



Rippers
Resurrected

THE SOUL CHANGERS

**THE BUDAPEST
EXPRESS**

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Part One:

The Budapest Express

“Love and hate have magical transforming power.

They are the great soul changers.

We grow through their exercise into the likeness of what we contemplate.”

—George William Russell

Outside of Budapest

Winter, 1893

The train whistle brought awareness back. Ice-laden wind tore at his face.

A train? Outside...on the roof?

Two men dragged him by the arms across the train's top. Back, toward the caboose, away from people.

Into the dark. Into the abyss.

His captors shrugged off the wind that so mercilessly tormented him.

His mind wanted to recall facts, but they slipped from his memory like ash from a fire. He couldn't even remember his name. Yet, unlike a newborn babe, he recognized the peril he was thrust into.

“Who are you? Where are you taking me?”

Ignoring him, one man spoke to the other.

“The bloke's awake. Not s'posed to be after that dose.”

“Baroness said e'd be trouble.”

“Knock 'im out again?”

Their accents, East London. Had he been there previously? Why couldn't he remember?

Fragments of memories sparkled.

A woman with skin the color of warm bread woke him abruptly. She fought the men dragging him into the night.

Was she dead? Would he be next?

Panic chilled him more than the wind. Planting his feet, he pulled his arms free of his captors. The sudden action caught them off-guard and he slipped loose before they could tighten their grip. He fell flat on the icy roof, his long blonde hair whipping his face.

Long hair. He couldn't imagine letting his hair grow that long.

Father wouldn't approve.

What hadn't changed was his mustache and beard. He could feel the snot from his nose running down into it, coating it, freezing it into a solid mass.

Scrambling, his boots barely finding footing on the icy surface, he rushed toward the space between cars. If he could get back to people, he could find help. Someone had to care.

Ten feet.

Four feet.

"E's a little rabbit, this one."

"Run, rabbit, run!"

He dove into the gap.

Defeat — the two men grabbed him midair.

They hadn't even run to keep pace with him. Hadn't stressed to subdue him. Weren't struggling to stay upright against the rush of wind and sleet. Their strength inhuman.

"Time for rabbit stew, then?"

They cackled.

"Put him down."

The command stopped their laughter.

Her words carried over the cacophony of steam pistons, blustery weather, and clanking wheels on worn tracks.

The lady from his memories, it had to be her. While not completely at ease in the airstream pushing against her, the woman's poise and composure impressed him. She wore a Norfolk coat, belt cinched tight and collar up against the cold. Her divided skirt flapped against her long legs revealing military style lady's boots. A rapier extended from her outstretched left arm, steady despite the rocking of the train.

"Cor, it's that skirt. Thought Chester took care of 'er?"

"Clearly he did not." She used her free hand to brush dust from her sleeve.

The other man shrugged. "Soddin' useless, that Chester."

"I won't say it twice. Release him to my custody. I've come a long way for him and he won't be your mistress' pet anymore."

The man recognized her accent as Persian, but why he'd know that was yet another mystery.

"Listen, bird. Don't matter if yer the Ripper queen herself. We gots orders, see? Bring the bloke in. We'll do it with you still breathin' or not."

The lady flicked her rapier towards them. "I've been threatened by better. I will happily accept your worst."

They advanced on her in concert. Gloved fingers bulged and claws ripped free. Their jaws stretched and four fangs slid into place between their top and bottom rows of teeth.

The man sat motionless, knowing he should take the opportunity to run, seek help for both himself and the lady, but her confidence in the face of such monstrosities fascinated him.

Strands of chestnut hair had come undone from the tight weave of her bun. They flitted in front of her green eyes.

Green like the broach mother often wore.

Why couldn't he recall his mother's face, yet he could recall that?

One of the creatures leaped while his partner slid across the icy roof taking the low approach. Neither struck their mark as the lady back-flipped away. Landing gracefully on her feet, she reversed and lunged. A wry smile graced her lips as she brought the rapier up through one creature's jaw and out the top of his head, skewering him like a piece of meat on a kebab.

She gibed, "Not so talkative now, are you?"

Kebabs. Sharing one with a friend. In Serbia.

Serbia! He had just visited a Serbian man, but who and for what reason?

A grunt brought him back to the present. The lady stumbled, three slashes rending the coat she wore, but none striking flesh. She frowned.

"Where am I going to find a new coat on a train. No manners."

She pulled two wooden stakes from her belt. One she held high, the other she wielded the same as she had the rapier. The rapier still lodged under the creature's mandible as it danced around.

How was it not dead?

Words swam inside his fractured conscience.

Vampire. Undead. Blood drinkers.

He knew of these abominations. Through legends told to him as a child.

His mother, or a nanny, spun stories of the vampir and other such denizens of the dark.

Not legends. Warnings.

The unencumbered vampire and the huntress dueled. She competently blocked the monster's strikes with her forearm and took every opportunity to plant a stake in its chest. Yet time and again, the vampire dodged. The well-matched opponents battled back and forth until the second vampire pulled the rapier free and it moved to join the fray.

The lady split her focus between the two admirably, yet the odds turned. More ripped fabric led to physical wounds. She took a long clawing to her left arm and blood darkened her sleeve. The damage forced her to drop one of her stakes.

"Stings, does it, skirt? Nothing compared to what's next."

