

Mortal Creatures of The Dead

by

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Book one in the Katherine the Wer Hunter Saga

Chapter 1

Crumbling church ruins, north-west Russia.

Ten miles east of Livonia.

February 1642.

* * *

The memory of the werewolf's ferocious snarling bounced around Katherine's mind as she packed up the camp at dawn. She was exhausted, having hunted him and his pack over the past two months in Livonia, killing nine of his family. He was the toughest werewolf she had ever fought. The rest of his pack had been no worse than the wolves or wolfmen she had hunted.

Her plan of killing him days ago had failed, so he pursued her through the forest until she hid in the high branches of an isolated oak tree since she had left her horses in the village stables in her desperate escape. She recalled his blue eyes reflecting in the moonlight, glaring at her. He circled below, making attempts to climb up, but his claws were useless at grasping the trunk. At the time she had her sword, throwing axes and knives yet was out of shot and powder for her pistols, so she waited until dawn for the werewolf named Alaric to return to human form.

As the clouds dissipated and the sun rose, she watched him run back to his cottage to lick his wounds from their fight. Throughout her time hunting his kind, she heard a person could shout their real name to turn them back to human form, yet it had never worked on any werewolf she had killed. It was bullshit. At nightfall today, she planned to kill him and claim the bounty.

The money she and her father earned by hunting werewolves and wolfmen over the past eight years had kept them in relative comfort. It made them respected by all since they took risks for the benefit of the rest. Katherine's reputation as a Wer Hunter was well known in north-west Russia, so a mayor of a town in Livonia had hired her to wipe out the werewolves attacking his town.

The wind whipped her ragged shoulder-length brown hair across her dark eyes. *This is getting too long and needs a cut and a wash*, she thought.

Her horse, Barley, grazed a few feet away outside the low flint walls of the crumbling church ruins where they had spent the night. Barley was a Russian Altai breed, a perfect grey stallion she had owned for five years. They had a bond of trust. She had never met a more sure-footed horse. As she watched him, he cast his gaze to her other horse, which she had acquired to pull the cart. Katherine had not named the brown mare yet since she had only bought her a day ago in Narva, northeast Livonia. Her previous one had been attacked by a bear, sadly making it too skittish for her kind of

work. The bear fled after she shot it three times as her dog, Tsar, had charged at it. It was a waste of ammunition but enough to scare it away. Its hide would have given her a months' worth of money, but she needed the horse more at the time.

The sky to the west was a sullen grey yet, to the east, where they had to go, the clouds were a dull white with occasional gaps showing patches of blue. It did not mean warmth and summer weather; it was only a different damn colour to look at in the firmament.

She glanced at the three fires around the camp. They had burned out long ago yet had done their job of keeping natural predators at bay. One gave off faint wisps of smoke from the embers, yet the other two were now cold and covered in morning dew.

Putting on her gloves, after rolling up the bear hide blankets, she unsheathed her sword before taking a brief walk around the small church ruins with her head bowed. The ruin had kept the wind at bay during the night. There was still a thin layer of snow on the grass and sod, but she instinctively knew more was on the way.

As she walked toward the charred stone arch to the east, Tsar bound down from the cart to greet her. He moved quietly for a dog of his size. She was thankful for it.

Tsar was a mottled black and grey Caucasian shepherd dog, capable of killing wolves or anything he wanted, including small bears. He was nearly three-foot-tall when on all fours and was her pride and joy, her guardian: loyal, fearless and above all, stronger than her. She gave him a loving hug speaking to him fondly while rubbing his black jowls. He responded with a lick of her cheek, then stretched and yawned as if to say he had slept soundly.

Her cart was lighter now since she had sold her wolf pelts and deer meat in Narva. Her coin purses were still heavy even after buying four plucked geese, plenty of cheese, apples, and water for the journey home to Gostilitsy in north-west Russia. One goose would remain as a gift for her father and siblings. The journey would be a dull fifteen hours if they did not encounter highwaymen, so a mile from Gostilitsy, her home town, she intended to encamp in yet another derelict ruin, a watchtower, where she would finally kill Alaric.

