

Untitled

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All the main characters are vampires, but not the blood-sucking, evil kind. It's more from they're point of view. Anyway, you'll find out more as the story progresses.

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0 - Introduction

Introduction

The light was fading fast. All around, mist clung low to the ground, concealing the world from all who dared to enter it. Barely visible was the grey castle, looming out of the dark, its high turrets all that were evident, rising tall like misshapen tree trunks.

A rather tall, cloaked figure stood on the edge of the castle grounds, paused behind its open steel gates. A large dog-like creature stood solemnly by its master's side, its gaze fixed towards the hazy castle. To a passer by looking in from the outside, there may have been nothing remarkable about this scene. However, they were not merely a boy and dog, for the animal was not a dog at all, but as a full-grown, European wolf, the last left in the United Kingdom. Neither was the boy merely a boy, but a vampire, one whose family stretched back over countless generations.

The pair were returning home after seven long months spent away. It was not, however, to be a happy homecoming, nor would it ever be again, for much strife had occurred while the two had been away. The castle was no longer the comfortable home it had once been, more a place of fear and dread.

The boy teetered on the edge of the castle grounds, unable to make up his mind whether he dared enter or not. With a sigh, he leaned against blackened railings encircling the property, letting the ice cold metal burn into his cheek. Concerned, the wolf raised its grey muzzle and stared up at his forlorn master, his ever-faithful eyes glowing golden through the mist. He whined, partly through concern and partly through impatience. On hearing this, the boy looked down sternly at his wolfish companion. Unsure of himself, the wolf wagged his tail feebly in an attempt to appease his master. A slight smile flickered across the boy's face, and he reached down to the wolf, putting his hand on the animal's furry head for re-assurance.

"Alright, let's go. Home at last."

The gravel driveway up to the castle front was a lengthy walk, surrounded by an almost impenetrable fortress of Scots Pine and Oak trees. Every step took them closer and closer to the castle, but the long walk only served to amplify their sense of dread. After what seemed like an age, the main entrance revealed itself through the mist, becoming gradually more visible until the pair were stood right in front of the massive oak door. Sat astride the door were two stone wolves, both modelled in a hunched, fearsome pose, their teeth bared in a snarl, ears flat against their skulls, their eyes wild and staring. They were so well carved that the layman may easily have mistaken them for real wolves. Their message was clear; keep away. The boy, who was all too familiar with them, ignored their fearsome stare, walking right past them without a glance.

After a few moments of hesitation, he reluctantly pushed the door open. Despite its substantial size and weight, the door swung open without difficulty, beckoning them into the shadowy hallway beyond. The wolf went in first, sniffing the air intently for any danger. With no apparent hazard to be found, the wolf signalled for the boy to follow him. Once inside, the heavy door swung shut. The thunderous sound made by the door making contact with its frame, echoed throughout the empty castle walls.

The castle's entrance hall, in which they now stood, was neither too grand nor too modest. A large stone arch rose above them from floor to ceiling. Following the curve of the arch were five mounted wolf heads, each bearing a formidable expression, with lips curled back and glassy eyes staring madly outwards. If the stone wolves didn't deter visitors, these wolves surely would.

The wolf padded silently down the long passage, but the boy's footsteps on the flagstones echoed

eerily down the hall, creating an atmosphere of solitude and emptiness. A sudden and overwhelming realisation of just how alone he was hit the boy at that moment. He slumped to the floor, with tears in his eyes, with only a wolf to comfort him.

1 - Chapter I

Chapter I

It was a little over an hour later, and boy and wolf had settled themselves in the main drawing room of the castle. The boy had started up a roaring fire in the great, gothic fireplace, and was now sitting in the large high-backed armchair that had been his father's. The wolf lay peacefully beside him on a tiger skin rug, enjoying the warmth emanating from the fire. Both boy and wolf remained silent in their own thoughts.

The boy felt angry and almost disappointed in himself for his earlier behaviour. He'd always been taught by his father that a vampire should never show any emotion. Any sentiment felt must never be exposed, no matter what the incident or tragedy. The only permitted emotions were anger, hatred, and others along that line. The boy was very proud to be a pure vampire, and was un-happy with his lack of restraint. Sensing his masters disdain, the wolf lifted its head from its paws to speak.

"Despite everything that's happened, I am glad to be home" said the wolf contentedly.

"I suppose so, but I'm afraid I can't share your enthusiasm, Wulfric."

"Not enthusiasm, no, but it does feel good to be back home after all that time away."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Don't worry Master Vlad. Things will seem better in time."

"If you say so, Wulfric."

Vlad sighed and sunk back down into the chair. He didn't see how Wulfric could ever be right, at least, not at this point in time. But Wulfric was a wise old wolf, so maybe he was right. Time would tell.

"Hey, Wulfric?"

"Yes, Master Vlad?"

"Would you tell me one of those wolf stories of yours? Like you did when I was a kid."

"As you wish, Master Vlad."

Vlad leaned back into the chair, closing his eyes so as to be able to imagine every word spoken by the wolf.