Worried for her safety, the man opened his mouth to yell, but no words came, like he'd forgotten the sound of his own voice. He tried to stand again, but as the train swayed, he found himself dropping to hands and knees again.

Why am I so weak? He thought. Why is this happening to me?

The two creatures boxed the huntress in; one to the front, one to the back. Spinning her right arm backward while twisting her torso to the left drove the rear vampire directly into the path of the wooden dagger. The instrument struck its chest with more force than he thought the lady possessed, piercing the flesh and bone, puncturing the heart. Lucky, but effective. A small cry of surprise and alarm — before the creature dropped. With a push of her boot, the vampire rolled off the roof and away.

The lady huntress winked at the man. "All talk, these vampir."

As she turned to re-address the other blood-sucker, she found empty air. The vampire, somersaulting over the huntress' head, came down behind her. The huntress turned, but at that moment, the train lurched on the tracks. No fault of her own, she slid on the icy surface and fell into the vampire's arms like a lover. There was no love in its demonic eyes as it pinned her arms to her side. It opened its maw fully and leaned in toward her exposed neckline.

Fear for her. Fear for himself. Horror at his impotence. He reached out with one hand and screamed, "NO!"

Blood and adrenaline raced through his veins. His hand grew hot, and to his horror, it changed.

The muscles in his arm thickened and the skin turned red. His knuckles hardened and long black claws elongated from his fingertips. His other arm began to mimic the first.

Weakness gave way to anger.

He snarled.

Anger led to strength.

He stood.

Strength produced courage.

He flexed his new appendages, testing one mighty fist against each other.

When the man looked to the two, predator and prey, locked in a deadly embrace, they both blinked astonishment.

He grinned and said, "Let her go."

"Sure thing, mate. I'm only s'posed to bring you."

It pushed the woman to the side of the roof.

She screamed as the black enveloped her.

Bursting with energy, he raced to the edge and, stretching out his arm, caught her by her belt.

The vampire took advantage of the distraction to spring forward, aiming his mouth at the man's shoulder. Unfortunately for the creature, it found a forearm too tough to bite through.

Hauling the woman back to the roof and spinning her away from the fight, the man punched with his freed left arm. The vampire flew backwards, teeth and fangs shattered. He ran at the creature, alternating blows; left, right, left, right, forcing it back to the roof's edge.

Stunned, the monster could do little to defend itself.

Finally, the man captured the vampire, his oversized mitt completely encircling its neck. With a squeeze, he popped the vampire's head free. He tossed the head over the side as so much garbage.

He stared at the empty hand that was not his own.

"Come! Now! We must get inside!"

How could he go back inside the train now? He was as much a monster as the vampires.

She took him by the arm and pulled him to the ladder.

"I don't know if I can climb with these things," he told her, his voice returning to normalcy.

She smiled and gave him a wink. "What things?"

He held up his hands. "These!" But the hands had transformed back.

The huntress turned and descended the rungs. She paused before disappearing from view. "Coming?"

A porter waited for the man inside the car, wrapping him in a blanket.

"Mr. Knappe, sir! I'm so glad you're okay."

"What did you call me?"

The porter paused, puzzled. "Mr. Knappe. That is your name is it not? That's the name you gave me when you boarded, the name on your ticket. Rey Knappe."

The man looked to the lady, who nodded.

"Sorry, the events of this evening have me shaken."

"No doubt they would any man, sir. It was plain Godsend that I happened to see those men enter your car and informed Miss Caspar here."

"And a fine job you did at that, Clive." The lady drew a handful of bills from her coat and placed them all in the porter's hand. "I'd also appreciate you getting us a bottle of scotch and some supper, if there is any left to be had. Please bring them to Mr. Knappe's room." She started off, but then stopped. "But not too soon. Mr. Knappe has had quite a shock. Give us a few moments to recover."

After a humble nod, Clive took off to fulfill the request. Miss Caspar led Rey to a private room. She locked the door after they entered and took a thorough look at him.

"You are quite a mess, aren't you? That's what you get for being on the run for weeks."

Rey ran his fingers through his unkempt mop of hair.

"How do you know me?"

Miss Caspar dug the tip of her boot into the floor of the car, hands behind her back. "I don't really. I just know who you're supposed to be."

Rey waited patiently.

Letting loose a long held breath. Miss Caspar dropped the expected façade of formality that came with being a woman in the current climate and plopped down in the bench opposite him. She reached down and massaged her legs through her petticoat.

"I'll tell you, fighting those things should get easier with age, but just about the time you feel you've learned all the lessons, your body starts to betray you." Finished, she looked up at him. "You may as well sit down." She drew a flask from her coat and

unscrewed the lid. "This should tide us until the scotch arrives." The lady took a swig before offering it. He declined, resulting in a non-committal shrug from her. She took another sip before replacing the flask.

Using the bed as a seat, Rey waited expectantly for Miss Caspar to begin.

"Does the name Baroness Mary Vetsera mean anything to you?"

He shook his head tentatively.

"The Baroness is an ages-old vampire, though she looks no more than seventeen." She drew a picture from yet another coat pocket. The jacket seemed remarkably well stocked. The image proffered showed a woman, beautiful beyond words: angelic, even ethereal.

"She's a vampire?"

"Vampire Baroness. Not all the vampir are as ugly as the ones we fought outside. Many masquerade as humans quite well. I thought you might even be one, at one time, but you are clearly something else."

