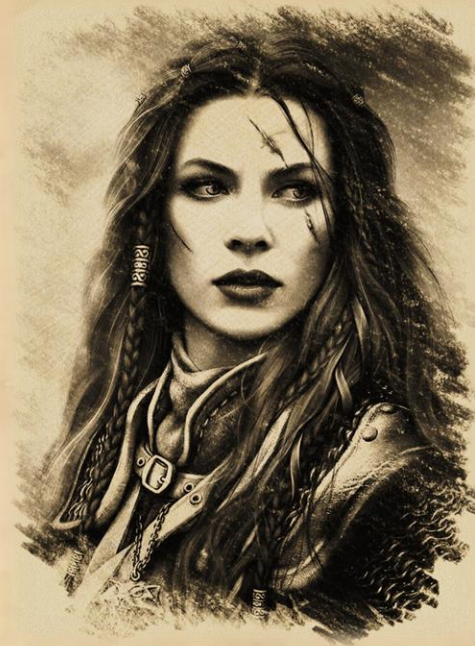


Mine is the story, which should never have come to be. It has been 20 years since I committed an act no father should, by driving a stake through my poor son's heart, as he begged me to end his suffering, after being turned into a vampire. I killed the other two young vampires in their coffins that were at rest with my son. In doing so, Baron Metus, the vampire lord who had turned my son and the others, took vengeance upon me and slaughtered my wife. It was three long struggling years hunting down the Vistani who kidnapped my son and sold him to Baron Metus.

It was the help of a young woman, that saw the Baron's demise. I was at the Bear & Bow tavern in the town of Wurmwood. When I returned to my room late one evening, I noticed the door ajar and a candlelit and a small fire in the hearth. I drew my rapier from my cane and saw a young woman sitting by the hearth. Her name as Ezmerelda. She had fiery red hair that matched her temperament and worn clothes which belied a sharp wit and noble countenance. She had a beautiful face that tugged at the edges of my memory, but I was certain I had never seen before. With barely a word of introduction, she spun a tale of tragedy and revenge. Her family slaughtered by the undead and her desire to hunt them down.



While the story was well-rehearsed, I had interrogated too many people not to sense the lies. I did not expose her story, however, though even now I am not sure why. In part perhaps because my very existence focused upon finding my son and killing the monsters and stood in my way. Any help was welcome. And in part perhaps because I had become so isolated that the idea of a human companion, even one who I could not trust, was too precious to let go. It would have been far better if I had just run her off. But I did not.



For the next year, she joined me on my adventures and gradually I revealed more of my story to her. The sympathy she showed me was deeper and more personal than expected, which I erroneously assumed was because mine closely resembled her story. One evening, after a far too close encounter with a pack of ghouls, the truth came out. I was bandaging her arm where a claw had caught her in the melee. Standing close as I was to her I could see the roots of her hair, much darker than the fiery red of the rest. Suddenly the pieces started to fall together as I looked at her face and knew who she resembled. The black-haired Vistani witch whose son I failed to heal. At whose feet I begged for my safety. At whose feet I offered my son.

Recoiling back from Ezmerelda my lips curled in a snarl of fury and self-loathing as I recalled my failures. Ezmerelda jumped to her feet a look of confusion on her face which slowly turned to realization as she looked me in the eyes. I knew.

She was too young to be the Vistani woman, a daughter or niece perhaps. I drew the sword from my raven cane and pointed it at her midsection, demanding answers, some primal rage inside me goading me to run her through. She sank back into the chair with a look of sadness on her face and spoke.



She was there that night when they took my son. Always quick to question she had voiced dissent and had been silenced by her mother. A few days later they had given my son to a messenger of some sort. She did not know who he was, or where he took my son. Over the next several years similar occurrences became more frequent, children stolen from homes or sold by their parents, always passed along to men who appeared in the night and were gone by the morning. Angry mobs or individual peasants that followed the caravan and tried to rescue the children or seek revenge met timely hordes of zombies or packs of ghouls.

Ezmerelda was the only one to openly defy her mother, the only one to speak out against the kidnappings and trades, and thus became distrusted by the rest of the caravan. She was kept far away from the children and the messengers. She overheard quiet conversations about vampires and obligation, but such conversations were quickly cut short when she was noticed.



Eventually, she decided to leave the caravan. unsure of what to do but holding a growing hatred for undead and whoever was orchestrating this charade she went in search of allies. She dyed her hair and discarded her Vistani garb. Following tales of my exploits, she sought me out, only then realizing that I was the father of the first child her family had stolen. I was where it had all begun. After that realization, she was unsure of what to do, or how to reveal her part in my tragedy.

I stood in silence, my sword was still drawn during her tale, listening intently for any hint of a lie, any excuse to kill her, and temper my desire for vengeance. But her words rang true. Certainly, she was hiding things, but nothing that she said was a lie. It seemed my vengeance would best be carried out elsewhere.

I demanded that she led me to her caravan, and she readily agreed. She told me she would be by my side and do whatever it took to find my son, that I was more family to her than the Vistani. I barely heard her.