After hitching up the unnamed horse to the cart via its collar, she checked her other possessions underneath the well-oiled leather tarp. Her bow and quiver were there along with her crossbow, extra shot and powder, holy water vials, plus a sack of mistletoe. She still regretted losing her flintlock musket down a gorge two weeks ago on a previous kill, but her favourite weapons of choice were her bear traps. It had taken months of training from herself and her father to keep Tsar away from them.

Under her fur-lined battle-weary cloak, she wore a white blouse above brown leather trousers that supported two pistols, four knives, and her sword with its loop guard, knuckle bow and spiked

pommel. Over the top of her blouse, she strapped on a sturdy leather chest rig with three more pistols across her ample chest. There was no such thing as travelling light in her profession.

Barley whickered enthusiastically, his ears pricking forward as she placed the saddle over his back before tightening the straps under his belly. Mounting him, Katherine took her brass monocular from a saddle pouch to survey the routes east and west. Satisfied it was safe, she ushered Barley forward, down the gently sloping mud road. The other horse dutifully followed with the cart as Tsar lumbered on ahead.

The werewolf she was about to kill, Alaric, was the alpha male who remained elusive during her killing spree. He always seemed to be at the back, directing the others. She had met him in person a day after their last encounter when he was in human form. He had been arrested and thrown in the night watch cells after a bar fight before she was going to kill him, so she paid the jailer and magistrate a pearl each to let him out in forty-eight hours instead of twenty-four, giving her a good head start. If she had been half an hour earlier in her pursuit, she could have claimed the bounty for the entire hunt and been home already.

When she had last spoken to him, he held onto the bars of a cell at ground level to the cobbled street in the coastal town of Sillamäe in north Livonia. The bounty licence issued by the Livonian Mayor was not valid there, so she would have been arrested for murder in that town. So, with a half-smile, she rattled her favourite knife along the bars of his cell, telling Alaric exactly where she was going. He only had to follow the scent of his deceased fellow pack members. She waved the knife to her cart, where various leather sacks hung on the outside. They contained body parts from his family, now transformed back into their human equivalents. She placed them in the same way a nobleman would hang hunting trophies on his walls, yet in sacks nailed to the cart by string loops. She had no intention of keeping or displaying them.

Alaric had sniffed the air, then his face contorted into a rictus of hate as he caught their scent, vowing to track her down to the end of the world.

Laughing inwardly, she wasn't sure about today's date but knew it was February 1642. It was her fifth werewolf hunt in twelve months, only this time, for the last of the pack, she was setting herself as the bait. She was looking forward to it.

* * *

Katherine would have loved to gallop to her destination, but the rickety cart would have disintegrated over the uneven road. All around her were trees, snow, and birds, yet she still glimpsed over her shoulder every so often to double-check Alaric had not hired a horse to catch up with her.

As the road turned gently south, she was surprised to see a massive logging camp opposite a clay mine on both sides of the road about half a mile ahead. When she passed this way two months ago, none of this was evident. She guessed it must be for the war.

Russia is constantly at war, she thought.

Serfs were running around like ants, being whipped and beaten to meet their quota of digging for mud, as she called it, before being given a meagre meal of soup, all to help the entitled landlords who wanted nothing more than to expand their empire or provide more conscripts to the crown while receiving an exemption for themselves and those they treasured.

A murder of crows flew low overhead, startling her, yet she knew they were only waiting for the days' work to end before descending on the dead.

'I'm not dead yet,' she shouted at them with a clenched fist.

Seeing this, she contemplated Russia would soon be at war once again but wanted no part of it and certainly didn't want to be conscripted. Generations of her family had shed blood against their numerous enemies. This time it was probably with Sweden. An enemy she knew nothing about and could not care less about them. Her heart skipped a beat as she saw women in the camp.

There's no way I'm joining them either, she thought, so took out her monocular once more.

She gasped. The route home was not free of soldiers. Being forced into the army was not in her plans. She slapped the monocular back into its holster spinning Barley to the left, then galloped to the high tree line, whistling for Tsar and her cart puller to follow. It was a short sprint but necessary. Fifty paces later, they hid inside the edge of the forest.

She leapt from the saddle ushering the cart horse into the shadows provided by tall evergreen trees, giving Tsar a signal to stay quiet. The only sound was the chittering of birds as she tethered the horses. If they got spooked by a bear or wolf, she didn't want them bolting toward the army, giving away their position. She lay on the ground behind the cover of two bushes next to Tsar, watching about two hundred soldiers march along the road hearing the faint singing from the men at the head of the column, accompanied by drummers. Then, through her monocular, she saw another garrison a mile away. Then another in the distance.

