped, and rolled off her companion. She tossed the stake down by her thing and reached under a bush to pull out a second pack and a tin lantern. The lantern was still lit—had been lit by Leesil before he came into the village for their performance. She opened the shutter, turned the knob to extend the wick, and the light increased a small portion.

Leesil sat up and began opening the front of his ragged shirt. Below the neckline, the true color of his skin showed—not corpse white but a warm tan. He itched at the white powder on his throat. Across his chest was strapped a burst leather bag still dripping with dark red dye. It was caked with a mound of wax that had held the collapsed stake in place on his chest, giving the appearance that he'd been impaled. He winced as he untied the twine holding the assemblage in place.

"You're supposed to attack from the front, where I can see you." Magiere's voice rose slightly as she rolled up the stained canvas and rope she'd used to drag Leesil out of the village. "And where do you learn to skulk like that? I couldn't see you at all at first."

"Look at this," Leesil answered in astonished disgust, wiping the dye off himself with one hand. "I've got a big, red welt in the middle of my chest."

Chap, the large hound, strolled over to sit by Leesil. Sniffing at the white powder on his face, the dog let out a disgruntled whine.

"Serves you right," Magiere answered. She stuffed canvas, rope, and brass urn into her pack, then lifted the bundle over her shoulder. "Now pick up the lantern and let's leave. I want to make the berries in the river before we camp. We're still too close to the village to stop for the night."

Chap barked and began fidgeting on all fours. Leesil patted him briefly.

"And keep him quiet," Magiere added, looking at the dog.

Leesil picked up his pack and the lantern and started off after Magiere, with Chap ranging along beside, weaving his own way amongst the undergrowth.

It seemed to take them little time to cover the distance, and Magiere was relieved when they approached the bend of the Vudrask River. They were now far enough from the village to safely settle for the night and build a fire. She turned inward, away from the open bank of the river, and picked a clearing in the forest that was still well hidden by brush, out of plain view. Leesil immediately headed back to the river's edge to wash up, with Chap following along, and Magiere remained to build a small fire. When Leesil returned, he looked more himself, though not exactly normal by most standards. His appearance was something Magiere had grown accustomed to, even before he'd told her of his mother's heritage.

His skin was indeed a medium tan, rather than the white of the powder, and made Magiere feel pale by comparison. But his hair was another matter—so blond as to seem pure white in the dark. There was little need to powder it for a village performance. Long tresses with a yellow-white sheen hung from his shoulders. And then there was the slight oblong shape of his ears, not quite pointed at the top, and the narrow suggestion of a slant to his amber-brown eyes beneath high, thin eyebrows the color of his hair.

Magiere had noted several times how much the lithe man was like a negative reflection of her own appearance. Most of the time, Leesil kept his hair tied up out of sight in a scarf wrap that also hid the tops of his ears. His mother's people were so rare in this part of the land that he and Magiere felt their mixed heritage might create undue attention—which would not be good considering his role in the profession.

Once settled around a comfortable fire and half-wrapped in a blanket, Leesil reached into his pack and pulled out a wineskin.

Magiere glanced at him. "I thought you were out."

He smiled. "I picked up a few necessities in that town we passed through a day back."

"I hope you used your own money."

"Of course." Leesil paused. "Speaking of money, how did we do back there?"

Magiere opened the small bag and began counting out coins. She passed over two-fifths of the total to Leesil, keeping the lord's share for herself. Leesil never argued, since Magiere was the one who had to deal directly with all the villages. He tucked his coins into a pouch on his belt, then tipped his head back for a long guzzle, squeezing the wine sack as he swallowed.

"Don't get drunk," Magiere warned. "It's not long until dawn, and I don't want you sleeping until noon when we should be moving."

Leesil scowled back at her, then belched. "Calm down. This is the best of it, money in our pockets and time to relax." He scooted back from the fire to lean against the remains of a toppled tree stump and closed his eyes.

The fire crackled and popped. Chap lay down close to Leesil. Magiere settled back, allowing some of the tension in her shoulders to ebb away. In moments like this, she couldn't remember how many nights had passed since the first such evening. If she actually took the time to count it out, she couldn't have been at the game for more than a few years. She rubbed an aching muscle in the back of her neck. This was a better life than the one she'd been born to—which would have consisted of a quick old age from being worked to death on the farm. Still, Leesil's unexpected change of strategy and his "playfulness" tonight seemed like an omen, leaving her fearful about her carefully planned future. A future she had not yet mentioned to him. It dawned on her that she was being as foolishly superstitious as the peasants she scorned, but the uneasiness would not fade. Perhaps it was just the way she had been raised.