The tone of her voice and mysterious accent soothed words that should have alarmed him.

"What does this Baroness have to do with me?"

"You were a project of hers, before you escaped."

"Project?" His head swam with the news. "You mean these arms?"

Miss Caspar leaned forward. "Those and who knows what else. Rumors circulated within the Ripper network that the Baroness planned a coup against the Cabal. My job was to check to see if the rumors were true."

"Cabal?"

Miss Caspar's sighed, exasperated.

"A vampire count named Dracula, once thought slain, has returned. He's pulling all his resources together into an organized group of madmen, monsters and the unholy. His forces are weak, but growing."

Creatures, such as the ones they had just fought, are amassing in numbers. The thought turned his blood cold. He got up and paced around the small cabin. Miss Caspar let him ruminate as he adjusted to the new concepts. He appreciated that.

"And Vetsera wants to lead the Cabal. Why now?"

"She has to move before Dracula's powerbase is secure. Vetsera lived with royalty in Hungary, a mistress of the Crown Prince. But something happened two years ago. The prince died, and so had she, if you were to believe the scuttlebutt. She actually faked her death, and then briefly retreated to Constantinople, the country of her birth,

before returning to Buda Castle as a Baroness.”

“As a native, you would think I would remember the death of a royal, if anything.”

Miss Caspar raised an eyebrow. “You remember your country of origin, but not your name?”

Rey shrugged. “It’s odd what things are not lost in the maze within my head.”

She nodded, accepting his explanation. “Well, yes. He was quite loved by the people. Archduke Rudolf Joseph, Crown Prince of Austria-Hungary.”

Something akin to lightning lanced through the back of his brain. He grabbed the sides of his head and dropped to his knee. Torture twisted his features as some forgotten memory tried pushing its way to the surface by the most painful route imaginable.

A young man stood on the other side of a window. Handsome. Rugged. Wearing regimental gear. So commanding.

“Rudolf! Darling!”

The man turns with a gun in his hand...

Miss Caspar moved beside him. “Mr. Knappe? What is it? Are you alright?”

The memory was lost and the pain subsided slowly. Rey blinked away the fireflies that flittered through his vision. He sat on the floor to get his bearings. “Something about that prince triggered a memory of sorts, though not pleasant. At the risk of further discomfort, tell me more about him.”

She returned to her chair nonchalantly, though she kept her eyes on him intently. “Most of what we know is rumor. The government, led by Emperor Joseph says his son’s health turned bad and he died. The staff of Mayerling, the hunting lodge where the prince lived, say it was suicide, and that he and Vetsera committed suicide together. But the Rippers know she is alive, so it is believed she murdered him.”

The pain didn’t return. Rey pushed his hair back and looked up at her. “That is the second time you’ve mentioned Rippers. What are they? Who are they?”

Miss Caspar smirked. “Forces of good concentrated on wiping out all denizens of the supernatural. The vampir. Werewolves. Demons. Creatures preying on humans, for food, for sport, for enslavement. Doesn’t matter. They are out there and we are the only ones trained to stop them.”

“We?”

She stood and offered a hand. “I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Mizzi Caspar. I’ve been sent by Queen Sisi of Austria to rescue you.”

Passing through Austro-Hungary customs turned out to be trickier than Miss Caspar had predicted before they departed the train. She looked over his papers and pronounced them as good a forgery as hers.

Both he and Mizzi doubted Rey Knappe was his real name. He doubted everything that had happened since waking. He didn't trust his senses anymore. Miss Caspar held the best hope of guiding him to answers, so Rey let her lead.

The Rendőrség gave both their documents a thorough check. Too thorough for Miss Caspar's taste. Rey noticed her posture change, like that of a deer preparing to spring for safety. A second officer took notice of his peer's attentiveness to detail and moved to join him.

She leaned over to Rey and whispered, "Be prepared to run."

"You two are engaged?" The first Rendőrség asked.

Miss Caspar averted her eyes, not speaking directly to the man. "Yes. We met in Romania, where my parents own a small restaurant. Mr. Knappe made arrangements with them for my hand. We have come here for the ceremony and the blessing of the Emperor."

The two Rendőrség took one more look at the papers. Handing them back, they allowed both of them to enter Budapest, city on the Danube. She hailed a hansom cab. Despite the hour, many waited for arrivals from the train.

"That was impressive acting, Miss Caspar" Rey admitted. "You almost had me convinced we were getting married."

Over her shoulder, Miss Caspar spoke, "Deception based on experience, Mr. Knappe. And do please call me Mizzi, we are married after all." She chuckled.

Rey found her captivating when he was not so scared for his life. "Then you must please call me Rey. Again, that was quite a performance."

"I find that the closer you draw from a real experience, the better the performance."

Rey wondered what she meant as they stepped into the carriage.

Mizzi drew the blinds immediately upon entering the carriage and tapped the roof twice. "The Restaurant Kacsá, please."

The sounds of horse hooves on the cobblestone filled the silence. Not willing to let it continue, Rey spoke.

"I do not believe I have said thank you yet."

"Oh? For what?"

"Coming to my aid. Who knows where I would be now? I owe you my life."

A wave of her hand tried to brush the compliment away, but a slight pink tinge to

her cheeks indicated it pleased her.