'We have to wait, boy,' she said to Tsar.

She pulled her hood low over her face, rolling onto her back, letting out a sigh. 'This is going to affect our plans, but hey, it's a bit of a rest, right?'

Tsar simply rolled over, mimicking her, giving her a look which she interpreted as *nap time*. She felt nothing of the sort. Her mind raced about the timescales of setting up the kill zone, hoping the rain and snow would not return so she could keep her powder dry.

An hour later, the marching soldiers had passed, so she mounted Barley once more, leading her team out of the woods, sauntering past the logging camp and mine without incident. A few miles later, at the crest of a hill, she arrived at her intended destination, the ruins of an ancient stone watchtower at the side of the road.

Moss and ivy covered the crumbling ten-foot-high masonry. Everything above the stone had been wood. It had burned down long ago. Heading through the ruins she saw the beauty of her town beyond: Its church, town hall, clock tower, homes, and taverns.

Tsar looked back over his right shoulder as if saying, *we're not going home yet, are we? It's another night of fighting.* His eyes portrayed tiredness but she knew he would be ready when Alaric appeared.

She gave him a knowing wink, adding a smile, 'It's what we do.'

Dismounting Barley, she stretched her legs. It had been a long two months of hunting and killing in Livonia, not only for her but also for her faithful companions. She was glad to be almost home.

Taking the monocular from her saddle once more, she spied the routes east and west. Being so close to home, it felt odd checking for threats, but it was here she wanted to kill Alaric. With an audience. On home turf. People would further respect the work that she and her father did since they killed their first werewolf when she was a teenager.

He dies tonight, she thought, slapping the monocular closed then sitting with a thump on the grassy earth. She drew her sword, staring at its chipped, battle-weary steel.

This needs sharpening, she thought, *and yet men are still burning women as witches, and the men of the town lack the courage to go out and fight werewolves, but they will happily join an army to kill other men in wars. What a bunch of idiots. They think there's safety in numbers, and they can hide behind the hundreds of additional troops in front. Ha! Bollocks. All you have is yourself in a fight.*

She re-sheathed her sword, picking up the monocular again. It was a delight to see many torches burning in the stone towers, on the surrounding walls together with the faint flicker of illumination from windows in Gostilitsy, but her desire to head home was cast out. She was cold and needed food before tonight's fight. She stood up, hoisting a goose from the cart by its neck.

Tsar, having taken her moments of respite to take yet another nap, saw the goose skewered so licked his lips, sitting upon his haunches, eager for the feast. Katherine sensed he was mocking her overthinking of the night ahead.

Although the warmth of the town called to her, it was no time to relax. Alaric would be here tonight. She knew it. The clouds were dense overhead, yet it would be a full moon in a few hours. At this time of year, the full moon lasted three days.

She held her right hand up to the horizon, below the setting sun, using her father's method. With fingers extended, one above the other, she knew each finger represented fifteen minutes of daylight, so they had an hour before total darkness. She nudged Tsar with a friendly shoulder as they watched the fire crackle as the tinder blossomed into flame. 'Boy,' she said to him, ruffling his head, 'I need you to do one thing for me tonight.'

He looked at her with bright eyes.

'Tonight, you kill, and we don't die.'

He placed his front left paw on her lap as if offering a loving sign of acknowledgement. She knew he was always ready for a fight, as she was, but tonight was the finale.

'Walk with me,' she said to Tsar. 'We need to reassess the plan.'

The ruin consisted of two semi-circles of flint walls with arched entrances facing east and west. Both doors now absent, destroyed by fire. To the east, a line of oaks provided yet another semi-circle of cover a short way off. They would offer a great vantage point to shoot from as the ruined walls' tops were perfect for placing the werewolf remains. As the skin of the goose continued to crackle above the fire, she took the leather pouches containing the remains from the cart, placing them strategically around the ruin, knowing the scent on the wind would do the trick of guiding Alaric in. When she had bagged them, they were the feet and hands of wolfmen and werewolves. Now they were mere human stumps of the same, and they stank, which was what she wanted in many ways. As the goose continued to cook, she took Tsar to the treeline to find a suitable tree to sit in, to wait out the night. Happy with what she saw, she slung a rope into the lofty heights of the branches, hoisted up her crossbow, two throwing axes and her bow before returning to the ruin.