*"Long, long ago, in a time when the world was covered in snow and ice, man was scarce, living in small packs in forest clearings. Wolves, on the other hand, were common in all of the northern forests, and their howls filled the forests far and wide.

There was one pack made up entirely of white wolves. All but one of them were she-wolves, each enchantingly beautiful. The male wolf, Yerik, often travelled far and wide by himself, only returning each winter to carry on the family line with the alpha female, Raine. For many years she had produced beautiful white pups, but that year, only one, tiny male pup was born, and it was black. The other wolves were outraged, and suspected Raine of courting one of the black wanderers. She was instantly made an outcast for blackening the family blood.

Life became very hard for Raine. She could only live on scraps, rodents and insects, and had to stay with her pup at all times when the pack was around or they'd kill him. Both Raine and her pup became progressively weaker and thinner, until one day Raine knew she had to leave the pack for good. She picked her pup up by the scruff of its neck, and set off. She travelled for many suns until one day she collapsed, unable to walk another step. The young pup whimpered and cried for food, but his mother had nothing to give. When the pup woke the next morning, Raine was stone cold.

For three days the pup cried out until he too became so weak that he had to stop and give up. It was

purely by chance that a lone she-wolf happened to pass by that spot and notice the stricken cub. The she-wolf, named Taka, took pity on the cub. Only a few days back she had lost both her three cubs and her mate when hunters had slaughtered them all. She had been lucky to escape with her life. Now her mothering instinct took over and she gently picked up the cub and brought it back to her den under an old tree root.

At first the pup was scared of this unfamiliar wolf, but hunger soon got the better of him, and by morning he was comfortably suckling from his adopted mother.

The cub grew strong and fast, his shiny, black coat growing ever more magnificent with age. As Taka didn't know the cub's name, she called him Dagma, and as he grew she taught him everything a young wolf should know. She taught him to hunt and to fight, but most of all she taught him about man. She told him what had happened to her family, and his birth-mother, whom she suspected of being driven to that state by man. She also recounted the many ancient wolf stories, emphasising the ones in which man was the enemy.

By the next spring, Dagma was fully-grown, and an outstanding specimen of his species. By this time, Dagma should have left home to find a mate of his own, but he vowed to stay for another year to care for his mother, who was now growing old.

Dagma was a fine hunter, often bringing back deer and mountain hare. On occasions he would even raid the human village many miles away, bringing back sheep or goat.

As the next spring came around, Dagma felt the pull to leave home. However, before he left he went to speak to Dimitri the great bear. He asked the bear if he'd watch over his mother while he was away, and to send him a message if anything happened to her. The bear was impressed by the young wolf's courage and bravery at coming to see him, and readily agreed to help.

Dagma travelled far and wide over the next few years. He did eventually manage to find a pretty she-wolf named Fay whom he raised five beautiful cubs with. But once they'd grown up, Dagma began to feel the pull back towards home and his mother. It was on his way back that a small chaffinch alighted beside him, asking if he knew of a wolf named Dagma.

'I am that wolf' he said, wondering what the bird could possibly want.

'I have a message from the great bear, Dimitri. He wanted to tell you that hunters came to the forest and slaughtered every wolf they could find, including your mother. Dimitri was away in the mountains at the time and didn't find out until his return.'

A great anger rose in Dagma, and after a thank you to the bird, he raced home.

The bird had indeed been right, his mother was gone, and the smell of man clung to the den. In a fit of rage he ran down to the village, snarling madly as he leapt amongst the people. Panic ensued amongst the men, as Dagma proceeded to kill every man he could get his teeth into. Dagma was sure that one of humans he killed was wearing his mother's pelt, which only served to fuel his rage.

Fifteen men and women lay slaughtered before Dagma was killed. The people of the village later called him a black demon, telling tales for many years to come of the evil spirit wolf who attacked them, always ending the tales by holding up the black pelt in triumph."

"That was a good story, Wulfric"

"I'm glad you liked it, Master Vlad."

Exhausted and tired, Vlad stared blankly into the fire, mesmerised by its movement. At points he could almost swear he saw images amongst the flames. Images of wolves and bears and men, and the eternal struggle between man and beast. Slowly his eyes began to close, and before he knew it, Vlad had fallen asleep.

Vladimir Kovács was born and raised in the castle in Scotland. It was his family's ancestral home, with countless generations of Kovács living there before him. Hidden away deep in the Scottish countryside, few people knew the castle even existed, and of those who did, even fewer dared to go anywhere near it. In the last hundred years, the castle had only ever had one visitor outside the family, a visitor who certainly wasn't welcome, for Vlad, and his parents, and their parents, and theirs before, where all vampires, and being such, feared nothing more than the ruthless vampire slayer.

Despite their ancestral home being in Scotland, their true origin belonged back in Romania, in the region around Transylvania. This was the place where all pure-blood vampire families originated from, with many still having family ties there. Vlad's family was no different, as his grandparents, on his mother's side, still lived out in Romania, and Vlad's mother, Petra, would often travel out to visit them.