“Think nothing of it. It is my duty, after all. As for where you would be, I imagine back at Buda Castle where I first saw you escape. I doubt you’d survive a second escape.”

Rey had a hard time picturing himself – half-dressed and diving from one of the castle’s parapets into the Danube – but Mizzi swore she saw him do it. Thinking he might have important information, she shadowed Rey as he stole food, clothing and money. Looking like a proper gentleman, finally, he bought a new identity and acquired tickets for Serbia.

Mizzi had lost him for over two weeks and it was strictly fate that she had booked the same train as he had, bound for Vienna.

“Still, that was impressive fighting.”

Her cheeks reddened more. Clearly, Miss Caspar was not used to compliments.

“Queen Sisi trained me. She was the finest Ripper that may have ever been, save for Mina Harker, that is. Rippers debate at lodges all over the world who would win in a fight.”

“Was?”

She pulled back the drape to peak outside, as if looking to see if they were being followed. Her voice took on a wistful tone.

“My lady nearly died from a curse. It is a story for another time.”

That disappointed Rey. At least Mizzi wore a different expression than she had when he stepped from his train car before departing: his hair cut and beard neatly trimmed. Instead of pleased, Mizzi took a step back in shock, her eyes begging for answers for what they held.

Rey inquired what brought on such a deep regard of his appearance and all she would offer was, “I knew someone who wore his beard and hair so.”

“A lover? A husband?”

Mizzi shook her head. “Yes, and no, the other could never be as he was married. When he passed some years ago, he took a part of my heart with him. Your appearance took me by surprise, as it was like you were him...but not.”

She spoke no more of it, which led to an uncomfortable silence between them.

Rey depended on her. Her face was the only one he could retain. He couldn’t recall Clive the porter’s face after the man had left the car. Mizzi reintroduced Rey to him when Clive had returned with dinner. And again, as they departed the train. Other faces, ones from his memory, were impossible to remember. Nor could he extrapolate faces when they were described to him. Whatever took his memory also took his ability

to hold faces in his mind.

All save for Mizzi, forcing him to cling to her.

The hoof beats slowed and the carriage came to a halt.

“We are here. Try not to let people get a good look at you. I am known around this city. You may be, as well.”

Mizzi tossed a small coin purse up to the cab driver as she exited. Wasting no time, she darted through the entrance, barely giving Rey any chance to examine the surroundings.

Lampposts casting flickering light over the area revealed very little. Restaurant Kacsá took up the ground floor of a four-story triangular building. The front door sat at the blunt point of two wide and busy conjoined streets. The traffic of pedestrians and horse-drawn carriages gave Miss Caspar’s concern merit. Even at that hour, too many people flooded the area for her not to be paranoid.

Mizzi tipped the edge of her wide brimmed hat to the greeter inside the restaurant. The sign was returned with a wink. Together, Mizzi and Rey ascended a series of stairs through a side door. They had not gone two flights when she stopped. Carefully turning an unlit wall sconce, Mizzi spun around and started going back down the way they had just came. Confused, Rey followed along as an obedient puppy.

Instead of returning to Kacsá, the stairs descended below the first floor, below street level and down into the dark. Smiling for the first time since he’d cleaned up, Mizzi waited for Rey to catch up before pulling a lever. He could feel the stairs shift below his feet, assuring him that the way above had been returned to normal. Another switch and lights illuminated their way.

“Welcome to the Budapest Lodge. We are safe, for the moment.”

But as they continued down into the bowels of the earth, Rey didn’t feel safe. Not yet. He couldn’t shake the image of Mizzi’s ashen face at his groomed appearance. She hid something from him; a clue maybe, to his identity, to why creatures of the night hunted him.

Rey doubted he would ever feel safe until he had answers to all his questions. As he placed his hand against the cold stone of the wall, he felt the appendage grow warmer. He did not look back, though, to see the claw marks he left in the rock.

“We moved the lodge from its previous location, above the Sausage Haus, in a hurry. We needed someplace less, um, obvious.”

Miss Caspar had a grasp of the understated.

The Budapest Lodge gave off the impression of a small city built within catacombs.

The underground respite for Rippers hosted most of the amenities one needed for survival: a market, lodging, supplies, places for worship, cafes and entertainment. However, locating them required traversing a labyrinth of cramped passages with few landmarks as to which way was what. Rey's guide had taken him down so many tunnels that he doubted he could find his way back to the surface unassisted. He told Mizzi as much.

"We don't use any directional signs in case we're discovered. It gives people in the most sensitive areas a chance to evacuate before being reached by invading forces."

The statement did nothing to calm Rey's nerves.

"Sensitive? Invading forces? I thought you said we'd be safe here?"

Mizzi assured him, "The Cabal forces in the area are not strong enough to mount an offensive that would breach our current security, nor win against our combined forces. But, the future is unknown. There might come a day when the agents of darkness could have sympathizers in high places." Dropping her voice down, she added, "We could not stand against an army of the damned."

"Even with what is in these sensitive areas?"

"Curious, are you?" Mizzi said, flashing her Cheshire smile again. "Well, fret not. We have an appointment in one of the sensitive areas, and maybe we can get some answers about who you are."

"How could anyone down here know who I am?"

But then Rey realized, the statement had two meanings.

Does she think I'm lying to her? Is she taking me someplace to be questioned, even tortured?