Born in the nearby country of Droevinka, Magiere never knew her father, but throughout her childhood she learned bits and pieces about him. As a transient noble vassal, he ruled the peasants for the lords and collected rents due on land plots, staying in one place for months or sometimes years but eventually always moving onward to wherever his higher lord sent him. Few had seen him except on early night collections, after daylight faded, and everyone could be found in their hovels and cottages, retired from labor. Her mother was just a young woman from a village near the baron's house. The nobleman took her for his mistress, and she remained mostly out of sight for nearly a year.

Rumors of her mother's fate were whispered about the village, but the little-known truth was all too mundane. Some told tales of glimpsing her on the manor grounds in the evening, pale and listless. It was during the later half of her stay at the barony house that some noticed she was with child. She died

giving birth to a girl child, and the nobleman was ordered onward to a new fief. Not wishing to be burdened with an illegitimate daughter, he gave the infant to her mother's sister and disappeared. It was this aunt who had named her Magiere, after her mother, Magelia. None of the villagers even knew Magiere's father's name. The chasm between classes was wide. He had power. They did not. That was all anyone needed to know.

Aunt Bieja tried to be kind and treat her as family, but the other villagers were not so inclined. The fact that her father was noble and had simply taken one of the village's few pretty young women—simply because he could—was cause enough for people to want someone, anyone, to punish. He was gone, and Magiere remained. And yet there was more to it than simple resentment.

Whispers, fearful stares, and rude calls were frequent whenever she walked past the other villagers. They would not let their children have anything to do with her. The only one who had tried—Geshan, the goatherder's son—ended up with a severe beating and warnings to stay away from the “dark-begotten” child. Something about her father had frightened them, something more than just his position as a man dealing legal life and death. At first, she wanted to know everything, to know what had been so frightening about him and why they all shunned her so.

Aunt Bieja once said with sympathy, “They fear your father was something unnatural,” but that was as far as she'd go.

Finally, Magiere grew less curious about her parents, and she began to hate the villagers for their superstitions and their ignorance. With the passing of years, little enlightenment came and hostility toward her increased. In the end, she cared nothing for her past and grew hard toward those around her.

When she turned sixteen, Aunt Bieja took her aside, pulled a locked wooden box from under the bed, and presented it to her. Inside the box was a bundle, wrapped in oil-cloth against the wet climate, which held a falchion, two strange amulets, and studded leather armor suitable for a young man. One of the amulets was a topaz stone set in pewter. It was simply hung on a leather string. The other amulet was a small half-oval with tin backing that held what seemed to be a chip of bone with unrecognizable writing carved carefully into it. Unlike the other, this one was strung on a chain that passed through the squared side of the amulet, so that its oval half hung down with the bone side always outward.

“I suppose he expected a son,” Aunt Bieja said, referring to Magiere's mysterious father. “But you might be able to sell them for something.”

Magiere lifted the falchion. It was exceptionally light for its look, and the blade gleamed even in the low candlelight of the room. A small glyph like a letter—but from no language she knew—had been carved into the base of the hilt. The shining metal suggested that Aunt Bieja had kept it polished over the years, but there was a thick coating of dust over the box it had been stored in, which indicated the contents had not been disturbed in a long time. The blade might bring a good price at market, but Magiere's thoughts began to run a different course from that night onward. It was a late spring night when she slipped out of the village, never once looking back.

There had to be something better in the world . . . something better than stepping outside each day to see faces filled with hatred, or people who pretended they didn't see her. She cared neither for her unknown past, nor any kind of future with such a wretched lot. Loneliness would be bearable if she were actually alone.

The following years had been hard, moving from town to town, working at anything to stay alive and learning the things she wanted to know—how to fight, where to hunt for food, and how to turn a coin from the foolish and unwary. There was little work for a young woman on the move, and she nearly starved to death twice. But she would not go home. She would never go back home.

Her hatred of superstition never faded. She became even more aware of how superstitious the people of the land were and how common from place to place. It was easy in the end to choose the specific things to exploit. Most of all, people feared the dark and death, and more so anything connected to both. The idea for “the game” didn’t just come to her suddenly. It developed in stages as she began to realize she might make a living by playing on fear, the same kind of fear which had once ostracized her.