When Vlad was only three years old, his mother went over there to introduce her newest son, six month old Markus, to them. After only a few days of being gone, a letter arrived at the castle from the Council of Vampires. It stated that Petra and Markus, as well as Vlad's grandparents, had been killed by a slayer. It was simply misfortune that Petra had chosen to visit at that time, for the slayer in question had been planning a raid on the house for some time.

Vlad had been far too young to remember much about his mother, only the odd faded image in his head. There was, however, a portrait in oils of her above one of the downstairs fireplaces. It showed her dressed in the deepest of reds and her face pale, almost white, contrasting perfectly with her long, black hair. Vlad would sit for hours as a child staring up at it, trying to remember anything he could about her, and half pretending that she wasn't even gone at all. Wulfric would often recount tales about her from before Vladimir was born, as well as the much loved ancient wolf stories.

Vlad also had an older sister, Magda. She was older by two years, and had many more memories of their mother. Sometimes Vlad would convince her to tell him some of these stories, but for the most part, especially as they grew older, Vlad and Magda rarely got on with each other. One of the reasons for this was that Magda was jealous that Vlad, as a boy, would inherit the castle.

When he turned sixteen, Vlad made the choice to visit Transylvania for himself. It was often custom for young vampires to visit Romania for up to a year after their eighteenth birthday, but Vlad simply didn't have the patience to wait that long. Vlad's father was concerned for him after what had happened to Petra, but Vlad remained adamant he was going, after all, Magda had gone the year before at seventeen. After much debate, Vlad's father agreed to allow him to go, but only if he took Wulfric with him for protection.

Wulfric was the family's guardian. For almost a thousand years, it had been his duty to protect the family, in particular, every first-born son.

Back when Wulfric was just an ordinary wolf in Romania, his species was rapidly being hunted to extinction across Europe and the British Isles. When Wulfric's own pack was targeted, Wulfric was one of the only survivors. Desperate for somewhere safe to hide, he dug under a castle gate where he knew the human's couldn't get to him. At that time, some of Vlad's ancestors were holidaying at the castle. It was then that Wulfric was discovered by one of the children at the time. Their father, Viktor Kovács, sympathised with the wolf's plight, for vampires were also subject to human persecution. As a wolf, Wulfric was one of the few animals that vampires have the power to communicate with, so Viktor was happy to allow Wulfric to stay, but only in return for protecting his family for as long as Kovács blood existed within the castle walls. Only when the very last member of this blood line had died out, would Wulfric die himself. After much thought, Wulfric agreed to this, and had been protecting the family ever since.

Because of this, Vlad was happy to have Wulfric with him, and the pair were very close. Unfortunately, no one could ever have predicted just how badly Wulfric would have been needed back at the castle

during Vlad's time away.

Wulfric woke early the next morning, so early that the dawn chorus had barely begun. He stretched and yawned before turning to see if Vlad was awake. He wasn't, so Wulfric decided to go off by himself for a while. He quietly left the drawing room and headed outside via one of the many hidden passageways which crisscrossed through the castle. Outside, the world was still dull and cold as the sun had yet to rise and cast its warmth over the land. Wulfric was unable to feel this chill through his thick fur, and set off at a brisk trot across the dew-covered lawn. He was hungry and intended to catch something to eat himself. He stopped underneath the crab apple tree, and raised his nose to the air, scenting for any potential prey. The sweet scent of wild flowers drifted over from the open fields beyond the castle grounds, as did the smell of sheep and horses from the farms nearby. Picking through these odours, he detected the scent of rabbits not too far off. Excited by the prospect of fresh rabbits, he set off once again, this time being much more cautious as he approached the warren. He followed the line of trees so as not to be spotted by them. Like the wolves in his stories, Wulfric was a skilled hunter, and had always been a good provider of food for his vampire family.

Slowly he inched closer and closer to the rabbits, his eyes trained on one of them in particular. Swift as lightning, Wulfric ran at his prey, and scarcely had the rabbit started to run before it was hanging limp in Wulfric's jaws. Satisfied with his catch, he headed back towards the castle.

Vlad himself didn't wake up until much later that morning. He got up to find himself alone and extremely stiff after a night spent sleeping hunched in the armchair. He stretched, before straitening out his clothes which seemed to have miraculously become very wrinkled during the night. He slipped off his black cloak, and lay it carefully over the back of the chair. Elsewhere in the castle, Wulfric's keen senses detected his master's waking, and he returned immediately to the drawing room to greet him.

"Did you have a good sleep, Master Vlad?" he asked.

"Not too bad I suppose."

"I am sinking sat now would be a good time to be having breakfast, yes?"

"To be honest, Wulfric, I don't feel much like eating right now. Plus, I doubt there's anything to eat here in the castle" sighed Vlad.

"I already took a liberty of catching a rabbit for breakfast. If you are not wanting it I could make use of it" said the wolf coyly.

"Go ahead" said Vlad, shrugging his shoulders in indifference.