He tried to block the secondary context out of his mind, without dropping his guard. Mizzi seemed sincere about her desire to help him, but then she also acted very convincingly at the train depot to those officers.

Deeper they went into the lodge. Smells overwhelmed Rey's nose. The dankness of stale air, chamber pots left outside rooms to be collected and disposed of, the unwashed Rippers as they passed closely by in the halls.

Reaching their destination, Mizzi stopped at a door and knocked gently.

"Doctor?" She whispered to the door. "Are you in?"

Her answer came in the form of a man's scream and the sounds of thrashing equipment.

"Oh, good. He's here."

She opened the door for Rey, but he balked. "Ladies first?"

The room looked more like the torture chamber Rey prophesized than a place of healing. One whole wall stored the most medieval collection of knives, saws and axes, many stained with dried blood. To their right, shelves contained jars filled with pieces of human, and not-so-human looking, body parts. Rey swore some of the parts, like a lung, still moved in their preserving fluid. A putrid smell overwhelmed his senses causing him to gag.

“You’ll get used to the decay after a few visits. Not everything preserves well.”

Another yell ended abruptly. Rey believed it came from separate chamber off to the side.

Mizzi warned, “We’ll have to be careful if the doctor is in surgery.”

Cautiously stepping up to the opening, she peered into the next room.

“Looks like he’s just finishing up. Let’s go in.”

“Let’s not. I don’t know what good seeing a doc—”

But Miss Caspar had already taken his elbow and directed the reluctant Rey into the operating room.

A table sat in the center of the chamber. On it, a man lay on his stomach, his arms extended from his sides, limp. The skin on his back was peeled away, leaving his muscles and flesh exposed like a pomegranate. Blood dripping from the open wound pooled under the table. Rey followed the puddle as it extended out as far as their feet. He jumped back as if the blood reached out for him, trying to draw him in to it.

“Sorry,” a Scottish brogue apologized. “If I knew I’d have spectators today, I woulda left out smocks and boots.”

The doctor stood at the head of the table, a maul gripped in his gloved hand. It dripped with blood and pieces of detritus Rey surmised was bone and brain matter, due to the caved in condition of the patient’s skull. He barely looked human with a mask incorporating glasses and a breathing filter covering most of his face. From under a cap, ringlets of reddish-blond curls broke free from where the doctor kept them bound. When he removed his mask, the doctor’s mouth twisted in grim disappointment.

“That could’ve gone better.”

“Another graft not take?” Mizzi asked, matter-of-factly.

“Aye, lassie, and a particularly nasty turn. He went for me rod and tackle with his teeth. Got them clamped down on me lab coat. I barely managed to subdue him before the boys ‘round here woulda been callin’ me stumpy.”

Mizzi blushed while Rey turned white.

“Y–You killed him? You killed your own patient?”

Turning to place the maul on a tray filled with other such devices, the doctor scoffed. "Not me first choice, laddie. Dougan knew the risks. That type of replacement has a high failure rate."

Rey turned to Mizzi. "And this doesn't bother you?"

"Of course it bothers me," Mizzi said, taking offense. "Losing a Ripper is always a terrible thing." She looked to the doctor. "That's a sinner's spine, is it not? That means he was a competent warrior. That's a blow to us. However, I've lost many friends either to thirst for upgrades, or just out in the field against a superior foe. One learns to accept death, Rey, or one becomes as mad as the monsters we fight."

"Aye, lad, she speaks truth. It seems cavalier, but I took no pride in what I had to do. Dougan here killed a bleedin' shambler himself, a fine feat by any reckoning, careful to keep the spine fresh and intact until he could get to me. Only because of that did I agree to do the surgery."

Crossing her arms, Mizzi obviously did not buy his explanation.

"Well, and he paid me extra."

The stare continued.

"All right, I'll send the money to his family. Some of it, at least."

Miss Caspar's gaze was unwavering as she stared down the doctor. She tapped her boot, making little splashes in the blood puddle. Taking off the glasses, the doctor relented.

"Fine, I'll send it all, except..." he held up a finger, "a small fee for operating expenses. I do need to eat."

Mizzi smirked, signaling her approval.

The doctor moved to the side of the table to embrace her. "M'dear! It's so good to see you."

For her part, Mizzi kept the doctor at arm's length. "You're a mess. You must clean up before you get a hug. And get me something to clean my boots, while you're at it."

He laughed and regarded Rey for the first time. "And who is this handsome lad? Doctor Horas MacNill." He offered an un-gloved hand. Rey begrudgingly took it, more out of norms than out of respect. The doctor clearly didn't have any regard for the sanctity of life.

Even more than that, Rey realized as he took in the madman, he was not entirely human. Where a normal right eye should be, an eagle's eye peered at Rey intently.

Rey dropped the hand and backed away in horror.

MacNill chuckled. "Oh, you noticed me Horus eye, did you? Cost me a pretty bit

of copper that did. Joined a team headin' down the Nile intent on getting' some relic or another. I just went along to kill a servant of that damned bird god so I could claim this beauty." He pulled down a bit of the skin below the eye as to give Rey a better look.

Rey's color drained as if Satan himself stood before him.

Mizzi squeezed Rey's arm. "It's okay. With that eye, he can see details no human eye could. It helps him in surgery and makes him one of the best Rippertech doctors in the world."