At first, she worked alone, convincing peasants that vampires were often spirit creatures that could be trapped and destroyed. The elaborate display of floating powders, fake charms and incantations made ignorant villagers actually believe she could trap undeads in the brass urn. She even worked on the trick of the dye in the wineskin, so that she could terrify her customers with sudden bleeding wounds as she wrestled with invisible attackers. In the areas she traveled, she would set up a place in one town for messages, usually a well-patronized tavern rife with gossip, where her exploits would be passed quickly on a wave of whispers. Outside just such a place was where she’d met Leesil for the first time. He was very good at what he did. So good, she really shouldn’t have caught him.

Walking away from a tavern in the evening, she felt a sudden trembling itch at the small of her back run up her spine and into her head. The whole night around her appeared to come alive as her senses heightened, and she *heard* rather than felt the hand digging in the cloth sack over her shoulder. When she turned and snatched the wrist, ready to deal with this thief, there was complete surprise on his face—a strange, tan face with glittering amber eyes beneath high, thin blond eyebrows.

Magiere couldn’t remember exactly what they said to ease out of that tense moment. Perhaps it had been a mutual recognition of their special talents. Leesil’s unusual appearance mingled with the schemes in her thoughts. She’d never actually seen an elf before, as they were not known to travel and lived far to the north. The combination of his human and elven blood created an exotic look in face and form. They spent a wine-soaked evening of conversation, during which he took off his head scarf and allowed her to see his ears. The next morning, they left town together, along with a strange wolfish dog Leesil had with him. That was four years ago.

The fire cracked again. Chap lifted his head and whined, staring into the darkness.

“Stop it,” Leesil slurred, halfway through his flask by this point. “There’s nothing out there.” He scratched the back of the dog’s neck, and Chap turned to lick at his face until he had to push the animal’s muzzle away.

Magiere leaned over and looked out into the forest. Chap didn’t usually fuss about nothing, but still he was a dog. More than likely he’d just heard a squirrel or a hare.

“I don’t see anything,” she said, and turned back to the fire. In the red light, she remembered the dimly lit common cottage and the two unexplainable oozing holes in the neck of Zupan Petre’s son. Her head began to ache. She dreaded the discussion she’d planned to have with Leesil. For a month she’d been putting it off, always waiting for a better time. But this last job made her wonder how much longer she could stall. She was getting tired of it all, and Leesil was getting careless. Things

were becoming a little too unpredictable.

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“Before you drink too much, we need to talk,” she said quietly.

“I never drink too much, always just enough.” He squirted another mouthful from the wineskin. He was about to take another gulp, when the tone of her voice made him stop halfway. He lowered the wineskin. “What about?”

She reached inside her pack and took out a folded parchment, slightly crumpled. “There’s a bank in Belaski where I put money when we pass through, and where I have messages sent to wait for my next visit.”

Leesil’s expression went blank. “Messages? What are you talking about?”

She held out the folded parchment to him. “This is from a land merchant.”

Leesil took the parchment, slack jawed with surprise. “You’ve been hoarding money away?”

“He’s been looking for a certain kind of tavern for me, somewhere along the coast . . . seems he’s found one.” She paused. “I’m buying a tavern in a Belaskian town called Miiska.”

Leesil blinked as if he didn’t understand a word. “What?”

“I didn’t want to tell you until the right place was found. I never planned to run the hunter game forever, and I’m tired.”

“You saved money?” Leesil shook his head. “I don’t believe it. All I’ve got is what’s in my pouch.”

Magiere rolled her eyes. “That’s because you drink it all, or waste it at a card table.”

Then she heard him suck in his breath and the words began to flow.

“Just like that?” he nearly shouted, ignoring her answer. “No warning. Not even a ‘By the way, Leesil, I’ve been saving for a tavern.’ And you never mention it. How much have you been putting . . . no, never mind. We’re in this together. I say we do four or five more villages and then talk about quitting.”

“I’m done,” she answered softly. “I want something of my own.”

“What about me?”

“You’ll like the town,” she rushed in. “We just head for the coast and turn south. It’s ten leagues down the coast from the capital city of Bela. I’ll handle the drinks. You can run the gaming. I’ve heard you talk about running a faro table . . . every time you lose your last coin at one.”

Leesil waved her off with his hand and a disgruntled scowl.

“Chap can watch over things,” she continued, the dog lifting his head at his name. “We’ll sleep inside every night and stop taking all these risks.”

“No! I’m not ready to quit.”

“You’ll be the card master . . .”

“It’s too soon.”

“. . . a warm bed, plenty of ale and mead . . .”



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