

A Night in Cetatea Poenari

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The mountains curved up and down and around like a roller coaster in vivid shades. The peaks nearby were the color of olive, in the far distance the mountains hazed to a bluish green, with jade hills in between.

The sky developed into a light gray, bringing with it mist and gentle sprinkles. It felt like late September, though the season was early spring.

“Oi, is it true that some bloke got ’imself killed climbing up here?” Brandon Moore asked, huffing as he stepped up the wide stairs.

“That’s what I heard,” Laura Lerwick said. “Before they built the stairs, a guy was doing research and fell down the hillside, breaking his neck.”

“That’s a shitty way to go, eh?”

No signs of life could be seen or heard. No birds flew overhead, not even the mocking caw of a crow. Brandon hadn’t taken notice of the strange absence of living things. He concentrated more on his exhaustion. He felt he was on the verge of collapse, and wouldn’t have been surprised if a pack of vultures circling above him.

“Bloody hell,” he wheezed. “How many damn steps are there?”

“I’ve read its fifteen hundred,” Laura said. “But also read it’s eighteen hundred and fifty.”

“Well, which is it?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t been counting them. And honestly, you’re really complaining about the stairs after what we just talked about?”

Brandon stopped to catch his breath. He bent over and placed his hands on his knees. His heavy camping pack weighed on him like a boulder.

“I need a break.”

“What?” Laura said. “We’re almost there, you lazy tart. Can’t you suck it up a little ways more?”

Brandon rose to his full height and glared up at her and then to the young Indian man, Fadi Garjan, standing a few steps below her.

“First off, I ain’t no bleedin’ tart, alright.”

“Awe, Brandon, our little arse bandit,” Fadi said jocularly.

“Shut it,” Brandon snapped. “Just five minutes, eh?” He reached into the pocket of his gray denim jacket.

“See, that’s your bloody problem right there, mate,” Fadi said as Brandon brought out a crumpled cigarette pack. “You can’t keep up ’cause you’re infecting your lungs with those bleedin’ things. Aren’t you taking health class?”

Brandon slid a crooked cigarette out from the pack with his teeth and said, “Just ’cause I smoke doesn’t mean cancer is gonna do me in.” He shoved the pack back into his pocket and retrieved his Zippo. After lighting his bent cigarette, he inhaled and said, “Besides, me bloody health teacher smokes as well. At least I ain’t a hypocrite.”

“Speaking of hypocrites,” Laura said, “why are there Christian tattoo parlors?”

“What d’you mean?” Brandon asked, slipping the pack straps off his shoulders.

“Doesn’t the bible forbid any kind of markings—such as tattoos—to be placed on the human body?”

“Dunno know,” Fadi said. “I’m an atheist, remember?”

Brandon snorted. “An atheist/environmentalist. That’s a strange match for sure, mate.”

“What? I have to believe in God to care about the world we live in?” Fadi pointed out.

“Right, right, you have your mystical monkey theory, eh?” Brandon said sarcastically.

“Mystical monkey theory? You mean *Evolution*, you git?”



Uninterested in the boy’s silly religious debate, Laura tilted her chin upward to the ruins above. She couldn’t believe she was actually looking at it.

Ceteata Poenari, the fortress of Vlad Tepes, known by most as Vlad Dracula, or Vlad the Impaler. Like most of Vlad’s castles and fortresses, Poenari was soaked in violent history. She could feel it in the cold, damp air.

She’d known about this place for quite awhile, yet rarely thought about it until deciding to come here. She had something to prove in this place.

Brushing her damp, brown hair from her face, she turned back as Brandon spoke.

“I’m not saying being an atheist is wrong, mate—to each his own, if you ask me. Just saying don’t be calling for my bloody help while you’re burning in the pits of hell and I’m relaxing in the clouds, getting full body massages from Angelina Jolie and Jessica Alba lookalikes.”