'Want some goose?' she asked.

He barked a happy reply giving her a look that said, *dinner?*

She had to agree it was time, ruffling his head affectionately before ripping pieces of flesh from the plucked goose, sharing it with him as the horses grazed.

'Now we wait,' she said, tossing a leg bone into the smouldering embers. 'Come on.'

Tsar followed her to the treeline, where she told him to wait before she walked back to the ruins once more to set up the bear traps. She knew Tsar would obediently wait for her *trigger word* before leaving his post, so she took a moment to add another twig of mistletoe to her necklace for protection and good luck, tying it on with a piece of cotton thread.

After lighting fires inside and outside the ruin to illuminate the kill zone, she jogged to the trees to sit on a sturdy branch above Tsar feeling tense yet with little to do, wishing she were sitting by one of the fires. She was thankful for her fur-lined cloak as dusk fell, and Tsar remained silent as

she put on her wrist and leg armour, plus gauntlets. She loaded her crossbow, pistols and rechecked her bow numerous times while in the safety of the tree.

For miles around, the light from the fires reflected on every shiny surface: long lost arrowheads, bits of metal or glass and more, as if hundreds of eyes were watching them.

She second-guessed herself, looking at the traps. *Would Alaric see them?* She had used them on half of his pack and was confident they were in the right places, hoping he was as dumb as the others.

Suddenly Tsar growled as the clouds parted, revealing a grey-white full moon. Then she heard a haunting howl from the west. Katherine snapped her head toward Tsar, seeing his nose pointed directly at the sound along the road. She scanned the road and fields with her monocular then saw Alaric bounding their way. He was in werewolf form. His teeth and eyes glinted in the faint light of the moon in complete contrast to his black fur. He switched from running on all fours to running on his hind legs depending on the terrain, but his relentless advance made her pick up her crossbow in her left hand and a pistol in her right.

‘Stay,’ she said to Tsar, who was visibly itching to attack.

Alaric was half a mile away, closing fast. The horses bolted, disappearing into the gloom.

‘Stay,’ she repeated. Despite being well hidden, she knew Alaric had the edge when it came to his senses, against her at least, but Tsar had the same senses as him. ‘Stay,’ her voice trailing off a fraction.

Alaric leapt into the ruins, over the first bear trap in the western doorway, skidding to a halt in the centre, eyeing the sacks around the walls.

His beast brain is obviously in command over his human one, she thought.

Katherine fired her crossbow, seeing the bolt slam deep into his right shoulder, causing him to wince. He turned to face her directly with a guttural growl, snatching the bolt out, tossing it to the ground.

‘Stay,’ she said again, for what she hoped was the last time.

Alaric bounded forward on all fours catching his front right paw in the eastern bear trap. It snapped shut with a metallic iron slam which echoed off the walls. The sound of his pain no doubt carried for miles as he bounced violently down the grey stone steps to the accompanying sound of breaking bones and metal on rock.

She dropped from the tree line, landing with a squelch on the grass next to Tsar, aiming for Alaric’s eyes, firing two pistols as he contorted in agony. Blood spurted in high arcs from his sockets as he tried to massage his eyes with his free paw. She knew werewolves healed quickly, but the healing time would take too long compared to the time she needed. She re-holstered the pistols then

launched a throwing axe at him. It landed square between his eyes, nearly burying itself up to the handle, the impact causing him to fall on his back. No sound this time. His arms sprawled out as if he were dead. The beartrap still had a firm grip on him so she turned to the ever-patient Tsar shouting, 'Destroy.'

The speed at which he moved never ceased to amaze her. He was on Alaric before she had even closed in; his massive jaws ripped the werewolf's throat out in a violent twisting movement as more blood spurted out across the ancient flagstones.

Katherine finished the onslaught by pulling her throwing axe from Alaric's forehead, cutting off his head with four definitive hefty strikes.

'Ten out of ten for me,' she panted, flicking her hair back. 'Zero for you and your kind, fucker.'