If that's what the best looks like... Rey considered, and let Mizzi's assurances slip down the drain like the blood of MacNill's last patient.

Sensing his nervousness, the doctor offered, "If you'll meet me in my waiting room, I'll get cleaned up. That should make me look more like Victor Frankenstein and less like his monsters." Again, the doctor laughed, but Rey felt no mirth in his own soul.

Sitting in Doctor MacNill's examination chair, Rey felt more like one of the jarred specimens than a patient. The Ripper doc poked and prodded him for a bit and then asked him to strip down to his undergarments.

Mizzi giggled.

"I will not! Not only because of the lady present, but I wouldn't allow myself to be so vulnerable to your machinations."

"Ah, machinations, is it? Do you understand at all what I do?"

Rey shook his head.

"He replaces pieces of Rippers' bodies with that of the creatures they kill." Mizzi leaned forward in her chair. "We call it Rippertech, and well, not everyone agrees with it. There's a schism in the ranks due to its use. Here, in this lodge, it is common. Elsewhere, it is considered taboo."

"Why would anyone want to have pieces of their own body replaced with those of a monster?"

The doctor stepped to the side and tapped a finger against his chin. "You ever heard the legend about eatin' a stag's heart after you kill it to gain its strength?"

There was a familiarity to the story. Rey remember himself as a boy, on the hunt, chasing a fox, dogs barking at his side. His father, face still a blurred image, seated behind him on the horse. Campfires stories.

"Well, the same could be said, of a sort, about creatures of the night." The doctor pointed to the shelves filled with body parts. "See those dangly things? Those are

adrenal glands from a hellhound. The beastie is dead, doesn't have use of them anymore, right? But if we were to replace your own glands with those beauties, you would find yourself more powerful during combat. Faster, able to react quicker."

"And that works?"

Mizzi grew sullen. "Not all the time. Maybe Rippertech grafts don't take effect, or when they do, they have unexpected side effects."

"Like the desire for a bit of blood sausage, if you get me drift." MacNill elbowed Rey.

"You're saying that Rippers do this voluntarily, knowing they could die or go insane?"

Mizzi stood. "Because creatures of the night have an unfair advantage over us mere humans. They can change shape, see in the dark, fly!" She illustrated her point by making shadow puppets on the wall. "Some Rippers believe we need to even the playing field. By stealing some of their powers, we can fight them at their level."

Rey couldn't imagine sacrificing his humanity to become more like those monsters, but then that's why Mizzi brought him to the doctor in the first place. To see how much of him was human.

"So, my transformation... you think I did something like that?"

MacNill said, "Let's see."

The doctor picked up two long metal prods from a contraption lined with dials and knobs. He flipped a switch and a hum filled the room. The back of Rey's teeth itched and he felt the hair on his neck stand up. Without warning, MacNill jabbed Rey's hands with the prods and electricity flowed through him. Rey yelled and jumped up from the chair. The smell of burnt flesh reached his nose and he growled. Wanting to punch the madman in the face, he raised his balled fist, finding it had transformed once again into the monstrous appendage.

The doctor couldn't have been more pleased. He clucked like an old lady as he examined Rey's arms up and down. "Amazin' work. Astoundin', actually. Taloned hands, muscle replacement. I never seen such clean work." He placed his eagle eye right up next to Rey's elbow. "And no scars? How is that possible? It's like they weren't attached as much as grown. Fascinatin'!"

Rey was directed to sit down in the chair again and open his shirt. Mizzi agreed to look away as he removed his jacket and coat and unbuttoned his cravat.

"Aye. I can see them now." The doctor moved in close again. "Scars around your ribcage. Intricate work, this is. Few could do it so well."

"Do what?" Mizzi asked.

"Open heart surgery of some sort. Not exactly sure. Someone placed somethin' inside of the lad to make him this way. Maybe a new heart, but I never seen a heart

replacement do that,” he pointed at Rey’s arms, “to a man.”

“Are you saying, my heart is not my own?”

“Possibly. Let’s check that brain of yours, too.” MacNill moved to the back of the chair and parted Rey’s hair with his fingers. “Aye, there’s been work done here, too. Same surgeon. His, or her, work is impeccable. Could explain the memory problems.”

Rey sat up quickly. “This Baroness planted something in my brain?”

“Definitely! Well, maybe not her, but a skilled doctor in her service, for sure. But what, I have no way of knowing without popping open your lid myself. Would you like me to?” He sounded too eager for Rey’s tastes.

“No. I have had enough of this madness! I have pieces of some monster inside of me and no memory if they were done by my own volition or against my will.”

Mizzi moved to his side and laid a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“It’ll be okay. We’ll find out what was done. Someone must know. Maybe within the Baroness’s camp. These changes were most likely done while you were her prisoner.”

“I can tell you this, laddie. Whatever was done to you, those mitts of yours are far from the only changes you’ll experience.”

“Are you saying he’ll change again?” Mizzi expressed oceans of concern.

“Aye. Most likely, it’ll happen in times of stress or fear. And considerin’ the amount of work he’s had done, there’ll be several new abilities.”

They gave him reassuring pats on the shoulder, doing their best to hide the pity behind their eyes. He was a monster, but no one knew exactly what type. How dangerous was he? How much of him would remain when the beast took over? Their pity only added to his growing sense of dismay.