Fadi gritted his teeth and made a fist as if to throw a punch. It hadn’t been the first time he and Brandon walked hand in hand over this subject matter. Fadi didn’t understand why they always argued about it. Brandon was hardly a-by-the-book Christian himself. Fadi believed it was because he’d grown up in a strict Catholic household and had come

about thinking it's safer to believe in something rather than nothing at all. Fadi thought that as ignorant as well as arrogant. It just seemed shallow and ridiculous to follow a religion strictly for the *just in case* reason.

"Stop bugging around and let's get up there and find a place to make camp before dark," Laura said impatiently.

Both Fadi and Brandon ceased arguing. Brandon flicked his cigarette away and hoisted his heavy pack.

"Aye, let's get this torturous climb over with."

As they drew near the entrance, Fadi noticed a damaged section of the fortress wall where the top had a 'v' shape carved into it as though to represent the first letter of Vlad's name.

"Why are the bricks dissimilar?" he asked, studying the bottom stones of the walls that were white and gray, to the ones above, which were red.

"The walls were rebuilt during different periods of time due to war," Laura explained. "This place has seen its fare share of battles and bloodshed."

"Oi, it wasn't just battle deaths, either," Brandon added.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you bloody know the history?"

"I'm a Chemical and Environmental Engineer in training. I have no time for history."

"Set your eyes down there, mate," Brandon ordered.

Fadi stopped and turned his body around. Brandon pointed to the road below.

"Down in that valley there, hundreds were impaled."

Fadi studied the area. The valley seemed calm and peaceful. It was hard to imagine it filled with agonizing screams while the ground soaked in blood and entrails.

"Come on," Laura called. "The rain is clearing and I want to set up camp before we have a look around."

They entered the ruins and went in search for a decent place to camp. There were no enclosed areas for the group to sleep under. The fortress roof had collapsed many years ago during an earthquake as Laura explained. They managed to find a place in a ruined tower of the upper battlements.

After setting up camp, the anxious college students split up to explore.

Fadi headed toward the back of the fortress, passing a couple of tourists leaving for the exit. Besides he and his mates, the couple were the only ones left. Soon, the entire place would be theirs for the night.

He continued through the corridors, now opened to the sky, admiring the structure surrounding him.



Laura slid her hand over the wet, rusty handrails as she wandered the maze of narrow corridors and broken brick walls.

She felt proud of herself for setting out to test a theory that her psychologically instructor had brought up. Her adventurous nature and her parent's deep bank account allowed her travel at a whim.

Brandon had laughed at her when she'd invited him to go.

"You wanna go looking for a bleedin' vampire?" he had said to her.

"It has nothing to do with vampires," she'd snapped. *"You're thinking about Bram Stoker's Dracula, I'm talking about the real Dracula."*

She told him to do his own research on the prince of Wallachia. After he'd done so, he decided to join her, especially since her parents paid for his ticket.



A dark room captured Brandon's attention. He jumped the rusty railing to investigate. Once he reached it, he discovered the room was actually a pit. Curious to see how far it went, he placed both hands against either side of the entrance for support and leaned forward a bit.

"Hello," he called out.

His voice echoed in black void, giving evidence that it was a very deep hole. Inside, the temperature dropped eight degrees cooler. Goosebumps rose over Brandon's entire body. The pit quickly bored him and he turned to leave when he heard something. He became still and listened intently.

It wasn't long before the voices returned.

"Hello?" he said, this time trying to reach someone, rather than just playfully throwing his voice around. "Is anyone down there?"

He listened again, and again he heard them. Crouching, Brandon leaned his head in with a hand cuffed behind one ear, trying to confirm what he heard was actually human voices. There were many of them, whispering in languages he couldn't translate. Amongst the whispers was the low whimpering of a man. Brandon could hear him clearly. He sounded like he was in great pain. Steadily the whimper grew into a heavy sob.