Alaric's head rolled toward the nearest fire, his fur beginning to burn against the smouldering charcoal. As his head and body reverted to human form, she let out a huge sigh of relief, giving Tsar a loving rub to the top of his head then hugging him around his neck.

'Time to burn the body,' she said flatly, half to him, half to herself. 'Then we have to send word to the Mayor to get our reward. But, my boy, we won.'

She tossed her axe onto the ground, where it landed on the stone with a resonating clatter as she let out another almighty sigh. Slumping to the ground, resting her hands upon her knees, calming down, she took a moment to look at Tsar. Her usual permanent scowl evaporated in a flash, 'Oh, look at you, you messy beast,' she said, sounding like a protective parent. Jumping up, she swiped a rag and flask of water from the cart to clear up the blood from around his mouth. 'Good boy. You've earned some more goose.'

While eating their second well-earned dinner in the ruins, they watched the body, together with the other limbs of Alaric's pack, burn from a distance in the meadow to the south. She burned the sacks as well. It was too dark to find the horses tonight, but instinctively she knew they wouldn't wander too far; besides, it was late, and she needed sleep. The only reason she did not go directly home was to make sure the fire did not spread, setting fire to the rest of the field.

Chapter 2

I hate my job.

* * *

Captain Christoff Zima, commander of the soldiers of Kolovda, rode slowly north to Gostilitsy on a skittish horse which he was contemplating shooting in the back of the head. It had whinnied at the slightest problems over the last twenty miles. A butterfly, a moth, a bird, everything made it change direction or halter. He decided it had issues.

Adding to his current foul mood, he had parted badly from his family: a row which had been ongoing for years between himself and his three brothers had got to the point of physical violence. He had knocked out two of them before leaving the house. He was pissed off, tired and hungry.

Additionally, the soldiers he led were tiresome. Some were no older than sixteen. Too full of energy and keenness, full of relentless questions, while others were gnarly seasoned veterans who complained about everything. Although he outranked them all, he respected and trusted them, yet at the same time wished they would march quietly, leaving him to his thoughts. He did not want to tell them to shut up since their conversations, whether positive or pointless, relieved their stress.

Lord and Lady Kolovda had appointed him the temporary role of emissary since they trusted him above all others. His current mission was to deliver two letters to hire Katherine Dute of Gostilitsy to sort out Kolovda's werewolf problem.

His new role had a few extra perks, which mildly elevated his mood, but they were at the back of his mind since he was distraught about his girlfriend. All he saw on the journey reminded him of her.

Sat in the saddle of a stupid horse, coming from a family of utter nutters as he headed to a town he had never heard of to hire a woman to do a man's job, he thought it might be better to blow his brains out instead of the horses.

* * *

After a hearty breakfast, Katherine gathered the horses from the meadow around the ruins before heading home with Tsar bounding on ahead with skipping proudness to his bulky gait.

Travelling east toward the rising sun, she saw soldier recruitment posters which unnerved her. Some stated mandatory conscription was in place for anyone between the ages of sixteen to forty.

She wanted no part in any war. She had seen her fair share of blood and guts to know a war was something she would be good at, but at the same time preferred to pick her battles.

Gostilitsy looked inviting in the early morning light, and her home was only a couple of streets away from the main gate. Yet, she had to send a letter to the Livonian Mayor informing him the job was done, so after the guards let her in, she took a detour to the courier's office. She wanted the second half of her reward money as soon as possible, allowing her to buy more clothing, gear, and weapons, which reminded her she had to sharpen her sword when she got home,

Or I could get one of my sisters to do it? She thought, chuckling to herself.

After sending the letter, she arrived at her half-timber home on the edge of town, entering through the south garden gate, keeping as quiet as possible. She wanted to surprise her family but had to put the horses to bed and stow her cart. She would let the horses run free anywhere outside the town, but thieves were a problem as the town was still expanding, and gipsies were everywhere. She grabbed some fresh straw for the floor and filled the feed buckets with oats before hanging Barley's saddle on a wooden horse, then brushed them both down before locking the doors and heading to the house.

'Hello,' she called out as the door clicked shut behind her. Her three teenage sisters' happy faces greeted her as Tsar bounded into the living room to the sound of joyous shouts. Her sisters petted and hugged Tsar enthusiastically before giving her greeting hugs as Ivan, her father, waved to her from his bed at the far side of the living room.