The accommodations Mizzi found for Rey were adequate for rest, but his mind would not let him sleep.

In a single day, the person he once was had been erased and the person who lay awake in bed had been thrust into a world that defied logic. Concepts such as creatures who preyed on humans and humans who fought back by taking the darkness into themselves were not thoughts that just became commonplace. This new life Rey found himself a part of required acceptance akin to losing a loved one.

So he grieved instead of sleeping. Holding his hands up to his face, he wept. Grateful the walls were made of stone, he let himself sob until he felt he couldn’t possibly cry another drop.

Finished, Rey set his mind to taking control of his new life. He may have been

dragged into it kicking and screaming, but it was the only existence left to him. He would stop being a victim. He needed to fight back. If forces of evil came for him, they would find him waiting.

Thinking he could remember his way back to an armory he saw upon leaving Doctor MacNill's place, Rey dressed and left the confines of his room. His body told him the witching hour had passed, so he didn't expect to encounter anyone up. Much to his surprise, though, he heard voices coming from the first juncture. They resonated from down the hall by Miss Caspar's room.

Moving silently, Rey slipped down the corridor. The source of the voices came from a man and woman embraced in a hug. When they separated, he recognized the woman as Mizzi. While he didn't recognize the handsome man with dark hair and dark eyes, Rey knew instinctually he bore the bearing of one born to nobility.

Rey stepped back into the shadows, lest he be spotted.

Mizzi spoke softly, but Rey found he could hear her words as if he were standing next to her.

"Jonathan, I was so afraid you had fallen when the lodge was attacked."

"It was a near thing," the stranger admitted. "Had we not already planned to move the lodge before the attack, I doubt there would have been a lodge for you to return to."

Her companion's London accent reminded Rey of some long forgotten memory, but he didn't have time to go down that rabbit hole.

"So many dead, it is hard to believe the Cabal would implement such a bold plan."

"Their numbers grow strong in the area. It is the Baroness' doing. Ever since she left Mayerling with Rudolf in tow, the Cabal has become brazen."

"I cannot believe he went with her willingly. I cannot."

"It has been two years, Mizzi. He has stood by her side as a faithful companion."

"But what of the reports he is dead? Has anyone found a body?"

The man sighed. "I am so sorry, but we cannot confirm that Rudolf's body was buried secretly outside of Castle Buda. As far as we know, he still lives to see her will done. He must be lying low, making plans. He is a brilliant tactician, after all.

"Now what of this man, Rey Knappe, you brought us? I though Sisi sent you to kill Vetsera's creation, not adopt it?"

Rey leaned in closer, stomach tightening.

"There is something... something so familiar about him. I do not know what it is. His mannerisms, his style. It is like he is trying to emulate Rudolf. At least, the prince I

used to know.”

“And who you still love. Do not let that cloud your judgment, Mizzi. He may act like your prince, but he is not. That man died two years ago when Mary Vetsera stole his soul.”

“I know.”

“And though the Crown Prince may have faked his death, if this stray of yours is an agent of Rudolf’s, he will meet a very real death.”

A door opened near Rey and a man dressed in only a nightshirt let out a woman wearing gaudy makeup. They both spotted Rey immediately.

“Oy! Whatta yer doin’ slinkin’ round at this hour?”

Hastened footsteps. The one called Jonathan drawing his gun. Mizzi, shock and betrayal in her eyes.

Run!

“Rey? Rey! Stop!”

But Mizzi’s plea echoed off the rock walls.

Rey felt his heart pummeling his ribcage, wanting to let loose whatever monster lie dormant. Despite the diminished light, Rey saw clearly and smelled more acutely. Between breaths of stagnant air, he caught whiffs of cooler fresher air down certain hallways. Following his nose, he ran, making turns on instinct. Shouts came from behind him. Men gathered to pursue him.

He found the stairwell leading up and took the steps three at a time. He flipped the lever and impatiently waited for the stairs to turn. Torchlight flickered behind him. The hunting party grew close.

Instead of heading out into the streets, Rey continued up to the second floor and rotated the sconce as he’d seen Mizzi do. As the stairs moved back to their original place, he ripped the lever from the wall, hopefully buying him precious moments. He ascended the stairs, feeling if he could get to the roof, he could make a plan of escape. The Danube shouldn’t be far. He could hire a boat to take him upriver and away from the madness of the lodge.

Rey found the access to the roof and quickly climbed. There, he took in Budapest from above. He spotted the river several streets over. A few blocks upstream, the boat docks waited. Running about, he looked for a ladder down.

A motion caught his eye. Something passed in front of the moon, darkening the sky for a moment. Rey followed its path, but it disappeared as quickly as it appeared. Feeling exposed, Rey reconsidered his actions. He moved back toward the access port, keeping his senses alert. Try as he might, though, Rey couldn’t keep his guard up

everywhere.

It dropped from directly above, pinning him to the roof and knocking the wind from him. Talons dug into his shoulders, piercing his flesh.

Rey struggled against the creature's grip. A great deal of weight pressed down on him. He couldn't get air into his lungs. Rey saw nothing but roof and black spots that grew larger, enveloping his consciousness.

The edges of Rey's eyes tinged red and blood coursed to his extremities. His fingers elongated and arms muscles filled out. Placing his palms flat against the roof, he pushed. His reward came in the form of renewed efforts on the part of his captor.