With a bow of thanks, Wulfric bounded away to enjoy his well earned meal.

Alone again, Vlad proceeded to explore the downstairs area of the castle by daylight, to see what, if anything, had changed while he'd been away. As he went around, everything seemed pretty much as he'd left things. If anything it looked neater than before he went away, although the slight covering of dust and the customary cobwebs still remained. This was rather strange as his father was far from house proud. Not that the castle was ever in a terrible state, but Vlad had never known it to be quite as tidy as it now was, and considering the circumstances, it made Vlad feel very uneasy.

At that moment, Wulfric came bounding over from the kitchen, specs of blood still clinging to his muzzle. Unwilling to remain downstairs any longer, Vlad climbed the stone staircase up to his own room. He'd had more than enough for the day, and just wanted to sleep the hours away, leaving reality far behind. Wulfric bounded effortlessly up the steep, stone steps after him. At times, Vlad almost envied the strength and agility of his furry friend. He tried to imagine what it would be like to be a wild wolf, like the black-coated Dagma in Wulfric's story. Except he'd be free of any family ties and free of emotion. He'd

run for hours through snowy forests, hunting down his prey of deer or elk, pulling them down and ripping flesh from bone, his superior strength making it no effort at all. Then he'd curl up in the snow, his thick black pelt keeping him warm. When he'd wake, the night's snowflakes and ice would cling to every hair on his body. And the whole routine would begin again. He'd be free. Free from his responsibilities, free from his problems, and most importantly, free from the pain they created.

His room was exactly as he'd left it seven months ago. Nothing at all had been moved or changed. Vlad expected this as he'd asked that no one go in his room while he was away.

"Wulfric, don't you find it strange how everything is so neat and in it's place?" asked Vlad, turning to the wolf.

"It's almost like no vone has been living hear for many years" replied the wolf.

"Exactly. It's very un-settling."

"Maybe, but sen maybe sat's just sa vay castles are vhen everyone is gone. Castles can be very good at looking after semselves. Alsough I doubt sa Master vould have left sings so neat. Especially after everysing shat happened."

"That's what's gets me, Wulfric" sighed Vlad. "It just doesn't make any sense."

"I'm sure it's fine. I vouldn't vorry about it." reassured Wulfric.

"I hope your right, Wulfric."

Vlad wondered over to one of the arched windows in his room, and stared out wistfully over the castle grounds and beyond. It was late August and summer was still very much in the air and the earth, and the hearts of every living beast. By now the sun was up and had melted away all the dew and warmed the day. A male blackbird sung merrily from it's tree-top perch, while a myriad of finches and songbirds, from the plump bullfinch to the humble house sparrow, flitted in small flocks amongst the Scot's pine. A fox, returning home, barked in a nearby field, and a pheasant gave it's distinctive alarm call in fright. A pair of hooded crows hunted for beetles on the front lawn, whilst the inhabitants of the local rabbit warren grazed peacefully nearby after their brush with Wulfric. They where now disturbed only by the odd fight breaking out between the noisy crows. Although autumn, and close behind it, winter, where waiting in the wings, it was hard to imagine such hardships at that moment, and every creature was determined to enjoy the long summer days, and warm summer evenings whilst they still could.

Vlad didn't care for the summer months, nor any of the ones in-between. Vlad favoured the cold, grey days of Winter, when the trees where stripped back to their black skeletons, and every creature was united by hardship and hunger. Vlad almost enjoyed this suffering, and he certainly preferred the cold weather to the unbearable summer heat.

Vlad turned away from the sickeningly joyful world outside, and returned once more to the bleakness of the castle. Once again bored and tired of the day, Vlad retired to his coffin, the archetypal vampire sleeping quarters, to rest. The faithful Wulfric lay down beside him on the stone floor, ever alert, even in sleep.

2 - Chapter II

Chapter II

Vlad didn't rise until a little after midnight. Wulfric was still asleep, his paws and ears twitching as he dreamt. He nudged the wolf lightly with his foot until Wulfric opened his eyes.

"Yes, Master Vlad?" asked Wulfric sleepily.

"Actually I am a little hungry now."

"And I suppose you want me to go hunting for you?"

"That'll work" smiled Vlad.

Wulfric pulled himself up onto his feet.

"As you wish, Master Vlad" said Wulfric, more than happy to comply to his master's needs.

"Only something small, mind. I'm not that hungry."

"I'll see what I can do" replied the wolf, leaving the room for the dark world outside.