Approaching him, she saw his wounds had been festering, but he was healing well thanks to her sisters' care.

'We won, dad,' she said, taking his hand, kneeling beside him.

'You always do,' he replied. 'I taught both of you well,'

'Your beard is getting a bit greyer,' she joked, taking a moment to assess his bandages and ointment administered to his forehead and arms.

The wounds were not from werewolves or other animals but a horse-riding accident two months ago. Ivan wanted to go one way; the horse wanted to go the other. The tree, meanwhile, stayed in the middle.

'You'll be better in a week,' she said fondly. 'Plus, I have a goose for us all for dinner tonight.'

He replied with a deferring smile. 'Girls, run a bath for Kat,' he said softly. 'She looks and smells like she needs one,' adding a chuckle.

A loud, repetitive knock at the door startled the household as her sister Beth ran to open it. Tsar barked, following her.

Katherine saw a strikingly handsome soldier in royal red and blue livery enter the living room a moment later. It was a uniform she didn't recognise, and he had a black fur hat tucked under his left arm plus a brown leather satchel slung over his shoulder. Unlike most Russian countrymen, he was clean-shaven, yet the determined look upon his face spoke of nothing but a career soldier. He seemed to be staring at the wall above her fathers' bed as if not wishing to make eye contact.

Beth pointed at Kat from behind the soldiers back, mouthing the words, *he's here for you.*

'Good day,' he said, pulling his brown satchel from behind him, taking out two paper folds, both sealed with red wax. 'I'm here to see Katherine Dute of Gostilitsy. I hope she is here.'

'I'm Katherine,' she replied, standing up from her father's bedside.

They made eye contact for a second more than was expected under the circumstances. A brief smile etched across both their faces.

He looks like a soldier but only carries a sword and pistol, she thought. I'm carrying enough weapons to level a small village.

Thankfully for her, he broke the silence while staring at her chest.

'I'm Christoff. I act as an emissary for Lord and Lady Kolovda. They have a commission for you.'

She turned to glance at her father, 'Another one?'

'Your reputation, my dear,' her father replied, giving a wink of approval.

'Our reputation,' she corrected him with a smile, referring to how they were both regarded in the Wer Hunting business.

'Forgive me, Katherine, but your appearance is not what I expected,' Christoff added. 'You seem so young.' His voice was deep but with a sympathetic tone. 'I was not expecting to employ a... how can I say, a young lady.'

She scoffed at his words, 'I'm twenty-five and have been slaughtering werewolves and wolfmen since I was eighteen. I have enough scars to prove it if you want to see them.' She said the second bit mischievously but with half a mind to show him in her bedroom whenever he wanted.

Christoff chuckled, 'That won't be necessary.'

He's handsome and about my age, she thought, blushing momentarily.

'Lord and Lady Kolovda will pay above your usual rate due to the nature of the target. Can we talk in private, or are you happy to discuss it here?'

'I'm happy to chat in front of my father, only.' She then shooed away her siblings, 'Make my bath and prepare my bed, please. Also, get Tsar something to eat.'

'We always keep food for your boy,' Beth replied.

‘Thank you. Now go. I’ll only be a minute.’ Katherine took some calming breaths looking at Christoff once more. *He truly is a handsome man*, she thought. ‘What are those letters you’re holding?’

‘Letters from Lord and Lady Kolovda. One is for the house, and the second is your commission. My Lordships needs are more pressing than the war. Each letter also contains a bronze royal seal, a badge effectively. It will allow you a safe passage from here to Kolovda in the south and the town of Rowandene, further south, where your target resides. The seals are effective now. Any Russian military official will recognise them.’

Katherine took the first letter from him, feeling the heavy metallic weight in the corner of it. She was about to open it, then reality set in. ‘But I can’t leave my family now. I need to protect them. War is coming. Troops march every day.’ She took off her cloak and chest rig then unbuckled her belt, placing everything on the dining table feeling too hot from the nearby fire. ‘So, tell me about this commission,’ she said with what she thought was a warm smile, but again Christoff was being the consummate professional, still staring at the wall. ‘You’re too uptight. What’s in the other paper?’