"Who's down there?" Brandon called, now concerned that a tourist had fallen in without anyone noticing. "Do you need help, ole boy?"

The second he asked the question an agonizing wail shrilled from the bowels of the pit. The sharp cry startled him so bad he fell backwards, but quickly got to his feet. As he left to find the others, he could still hear the haunting cries of the unknown man.

"There isn't any one down there," Fadi explained, looking into the hole with his flashlight. "It's deep for sure, mate, but I see the bottom and there isn't anyone there. I think you've gone mental."

"I'm telling you, I heard 'im," Brandon snapped angrily. "I heard 'im as real as I'm hearing your fat lip telling me otherwise."

“Did the man say anything?” Laura asked, standing beside Brandon.

He craned his neck to her. He was holding himself, trying to calm his nerves.

“Couldn’t understand what they were saying,” he explained. “But I heard a man in pain, like he’d fallen and broken every bone in his body.”

“What *they* were saying?” Fadi said, turning away from the hole. “You heard more than one person?”

Brandon shifted his eyes to him, nodded, and said, “Yeah. Look, I ain’t daft. I...I dunno know. Maybe they left, or something.”

“There isn’t another way out but up,” Laura pointed out. “I read about this pit. During battles, soldiers put POW’s in there to be dealt with later. Some were lowered, others thrown in and left to die if the drop didn’t kill ’em first.”

Her little history lesson did anything but ease his tension.

“I need a bloody ciggy,” he said, reaching into his pocket for his cigarette pack.

Twilight darkened the landscape. Before it got too dark, the three went outside the fortress to collect firewood.

On their way up the steps, something caught Fadi’s eye. What he saw almost appeared to be a forest where the valley had been. The evening shadow made it difficult to identify what had suddenly sprouted from the ground. Fadi turned away to say something to the others, but they’d gone back inside. To his surprise when he craned his neck back at the valley, he could see it more clearly as if the light had faded just enough for him to get a better view. He squint his dark eyes to narrow slits and discovered that what he saw was no forest but long pikes—hundreds of them, lining the road, and embedded on them were human bodies. Fadi instantly dismissed the sight as trickery of the mind; an optical illusion brought on by awareness that the acts of impalement had once been preformed in the valley. Besides, what he saw could be anything; he was, after all, very far up from the sight.

He headed up the steps to meet with his mates at the campsite.

The fire warmed her hands. After changing into her University of Nottingham sweater, Laura felt cozy and dry for the first time since that morning.

“We lucked out finding this spot, eh?” Brandon said, lighting up a smoke.

“Actually, we really did,” Laura agreed. “Cause I think we’re near where Vlad’s wife jumped to her death to escape capture from the Turks.”

“Alright, enough history junk, eh?” Brandon complained. “Me nerves are still rattled from earlier.”

“Oh, Mr. Catholic got scared by some spirit voice, eh?” Fadi chimed in. “Don’t you religious folk believe in those fairytale realms called heaven and hell?”

“Shit,” Laura muttered under her breath. “Not this again.”

“Maybe this *is* hell, mate,” Brandon returned. “Maybe you died while climbing up those bloody stairs and haven’t realized it yet.”

“If that be the case than why am I talking to you?”

“‘Cause I ain’t Brandon, chum. I’m really your own personal demon and I’m gonna spend the rest of entirety tormenting you.”

“How? Constantly chattin’ me ear off with your nonsense?”

“Stop it, you two,” Laura cut in. “Brandon, I’m sure all you heard was the wind.”

“Oh,” Brandon said offensively. “Calling me crazy, are you? Dealing out the ole *it was only the wind* card, eh? Thought you wanted to convince yourself that this place *is* haunted.”

“I do.”

“Why?” Fadi asked.

“A professor of mine talked about how the mind can affect the body, physically. He said that a perfectly healthy person can become ill simply by believing strongly enough that the body had some kind of hypochondria disease. He touched on the subject of hallucinations and that being in a building or area rumored to be haunted can convince the mind to believe that something is there, when in fact it’s nothing. I can’t explained it but it intrigued me. I want to test my own mind control by spending the night in a haunted place.”