As the days went by, August rolled into September, and September into October. During this passing of time, a routine built up in the castle. Vlad and Wulfric would sleep the day through, rarely rising before midnight, despite the lengthening autumn nights. Wulfric would then go hunting most nights, more often than not returning with a catch. He'd always been a good provider for his family, catching rabbit, mountain hare, pheasant, and in the spring, red deer fawns, as well as various other prey. Although human blood was necessary for the survival of all vampires from time to time, for the most part they could live off the blood and meat of other animals, and Wulfric made sure that that was quite possible. While Wulfric was away, Vlad moped about the castle, spending the majority of his waking hours reminiscing over the events of the last few months, trying to work out just how such a tragedy could have happened, and whether there was anything he could have done about it. More than anything he blamed himself for not being there when he was needed most. Worried for Vlad's state of mind, Wulfric searched out the old wireless radio, the only piece of technology in the house, to keep Vlad occupied while he was away. The radio did its job well, and Vlad began to spend all his time huddled in his father's armchair, in front of a roaring fire, listening to the news coverage alongside various topical debates, radio dramas and whatever else he could find so late in the schedule. The news was of greatest interest to Vlad as it allowed him to stay in touch with the world outside. As callous as it may sound, Vlad particularly enjoyed the reports which involved human death and suffering. The more painful the events, in every sense of the word, the better. After all, it was only fair considering the ruthless way his own kind had been killed off. If they would celebrate the death of his species, he would celebrate the same of theirs, although he could never quite understand why humans were so eager to kill other humans. They could certainly learn a lot from vampires on that subject. In the whole of their existence it was almost unknown for a vampire to kill another vampire for any reason.

Like the domestic dog, Wulfric was unable to understand the human language. He picked up a few words off the radio, but for the most part it made no sense to him. Vlad himself did speak human English, but, as a vampire, Wulfric was able to understand him, the same way Vlad was able to understand Wulfric's speech. No one really understood how that worked, or why it only worked for certain animals, but that's the way it was and few vampires gave it much thought. Vampires tend not to have the curiosity or lust for knowledge that humans have. So, when the radio was on, Vlad would

repeat anything that may be of interest for Wulfric's benefit.

One morning, while Vlad slept, Wulfric woke up not long after he'd gone to sleep, his stomach growling for food. Content to oblige, Wulfric rose to his feet and padded silently out of the room, down the stairs and out into the fresh morning air. The temperate autumn sun warmed his old bones, and he raised his muzzle skywards to enjoy it further. His stomach growled again, prompting Wulfric to get himself moving in search of food. As he started off, he felt an invisible force pulling himself towards the castle gates, and out into the world beyond. Wulfric hesitated for a moment, before deciding that it couldn't do any harm. Maybe there'd even be some better prey out there. Exited by the prospect of quarry other than rabbit, Wulfric changed direction and headed towards the track he'd taken with Vlad on their return home back in late summer. This time, however, Wulfric walked through the trees, rather than on the path. Like any wolf, he favoured the protection they gave over the exposed nature of the open pathway.

With his swift trotting pace, Wulfric reached the castle gates in no time. They towered menacingly over Wulfric, and looked no less foreboding than they did at night. Anyone with the foolishness to pass through them without fear was truly mad and deserved everything they got once they'd passed through. Wulfric himself did not need to fear the imposing gates, and went through them with barely a thought other than to remember to tell Vlad to close the gates lest intruders stopped by. Outside of the castle grounds, everything seemed pretty much the same. The forest of Scot's pine continued and the finches and crossbills flittered happily from one side of the wall to the other as if the boundary didn't exist at all. This was very strange for Wulfric, who felt a definite sense of change in the atmosphere on the other side.

Wulfric trotted around the forest for a while, unsure quite why he was there, and what to do now he was there. After an hour of aimless travelling, a thought, although it was perhaps more of a memory than anything, struck him. He lifted his nose, searching for something he knew should be nearby. It took some time, but he found what he was looking for, and headed in the direction as dictated by his nose. Wulfric soon found he was closer than he had at first thought, as a vast expanse of water appeared before him. Wulfric skidded to a halt as he left the safety of the trees. A pair of red deer hinds, startled by the sudden appearance of such a formidable predator, bolted in the opposite direction. Lucky for them, Wulfric had forgotten his hunger, and now stood, awe inspired, before the great loch.

Back when Vlad's grandfather had been owner of the castle in the early 1800's (vampires live much longer than humans), a bitter dispute had been had over ownership of the loch. At that time, the castle wall extended to the far side of the loch, and Wulfric had spent many a happy hour around it's edge, walking or hunting with the master or mistress or playing with the children, one of whom was Vlad's own father. Local landowners, however, wanted access to the loch for fishing, and sportsmen wanted to hunt otter, osprey and wildfowl which were common there, as well as the red deer who resided within the forest. In the end, Vlad's grandfather agreed to sell the land, more than anything to have some peace from the local residents. The land was sold to a Mister Chippingham, a wealthy local landowner, who wanted to open up the loch for fishing and sporting parties. Wulfric had been sad to see it go, and this was the first time he'd been back to it since it's sale.