He seemed to ignore her and continued, ‘This is for the household,’ he said, handing over the second letter, but this time he handed it to her father. ‘It says you are all exempt from military duty.’

Her father, Ivan, opened it with a flick of his thumb at the same time snatching up his glasses. ‘Oh my,’ he exclaimed, ‘It’s true. Kat, look.’

Katherine read the letter in a flash and handed it back. She wanted to hug and kiss Christoff for the missive but managed to control herself quietly.

Christoff gave Katherine a reassuring smile, ‘I must be going now to join my troops in my lodgings at *The Fighting Cocks Inn*, down the road. I’ll return at mid-day tomorrow for your answer. My lord and lady, and I do hope you will accept. I bid you both a good day.’

‘Wait,’ Katherine said. ‘Stop being such a straight-backed formal royal lackey. Follow me to the garden to tell me more about this, and I can read the assignment letter. Come on.’ She forcefully grabbed his wrist, leading him to the back door as Tsar followed dutifully, keeping guard of her around the stranger.

Standing together on the snow-scattered lawn, Christoff seemed to relax. ‘Thank you for this informal moment.’ His head lowered as if not wishing to make eye contact. ‘I’m not used to this emissary business and thought it best to imitate the courtiers we have at the castle. Your frankness is most welcome.’

‘No. You’re welcome. But I’ve never met any of the kind of people you talk of. I’ve never met a lord or lady before. Now before I open this letter, tell me, you seem so much stronger than me,

you're taller and built like him,' she took her eyes off his biceps and broad chest for a second, gesturing to Tsar who eyed Christoff keenly, 'Yet you don't get the job of killing the werewolf. Why?'

'I've tried to hunt him on three occasions together with other soldiers and night watchmen from our town, yet each time he has eluded us. On one occasion, I shot him square in the chest with my musket at close range as he took several shots from my troops. He seemed not even feel them, so Lord and Lady Kolovda feel it better to hire a professional. Someone who knows how they think and how best to kill them.'

'Have you lost anyone close because of it?'

'Yes. My girlfriend.'

'Oh.' *My God, how tragic. But he's single*, she thought, with girlish selfishness.

She opened the wax seal on the letter and began to read. The letter stated Lord and Lady Kolovda request her to kill Duke Victor Rowandene in his town twenty miles to the south of their town. They expected her in Kolovda within a week.

'Is he part of a pack?'

'We doubt it. It's only a single werewolf who attacks each full moon, yet there's not been *one* case of an attack in *their* town. Many of our men have chased the werewolf, and he always retreats south. Additionally, there's no trade between our towns. The people of Rowandene know we have a werewolf problem, so stay away. It's as if they are told to stay away by the duke himself. One more thing, it's rumoured that the duke and duchess hate each other. They don't have any children and only married to combine their wealth and lust for power.'

Katherine let a moment's silence hang between them as she turned her head, composing her thoughts, then she took his hand. 'Hunting and killing beasts is what I do. I care for people like you. That's why I do it. Your heart seems so honest. I can take the pain if they hurt me. I can take the pain of the loss of a friend. But I'd like to be more than friends with you.'

'Now *that's* flattering.'

Again, her nearly permanent serious expression faded a little as they exchanged a smile.

'I had best be off, Katherine. Please read the letter thoroughly. I'll be back tomorrow for your answer. I don't know what you would class as a tough job, but I've seen this beast and —'

'How long can you stay in town?' her heartbeat quickening as her hands became sweaty. 'I'm waiting for my bounty money to arrive from Livonia. It should be here in two days. I need it to buy more hunting equipment and supplies, and I'd like to travel with you.'

'I can stay two days,' he replied sheepishly, briefly reaching out to hold her hand for a second. 'I must say and forgive me for saying this. You are the prettiest thing I've seen in a week.' He inhaled sharply yet continued to stare at the snow.

‘That’s so flattering. Thank you. Why do you say that?’

‘I say it because the ugly mob of soldiers I travelled here with are a bunch of spud faced chancers and scabby arsed beaver trappers. I dread travelling back with them. I only wish you could accompany me, so yes, I’ll stay. His lordship won’t mind.’ Another brief smile crossed his face as he continued to switch his glance from her eyes, then her chest, to the snow and back again. ‘Now I must go.’