“You know, England is loaded with haunted hot spots,” Fadi pointed out.

“Yeah, but I saw a segment on the History Channel last October about Poenari and it made me really want to come here.” She broke a stick in two and threw a half into the fire. “What about you, Fadi? Besides a free trip, why did you decide to come along?”

“I suppose I do have me own reasons. You both know I’m not a fan about the Creation theory, right?”

Brandon opened his mouth to speak when Fadi cut him off.

“Shut it, wanker!”

Brandon stayed quiet and smoked his cigarette with a little grin on his face.

“Anyway, I want to prove that there is no life after death, *period*. Since Poenari has been said to be one of the most haunted places in the world, I figured if I’d spent one undisturbed night here without any ghostly encounters, I can comfortably go on with my belief that nothing exists beyond this point.”

“That’s a bloody depressing belief, mate,” Brandon said grimly.

“Oh, yeah, so what’s your big reason for coming?”

Brandon shrugged and flicked his cigarette butt into the fire.

“Just here for the ride, boy-o.”

Deep into the night, the group had fallen asleep. The fire had long died away when Brandon felt something near him.

“Who’s there?” he said, sitting up.

His eyes traveled around in the darkness, seeing only flickers of glowing red coals where the fire had burned. He still felt the presence near him as he reached for his flashlight. He clicked it on and shined the light over the campsite and found nothing.

Typical, he thought.

Believed to be a case of paranoia caused by the voices from the pit, Brandon stood and went out into the corridor to relieve himself. If it was just him and Fadi, he wouldn’t have gone outside the tower, but he wanted to be a gentleman and not piss in front of Laura in case she woke up.

He kept the flashlight on when he sat it down on the ground. He turned to the wall and unzipped his pants. The only sound was his stream hitting stone. No wind blew and no sound of chirping crickets: nothing.

Then a moan.

It came from down the corridor away from the tower. Brandon turned in the direction where the sound had come from. He heard it again. A long, deep moan flowed through the vast darkness, sending icy chills down his spine.

Zippering his pants, he snatched up the flashlight and aimed it down the corridor. The moan came again, followed by the rushing footsteps coming towards him.

What the hell is that? Brandon wondered.

A woman appeared in his light. It was only a flash, but he saw her. Her eyes were wide with fear and she let out a sharp scream as she ran straight into him. All matter of warmth was stolen from him when the transparent figure passed through his body. His heart thumped irregularly, causing him to become short of breath. Unable to stay on his feet, he collapsed and shivered uncontrollably.

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Laura woke when a woman screaming rang into her ears. It only took her a moment to spot a light nearby.

She found Brandon on the ground, white-faced and incoherent. She knelt to him.

“Brandon?” she said in alarm. “What happened to you?”

He didn’t respond, only moved his mouth up and down like a gasping fish. The light from his 12-volt flashlight shined directly in his face, but the brightness seemed not to affect his wide, unblinking eyes.

Laura didn’t know what to do.

“I’m going to fetch, Fadi,” she said, standing to her feet.

The moment she did an agonizing scream came from the tower.

“Oh, god, what was that?” she said. “Fadi? Is that you?”

“She told me if I do as she’d done, her pain will stop,” Brandon said softly.

“Who?” Laura asked, happy to hear him speak.

Before she knew it, Brandon shot to his feet and ran down the battlement.

“No!” she cried as he leapt out of what had once been a window, dropping completely from her sight.

Oh, my God! Laura thought. *Did he really jump?*

Brandon was gone.

Shaking from head to toe with the shock of witnessing her friend plunge to his death, she heard rapid footsteps coming her way.



The instant Laura had left the tower, Fadi opened his eyes. He sat up and felt something warm and wet on his abdomen. Confused, he clicked on his flashlight and aimed it on himself.

