

JOURNAL OF RUDOLPH VAN RICHTEN

For more than three decades now, I have undertaken to investigate and expose creatures of darkness to the purifying light of truth and knowledge. "Hero" I am named in some circles; "sage" and "master hunter" I am called in others. That I have survived countless supernatural assaults is seen as a marvel among my peers; my name is spoken with fear and loathing among my foes.

In truth, this "virtuous" calling began as an obsessive effort to destroy a vampire that murdered my child, and it has become for me a tedious and bleak career. Even as my life of hunting monsters began, I felt the weight of time on my weary shoulders. Today I am a man who has simply lived too long. Like a regretful lich, I find myself inexorably bound to an existence I sought out of madness and, seemingly, must now endure for all eternity. Of course I shall die, but whether I shall ever rest in my grave haunts my idle thoughts, and torments me in my dreams.

I expect that those who think me a hero will change their minds when they know the whole truth about my life as a hunter of the unnatural. Nevertheless, I must reveal, here and now, that I have been the indirect yet certain cause of many deaths, and the loss of many good friends. Mistake me not! I do not merely feel sorry for myself. Rather, I come to grips with a devastating realization: I now see that I am the object of a baleful Vistani curse. More tragically, the nature of this hex is such that I have not borne the brunt of it; instead, far worse, those who surround me have fallen victim to it!

I have related the tragic story of how my only child Erasmus was taken by Vistani and sold to a vampire. I explained how Erasmus was made a minion of the night stalker, and how it was my miserable part to free him from that fate at the point of a stake. What I have neglected to illuminate before is how I tracked Erasmus's kidnappers across the land, or how I "extracted" Erasmus's whereabouts from them.

In fact, the Vistani took Erasmus with my own, unwitting permission. They had brought an extremely ill member of their tribe to me one evening

and insisted that I treat him, but I was unable to save the young man's life. In fear of their retribution, I begged the Vistani to take anything of mine if only they would withhold their terrifying powers, of which I knew nothing. To my lasting astonishment, they chose to surreptitiously take my son in exchange for their loss! By the time I realized what had occurred, they were already an hour gone.

Incensed beyond reason, I strapped the body of the dead young man to my horse and doggedly followed the Vistani caravan through the woods, naively allowing the sun to set before me without seeking shelter from the night. Shortly after darkness fell, I was beset by undead that would have slain me, had not their master—a lich—intervened and spared my life, for reasons that I do not completely understand. He somehow detected me and, with his powerful magic, took control of a pack of zombies that wandered in the forest. He spoke to me through the mouths of the dead things and placed a magic ward against undead on me, then animated the dead Vistana and bade it tell me where I could find its people. Unfortunately (I say in hindsight), the plan worked. I found the child-stealers, and my unwelcome entourage included a growing horde of voracious undead that could not touch me, thanks to the lich's ward.

When I found the caravan, I threatened to set the zombies on the Vistani unless they returned my dear boy. They replied that he had been sold to the vampire, Baron Metus. Something inside me snapped. I released the zombies, and the entire tribe was eaten alive.

Yet the story has not ended. Before she died, the leader cursed me, saying, "Live you always among monsters, and see everyone you love die beneath their claws!" Even now, so many years later, I can hear her words with painful clarity. A short time later, I found my dear Erasmus made into a vampire. He begged me to end his curse, which I did with a heavy heart. The darkness had torn him from my loving arms forever, and I foolishly believed that the curse had exacted its deadly toll. I wept until an insatiate desire for vengeance filled the bottomless rift in my heart.