She didn’t want him to leave at all but thought it best since he was looking somewhat nervous, as if on the verge of saying something foolish to further add to his smitten behaviour, but so was she.

* * *

Next morning.

Three loud knocks at the front door made Katherine wake up. She bounded down the stairs in her nightshirt with Tsar following, hoping to see Christoff, but the man at the door was only a grubby courier. He handed over a small wooden box, no bigger than her hand.

‘Thank you,’ she said, slamming the door in the young man’s face. It was addressed to her, and it rattled. After prising open the wax seal, she saw ten pearls inside, one for each monster she had killed. Underneath, she found a piece of paper and pulled it free. It was from the Mayor in Livonia.

Dear Katherine,

You have done us such a great service putting your life at risk for our town. The pearls within are worth a little more than our originally agreed fee. You are welcome to them. Our town and country thank you. May God bless you and your wonderful hound. We heard so many great stories about him matching your bravery.

Long live you, Russia, and Livonia,

Engelbert.

Mayor.

She dashed into the living room to wake her father, ‘Look,’ she exclaimed, showing him the box and letter.

‘Good lord,’ he replied, ‘that’s a bounty and a half. They look white with a hint of gold. They’ll fund us for a good while. I dread to think of their worth. Ha. Well done, my darling. Wake your sisters. Get them to work in the gardens.’

‘I have another plan for them today,’ she replied with a wink. ‘Now, take these five pearls and hide them. I’ll put Beth, Charlotte, and Irina to work on hard chores. I’ll pay them a small number of roubles for now. You keep two pearls for you and the house. They get one each to spend on whatever they want. I suggest clothes, bedding, toys, and candles. They won’t have any idea that’s their reward.’

‘God bless you,’ he replied, leaning up to kiss her cheek. ‘By the way, that Christoff chap is –’
‘Yeah, he *is*, isn’t he,’ she replied with a wink.

Half an hour later, she had her younger sisters sharpen her sword and axes while advising them to put them in boiling water to remove any infection chance. They seemed content after she paid them a few coins. She left them to their chores with a satisfactory smug grin as she walked into the town centre with Tsar by her side.

The artificer’s shop didn’t have any new gadgets, weapons, potions, or any better bear traps, so she left with only a few new throwing knives since she had everything else he had in stock. Then she visited the gunsmith to buy more shot and powder for her pistols while searching for a new musket, but what he had was utter rubbish compared to what she had previously owned, so decided to stick to what she had for now.

Heading home, she detoured through the market, feeling generous to her father and sisters following her recent payment. The market seemed to be full of new things from other countries, including vegetables she had never seen before. But she was also keen to meet with Christoff again.

Then she got her wish.

As she paid for some toys for her sisters, she saw Christoff on the far side of the market. He was alone, looking lost. Placing the toys in her satchel, she circled the market, approaching him from behind.

He doesn’t stride around the market but seems to loom above all others, she thought. Fuck it. I only have one chance.

As he entered an alleyway, heading back to his lodgings, she sneaked up behind him, spun him around, pinning him to the wall. ‘Your lips or your money. Your choice.’

‘Katherine?’

She released her grip on his arms, letting him turn around, then forcefully kissed him.

‘This is too soon,’ he replied, gently holding her arms, releasing himself from her embrace. ‘I... Please, I must be going. You’re wonderful to be around, and I genuinely want to –.’ He lowered his head as if to walk away. ‘I need to speak to my men. I’ll see you outside the *Fighting Cocks Inn* at first light tomorrow.’

Still not over his ex, she thought. She hung her head, exhaling harshly, then called after him, ‘It’s three weeks to the next full moon. What’s the rush?’

He walked back to her ever so slowly with his head held low and his right hand on the hilt of his sword. Leaning closer, he whispered, 'We believe he is a different kind of werewolf. We would rather you had the easy task of killing him in human form.'

'It's a waning gibbous moon tomorrow. Are you sure?'

'There is a rumour that he can still change even if the moon is waxing or waning. My lord and lady hope you have an easy mission, so they request your presence as soon as you can travel.' The reward money is the same, whether he is in wolf form or not.'

'I'll be at the inn at first light.'

At least I got to kiss him properly, she thought, but can the duke change at will? Or when the moon is almost full or diminishing? Now that's impressive. Never killed that type before.