We set off at a grueling pace, running our horses into the ground and buying new ones at each passing village and city. It took a month of searching and questions for her to track down the caravan, even knowing their normal route. During the whole journey, I said barely a word outside of bartering or making demands where necessary. She tried to speak to me most nights, but my mind was trapped in a cage of revenge and self-loathing. Eventually, she stopped trying and the silence echoed through my head in the night as I lay trying to sleep.

Then we found them. Camped in a small holler a quarter mile from the main road. The Vistani seemed at ease, they were not on the run from a new conquest and were enjoying their reprieve. We watched them from the woods until evening. Most were gathered around a fire listening to a large man tell stories while two took turns stirring a stew that sat over a smaller cooking fire. There were no guards posted. It was trivial for us to slip into the camp. I poisoned the stew while Ezmerelda took care of the ale.





Chatter root was what the man called it. I do not know its true name. It was a plant that paralyzed the body from the neck down but caused little or no lasting harm. I found a small patch of it growing in the marsh near the ruins of Berez, it was perfect for interrogation.

The poisoning went almost too well, within hours everyone in the camp was rolled over on their backs shouting to each other in panicked voices but unable to move a muscle. I approached the largest tent draped with colorfully embroidered cloth and bangles. With each step my anticipation built, fueling a renewed rage as I slashed the drapes from the front of the tent.

And there she was. That Vistani bitch who took my son. Less regal and demanding now as she was half fallen out of a chair with stew spilled down her front. Her eyes lit with a panic as she recognized my face and slurred words bubbled from her mouth. She was lighter than I expected as I picked her up and threw her on the floor in the center of the room, my blade out of the cane, and into her shoulder before she hit the floor.

The most useful part of the drug was that the victim could still feel pain.





She screamed as my blade pulled roughly from her shoulder and dragged a shallow gash down her front, her already barely intelligible utterances now stained by an ugly realization that she was going to die here. Dropping my sword and unsheathing a flat skinning knife I knelt on her stomach with my hand against her neck and demanded answers. The question had not changed in all these years. Where was my son?

Ezmerelda stood at the entrance, one hand full of the bright tent's cloth, the other clenching her rapier.

I got the answers I sought. My son, and many others, had been given to a vampire. A Baron Metus. Whether they were sold or were traded or were a gift I could not tell, as she grew steadily more unintelligible. His location, however, I did obtain.

Raising my knife to be done with the task her voice spoke with a surprising degree of clarity. It had a cadence to it almost as if she was reciting a poem, "Live you always among monsters, and see everyone you love die beneath their claws!"

With a final flick of the knife, her noises stopped, and I stood up, facing Ezmerelda. She had pulled herself together, more so than I. She had a grim set to her jaw and a determined look in her eyes that I recognized. "What now?" she asked, sword still gripped in her hand. I should have told her that we were leaving. That we were going after my son. But I did not.

Instead, I strode off in the direction of the campfire, the rage a dull throb behind my eyes. My blade took the first through his open mouth as he tried to scream. Turning to the next I was surprised as a rapier punctured through his chest a moment before my blade reached him. Ezmerelda stood by my side but did not meet my eyes as she stepped towards the next with a raised arm.

The Vistani are very long-lived people and seldom have children. There were only two in the camp. The camp was a fiery blaze in the night as we rode away to the crackle and pop of ancient trees catching fire. The smell of old oak blended with the acrid scent of burning dyed cloth and the sweet scent of cooked flesh.

We never spoke of that night.



We rode for the Baron's estate at a breakneck pace. In my mind, I felt that everything would be justified if I could only save my son. Alas, such sins are not so easily forgiven.



Ezmerelda accompanied me to the Baron where I found my son Erasmus made into a vampire. A consort for the Baron. He begged me to end his curse, which I did with a heavy heart.

I wept until an insatiate desire for vengeance filled the bottomless rift in my heart. We hunted the Baron, like wolves run down a rabbit, right back to his lair. He led us to the rest of his consorts, adults and children, all turned. They fell like grain before a scythe, only a few even attempting to fight back. Some managed to escape, but most welcomed their end.

I tracked down those that ran at first. Then I went in search of servants of the Baron, then allies. There always seemed to be a good reason to continue the hunt. I had learned Baron Metus became a vampire by the way of Lord Strahd von Zarovich, the lord of the vampires and perhaps the greatest vampire of all. Ezmerelda stayed by my side, though our relationship never returned to what it was.





I had found an abandoned tower on Lake Baratok in Barovia, built centuries ago by the wizard Khazan, the tower seemed to be a perfect location to forge our hunt for the undead and my scheme to eventually track down and kill Lord Strahd.

I could see Ezmerelda's light begin to fade. I tried to drive her away many times. I, it seemed, could not leave the hunt, but surely, she must not continue to suffer for my failures. Eventually, she did leave. But somehow it seems a vain hope to believe that she found her way clear of the business. No. It is all she knows. It is all I taught her. I can only wish she seeks some solitude and peace, as blood and death are all she knows.

Rudolf van Richten