Hunting had decimated the wildlife in and around the loch, but since it was purchased by the National Trust in the 1970's, the wildlife had returned, and the loch now looked much as Wulfric remembered it. Wulfric walked leisurely towards the waters edge, where he stood and surveyed the land, keeping an eager eye out for any sign of humans. All seemed calm and safe, so Wulfric stooped to lap at the fresh water. It was cold and refreshing after his mornings activity. As he lifted his head after a long drink, he

eyes caught movement out in the loch. As he watched, it soon became apparent that the movement was that of an otter, splashing and diving playfully as only an otter can. Of all the creatures in Scotland, the otter is by far the most elegant and beloved out of all of them, and Wulfric found himself mesmerised by it's skill in the water and it's reckless joy, something unique to the otter. After a while, the otter saw it had an audience, and, unable to contain it's curiosity, swam over to get a better view of the wolf. Wulfric, who didn't fancy being gawked at by a mere otter, got to his feet and walked off in the opposite direction, continuing along the edge of the loch. Disappointed by such a rude reception, the otter decided to have some fun at Wulfric's expense. It caught up to him within seconds, leaping out of the water a few yards in front of Wulfric. Then it began running around Wulfric, jumping in the air, rolling around and whistling in delight. Wulfric tried to ignore the otter, so in return it started running under Wulfric's body and nipping at his legs. Wulfric snapped at the pesky otter, but it was much too swift and agile for him. In the end, the only thing he could do was to retreat to the trees. The otter followed him up the bank for a while before returning to the water and swimming away. After that, Wulfric decided he'd had enough for the day, and promptly headed home, catching a satisfying meal of black grouse on the way back. There was still many hours left before nightfall, and Wulfric was back in the castle without Vlad knowing he'd even gone.

Over the next few weeks, Wulfric often woke up during the day and went to sit by the lake. He just couldn't seem to keep himself away. Wulfric kept his daytime adventures to himself for a while, and it wasn't until Vlad started to question him on where he was catching mallard, pochard and pintail ducks from that Wulfric revealed his secret.

"Sorry I never mentioned it before" said Wulfric after explaining where he'd been going.

"Well I'd rather you stayed in the castle during the day. It's just that if a slayer were to come to the castle, who'd be there to warn me?" said Vlad in a concerned voice.

"I'm so sorry, Master Vlad. I didn't sink about sat."

"It's ok, just let me know if your going anywhere, ok?"

"Of cause, Master Vlad. Why don't you come down to sa lake vith me next time? It's a stunningly beautiful place, I'm sure you'd love it."

"I don't really feel comfortable with the thought of leaving the castle grounds." replied Vlad.

"I'd be sere to protect you. It's perfectly safe anyway, humans almost never go sere."

"I'll think about."

Vlad did think about it, and in the end he agreed to go late one afternoon. It took Wulfric a while to coax Vlad past the castle gates, but once Vlad was by the loch, any trepidation he'd felt was completely forgotten.

"You where right Wulfric, this place is amazing."

Wulfric simply nodded in agreement.

The pair sat down on the bank together, and Wulfric recounted past memories of the time he'd spent around the lake. As he was speaking, a magnificent osprey floated down over the lake, circling slowly in search of fish. She was one of the last remaining birds of her species in the country, a product of the survival of a handful of ospreys in Scotland after years of over hunting. Now she was protected from harm, and free to live and breed in peace. The only problems that she now faced where egg collectors, eager to steal her precious brood. During the breeding season, a 24 hours watch was set up close to her nesting site, but the breeding season was no over, the humans where gone and nobody tried to bother her.

"Sere used to be many more ospreys and eagles avound sa loch from vhen I vember it. You couldn't come down hear vithout seeing vone or sa oser."

"Another victim of man's ruthlessness" said Vlad bitterly.

A silvery fish below the surface of the water caught the osprey's attention, and with years of skill behind

her, she dived down, catching the fish effortlessly in her long talons. Once she'd caught her prey, she sailed away on the breeze to find a spot where she could eat in private. Vlad followed it's progress until it disappeared into the trees.

A pair of otters splashed playfully in the shallows further downstream was next to catch Vlad's attention. Vlad, as Wulfric had been, and as most other people watching otters for the first time, became mesmerised by them. Wulfric watched with only a vague interest now that he'd seen their less appealing side, and hoped secretly that they'd go away, or at the very least stay where they were and not cause any trouble.

As he watched the pair of otters, a strange feeling came over Vlad, almost as if he'd seen such a thing before, or something very like it. He began to wonder if he'd been to the loch before, but this didn't seem very likely as he had no memory of ever having been there. Nothing about the loch seemed familiar to him, and yet he couldn't shake of this nagging feeling that he'd seen it all before, rather like *deja vu*, just more abstract. Frustrated that he couldn't figure out why he had this persistent feeling, Vlad racked his brain to try and remember something, anything that would enable it to make sense. He was aware of something teetering at the edge of his mind and at once he felt sure that that was where the answer lay, although he couldn't quite grab hold of it. Desperately he grappled for it, but every time it managed to elude him, slipping back into the blackness of his mind. Vlad was close to giving up on the memory altogether when all of a sudden it hit him like a speeding freight train. He had been there before and he knew exactly when and with whom.

Wulfric saw the change in Vlad's expression immediately and knew something was up, although he couldn't tell quite what.

"Are you alright, Master Vlad?" he asked.

A long silence followed before Vlad was able to answer.