His sweater drenched with blood. The cause was a deep, softball size hole in his stomach. The shock rendered him speechless, and his situation only became worse when he slid his hand behind him.

“Oh, Jesus,” he said, when his fingers dipped into the moist exposed tissue.

The wound had gone straight through him.

“Oh, Jesus. Help me!”

If any pain existed he didn’t feel it, but the amount of fear he experienced compensated for it.

He had to get out of the tower. He needed to go home.

Fadi flew past Laura in the corridor, screaming.

“Fadi! Wait!” she called to him.

He didn’t stop. Instead he ran blindly over the walkways and into an open space where an image halted him to a complete standstill.

There was no body attached to what he saw, but it hovered five feet off the ground. It was the chalky white face of a man piercing through the darkness. It had no eyes and it showed no expression.



The chase didn’t last long, but the fear and anxiousness made Laura breath heavily. She found Fadi near the exit, pacing back and forth. How he managed to get that far without the assistance of a light was beyond her.

“Brandon is dead,” she informed. “He jumped off the building!”

Fadi stopped. He became perfectly still as he eyed something behind her.

“There’s a face over there,” he said in frantic tone. “The face, d’you see it?”

Laura craned her neck around and spotted nothing, even when shining the light at the vicinity. “What face?”

As she searched, she heard Fadi say in a deadly earnest tone, “That face wants me to kill you.”

His words didn’t fully register until she turned back to him. His dark complexion had faded a bit; his eyes were wide and colorless. He was no longer the friend she knew and loved—he was someone else entirely.

“That face wants me to kill you, Laura,” he repeated. *“Painfully.”*

He charged at her and she quickly reacted by swinging her heavy flashlight around, striking him across the head. She wasted no time and ran away, leaving him to stumble around while calling to her.

“Laura, wait! The face! Don’t leave me with the face!”

She ran for the exit only to halt suddenly at the ledge.

Where’s the bloody stairs?

Her friend’s haunting bellow convinced her to take a chance or otherwise he would surely kill her. She dropped the flashlight into the forest below, took hold of the edge, and slowly lowered herself over until she dangled from it. The drop wasn’t far, but the steep hillside concerned her. She let go and landed hard on the uneven ground. The fall caused her bones to rattle, but her youthful strength got her to her feet again. After finding the flashlight, Laura climbed down the hillside.

It didn’t take long before the forest closed in around her.

The skeleton like trees seemed never-ending. Exhausted, she stopped for a moment to catch her breath. The intense silence around her made it seem nothing could disturb it.

But something did.

Behind her the loud crashing of something heavy falling down the hillside forced her to whip around. Shining the light towards the sound, she watched as shrubs crushed and twigs broke under the weight of something invisible rolling over them. The frightening howl of a man tore into the air. The cry finally silenced with a loud crack that could only be described as a neck-bone breaking.

Laura followed the crumbling dried leaves with her flashlight, all the way to her feet where the phantom stopped. Her frantic breath misted across the flashlight beam. It took her a moment to gather the courage to run again. As she ran, footsteps rushed behind her. She shined the light back, but only caught a glimpse of a figure between the trees before the light flickered off.

Darkness.

She continuously pressed the button.

Click! Click! Click! Click! Click!

The light would not shine.

She stopped and it became silent once more. She heard nothing but her own heavy breathing for a long moment. This wasn’t part of her imagination—*this* was real.

Crunch!

Laura stopped breathing and listened to the leaves crunching nearby.

The figure was walking toward her.

“Who’s there?”

Crunch! Snap! Crunch!

“Who are you!” she shouted.

The footsteps stopped. Her chest tightened with anticipation. Cold air puffed into her ear as though someone blew into it.

The icy breath caused her to run again.

Laura ran through the blinding darkness with the footsteps constantly at her heels. She never found her way out again.

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