"Stop fighting it," an unholy voice told him. "My mistress prefers you alive, but she can always revive you if need be."

The blast of a gun preceded the loosening of pressure on Rey's back. A second blast gave him enough release to draw in air. He took a lungful and rolled to his back. Torches illuminated the roof, allowing Rey to see what held him down.

Like a stone gargoyle brought to life, the winged fiend arched its back and roared. More shots forced the creature away from Rey, though the bullets did little damage against the monster's thick, red hide.

Mizzi and a man Rey assumed to be Jonathan – having already forgotten his face – didn't falter despite facing such a sight. They continued firing at the hellish demon. With two pumps of its giant bat-like wings, it took to the sky again. As soon as it cleared the roof, Miss Caspar ran to Rey, helping him to his feet.

"We need to get you out of here!"

He pushed her away. "No! No more running. I have to fight her."

"The Baroness?" Jonathan asked.

"She's the only one with the answers. I'll pry them from her corpse if I have to."

Devilish laughter echoed through the night caused the trio to scan the horizon.

"Poor little man. Lost his memories. Who is he? What has he done?"

Rey balled his fists. "Face me, monster!"

"But what if the little man is as bad as the monsters he fights?"

Mizzi called out, "If you know something, fiend, then no more games. Tell us!"

A guffaw. "Not my story to tell, harlot. However, if you think my mistress will fall so easy, you are mistaken. The only ones dying tonight are..."

"YOU!"

Coming up over the side of the building, the creature flew faster than the eye could

follow. It struck all three below the knees, flipping them into the air. Pain seared Rey's legs. Then his back as he landed hard.

Jonathan got up first and helped Mizzi to her feet.

"Jonathan! The war chest!"

Running to the center of the roof, they bent over an object. They rose back to back, and each baring an iron spear.

"Where did..."

Mizzi motioned to a crate that sat open.

Rey moved to the box and found it loaded with various offensive implements. He reached for a spear, but discovering it hot to his touch, dropped it. Instead, he grabbed an ax. He joined the Rippers and they formed a triangle that matched the building beneath them. No matter which way it came, they would be ready.

Rey remembered how he'd been taken off guard when he first arrived and looked up in time to see the demon diving directly at them.

"Above!"

The spear wielders spun and launched their weapons skyward. The shafts pierced the demon's wings.

It spiraled out of control, howling in pain as it crashed through the roof, through the floor below and into the room below that.

Ax firmly grasped in hand, Rey launched himself through the hole after it.

The place appeared vacant save for the monster propped against a wall. It tried to free itself from the spears imbedded in its wings. Each time it touched the iron, smoke rolled off its hands and it pulled away.

Rey looked at it with a mix of revulsion and pity. "Stop fighting it."

The demon looked up and chuckled.

"You should be freeing me. We are on the same side, after all."

"I am no friend of monsters."

"Oh, but you were. For years you have been my mistress's stalwart servant. Just because you don't remember doesn't make it truth."

Rey brandished the ax. "Who am I? What did she do to me?"

"Nothing that you didn't want. She offered you immortality. She offered you a chance to rule, but not just some small empire. She made you powerful enough to take over the Cabal from Dracula. Powerful enough to rule the world!"

Rey took a menacing step forward. "WHO AM I?"

“Poor little man. Can’t even remember his name.”

The demon launched itself at Rey, a clawed hand raking his chest. Rivers of blood poured from the wound. The creature swung again, but instead of finding flesh, Rey’s taloned left arm intercepted. The room grew smaller. Even the ax seemed tiny in his hand, so Rey dropped it and looked eye-to-eye at the demon.

“Yes, brother,” the creature entreated. “Reveal your true nature!”

Rey roared and reached through the creature’s chest, smashing through hollow rib bone, to grab a hold on its black heart. With little effort, he pulled it free and held the still beating organ in his open palm.

Clearly, the act surprised the demon. An expression of disbelief covered its face before it collapsed.

Noises in the hallway outside the room caused Rey to turn. He spotted his reflection in a mirror for just a moment. He’d grown to twice his normal size, legs and torso now as thick and muscular as his arms. His skin radiated bright red, the color of fresh blood. But the most startling was his head.

Two horns, identical to the demon’s, sat atop his crown.

“Rey? Rey? Are you in there?” Mizzi pounded against the apartment’s door.

Rey didn’t want her to see him. He leapt up through the hole in the ceiling just as the door came down. Not waiting to see her horrified face, Rey propelled himself over to the next building. He did it again and again until he was clear of the city and all the secrets it held.

Buda Castle

Baroness Mary Vetsera watched the half-demon hop from rooftop to rooftop. Despite the hour and distance, she could see her former lover make his escape from the city they once controlled together. A slight breeze caused Mary’s scalloped cape to ripple, exposing the pale white skin of her bosom to the night.

Doctor Maxim Dred, the Baroness’ personal Rippertech expert, watched the same event through a telescope placed on the parapet. “He’s getting away. Don’t you want to stop him?”

She gave airs. “He’ll come back eventually. He’s torn between two worlds. Soon, he’ll realize he can call only one place home.”

The doctor looked up at his queen. “How can you be so sure?”

“Oh, I know. Every prince wants a kingdom to rule. My dear Rudolf is no different.”