"I remember" was all he was able to say, his gaze still fixed on the otters.

"Remember what?" asked Wulfric, eager to find out.

Another long pause ensued, but Wulfric remained patient, sensing that it must be something important.

"I remember" he repeated. "I remember being hear before. I remember the loch and the otters and everything."

"It's quite possible you did come down hear when you vere younger. I can't remember it myself sough."

"And I remember her" Vlad continued.

"Her?"

"Her. My mother."

"Ahh, now I understand."

"I can really remember her Wulfric. It's like it was just yesterday, or maybe even today. I feel like I could just reach out and touch her and she'd be there. I can't believe I never remembered this before."

"Memories are hard to keep hold off. Sey have a habit of slipping away, and sometimes it takes a certain event or place to capture shem again. I've always sought sat sa more precious a memory, sa harder it is to remember as it's sa kind most likely to get away."

"Well I'm never letting this one go. Not ever. Oh Wulfric, I do miss her. Now more than ever. I do wish she was still hear. I wish everyone was still hear. I'd do anything to have them back."

"So would I, Master Vlad. So Would I."

When Vlad and Wulfric went in Romania, it was agreed that they'd stay with his father's brother, Magnus, who had a castle in a remote area fifteen miles outside Transylvania. Magnus had never got on to well with his brother, having been jealous that he, as first-born, would inherit the castle in Scotland. Now that he was doing well for himself, he was able to put any family rivalries behind him, so that when a letter arrived from his brother asking if Vlad could stay with him, Magnus was happy to agree. Magnus's castle was modest in comparison to what Vlad was used to back home, but it was no less homely or comfortable to stay in. Magnus also had a family of his own, a wife, Eliza, and two daughters under ten years old.

While staying there, Vlad and Wulfric spent most days by themselves, exploring the forests and visiting all the local towns and villages. This was rather a risky business, as vampires were not uncommon in Romania, and therefore locals always had their wits about them, looking out for anyone who could potentially be a vampire. Magnus was careful to warn Vlad of this, and made sure that whenever Vlad was outside the castle, Vlad was to ditch the tradition cloak and dress in ordinary, local clothes so as to blend in. Magnus also told Vlad that if anyone asked about Wulfric, Vlad was to reply that Wulfric was merely a rare breed of dog, bred to resemble a wolf, for a true wolf as a pet would seem very suspicious indeed. It was also obligatory that they didn't go out after dark, for anyone out at that time would be suspect as a vampire. This became a particular nuisance to Vlad, but it was all a necessary nuisance, and eventually it simply became routine, and Vlad didn't even have to think about it.

Vlad had planned to stay in Romania for between nine to ten months, but after only six, a terrible tragedy occurred, one that was to change everything as he knew it.

That fateful day, Vlad and Wulfric returned to the castle just before dark, as per usual, expecting everything to be the same as when they left it. As they entered the drawing room, the whole family were sitting there, looking very grave indeed.

"Is anything wrong?" asked Vlad as he walked into the room.

Unable to answer, Magnus simply stood up and walked over to where Vlad was standing at the doorway, and handed him a sheet of crisp, white paper with typed letters on one side. Vlad instantly recognised the heading as being from the desks of the Vampire Council, and started to feel worried. The Council only ever sent letters that were of the utmost importance. Hesitantly, Vlad began to read the words typed beneath.

Mr Vladimir Kovács

We are sorry to inform you that during your absence Mr Irving Kovács and Miss Magda Kovács were unfortunately captured and murdered by the well known and prolific vampire slayer, a Mr Reed. As he has the backing of human law behind him, these killings must be deemed lawful and there is nothing the Council can do in the way of justice or compensation for your loss.

As the only living close relative of Mr Irving Kovács, the Kovács ancestral castle and estate automatically transfers into your possession.

Yours sincerely

Mr Phillip Joyce

Deputy leader and head of the investigation and intelligence department.

Vlad had to re-read the letter many times to make quite sure he had read it right. It just seemed so hard to believe, and it didn't help that he had so many eyes staring at him and waiting for a reaction. Wanting to be alone, Vlad simply turned and walked away. Eliza went to stand up and go comfort him, but Magnus told her to leave him and allow for him to deal with the news in his own way.

Vlad retired himself to the guest room where he had been staying for those last few carefree months. He shut and locked the door before reading the letter out loud for Wulfric's benefit, who up until that point had been in the dark as to what was going on.

"Sat's just awful" sighed Wulfric after it had finally sunk in.

"What am I going to do, Wulfric?"

"I really don't know, Master Vlad. I just don't know."

Vlad spent the next month trying to decide what was best to do, and how to continue now that he was, for the most part, all alone in the world. He desperately wanted to return home, although the fear of returning to an empty castle terrified him. He started to wonder whether it might have all been a big mistake, and when he returned everything would be the way he left it, but deep down he knew this just wasn't true. Vlad knew he couldn't stay with Magnus and his family for ever, and after much deliberation decided the only thing he could do was to return home.

One evening in early November, Wulfric awoke a few hours after dark. Something strange was going on, Wulfric felt sure of it. Vlad was still asleep, and Wulfric wondered whether he should wake him early to warn him. He paced the room whilst trying to decide, and eventually came to the conclusion that it might be better if he went to find out whether anything was actually wrong first before waking Vlad, after all, he wouldn't be pleased if it turned out to be nothing at all.

Wulfric padded down the corridor to the stone staircase. At the top he stopped and listened for anything or anyone that might be in the castle, but he couldn't hear anything. With silent, tentative steps the wolf descended the stairs, stopping every so often to check for disturbances. The further he got, the more intense the feeling became, although he was yet to find anything suspicious or out of place.

Once at the bottom step, Wulfric cautiously put his head round the corner and scanned the hallway which led down to the front door. At once he noticed the front door was slightly ajar as he could see a thin sliver of grass and trees through the gap. Wulfric knew Vlad would never leave the door open like that, although he could be a bit forgetful about actually locking the door during the day. Wulfric listened again, harder this time, desperate to find out who was intruding in the castle. Faintly he felt sure he heard footsteps coming from one of the nearby rooms, and without a moment of hesitation, he dashed back upstairs to warn Vlad.

As he ascended the stairs at full speed, Wulfric wondered whether he should have been more thorough about finding out who exactly was in the castle, and where they were, but so fleet of foot was he that before he had a chance to think it over anymore, he was back in Vlad's bedroom. Once he'd woken him, Wulfric was quick to explain the situation.

"Do you think it could be a vampire slayer?" asked Vlad nervously.

“Sat seams sa most likely explanation. Perhaps it’s sa same vone who killed sa Master, come back to see if shere’s anyvone left. Whoever it is, sough, vere going to have to get vid of sem.”

“Err, right. I suppose I’m going to need a weapon of some kind” said Vlad who was less than enthusiastic about the idea of taking on a vampire slayer.

“If I vremember correctly, sen sere should be a collection of swords in sa basement.”

A look of horror spread across Vlad’s face. The basement was essentially his fathers room, and he hadn’t been in there since his return home, nor had be ever planned to go down there again.

“It’s sa only option I’m afraid” said Wulfric, who understood Vlad’s reluctance.

“I know, I know” sighed Vlad. “Lets go then.”

Lucky for Vlad and Wulfric, there was a secret staircase that led right down into the basement. The entrance was hidden behind a false door in the stone wall at the other end of the corridor, and even Vlad who was all to familiar with the castle, struggled to find it.

“Lets just hope the slayer hasn’t reached to basement before we do” whispered Vlad anxiously as he closed the secret door behind him, shutting them both into the pitch dark stairway.

The pair went down the stairs as silently as possible, and once at the bottom, Wulfric put his ear to the door to check for any human activity.

“It seams empty” said Wulfric after a while.

“It better be” replied Vlad fearfully as he slowly pushed the door open.

As they stepped into the room, Vlad froze, overwhelmed by it all. Everything was as he remembered it, making it almost feel as if his father was still hear and hadn’t been gone at all.

In the centre of the room stood his father’s imposing, mahogany coffin. His more modest oak davenport writing desk stood in the nearby corner. Vlad found himself walking over to it, and on closer inspection found a letter addressed to him while in Romania, that had yet to be sent out. Vlad couldn’t help but touch the paper, running his fingers over the smooth ink words.

“I hate to say it, but sis is veally no time to be veminiscing. Best leave sat for more appropriate circumstances.”

“Your right, your right” replied Vlad, turning away from the letter to face to room again.

Vlad scanned the room and was quick to notice the collection of antique swords mounted on the opposite wall. He went over to them, looking over them carefully to see which would be the most appropriate to use. Vlad found himself drawn to an attractive Scottish broad sword. It was lightweight and easy to manoeuvre with it’s thin silvery blade and rounded handle.

“Alright then, lets go” said Vlad, turning to Wulfric after having make his choice.

Wulfric went first, keeping all his senses alert. As they were leaving the room, Vlad noticed his father’s best cloak hanging on the wall beside the door. Unable to resist, he went over to it. Without even being truly aware of what he was doing, Vlad carefully took the cloak down from it’s hook. He slipped off his own cloak, letting it fall silently to the ground, before putting on his father’s. Wulfric was rather shocked by this, for a vampire’s cloak is a very personal thing that should not be worn by anyone else but it’s rightful owner. And yet, somehow, it seamed to suit Vlad, so Wulfric decided not to comment on it.

As soon as he put it on, Vlad felt an instant sense of strength and determination. He felt ready to take on anything, even a vampire slayer.

The pair then continued on their mission. They crept warily down the corridor, with Wulfric listening in through every doorway in an attempt to find the elusive intruder. Vlad held his sword tight, ready to strike at any sudden movement, every sense alert for danger. After much searching, Wulfric eventually found what they where looking for.

“Sere’s someone in sere” whispered Wulfric, pointing his muzzle towards the drawing room.

“I guess this is it then. It’s now or never.”