

Tepes

By Szabo Eduard Dragomir

To anyone who may come across this enclosure of words, my name is Ayberk Boran and with these final paragraphs I transcend upon paper with palpitating hands and disoriented mind, a final confession that will confine and hopefully protect the last remaining shards of what has remained of my shattered sanity and warn the generations of tomorrow, and the decades afterwards, of the wicked travesties and malignant witchcraft that I came to witness throughout my life.

I had lived in a time where the mighty European borders erected by giants of old from a civilization devoured to death by countless, little vicious mouths, have been tried and even moved by a Crescent Empire that rose from the Near-East, an empire which I served with utmost loyalty and devotion as one of its many officers. However, my mediocrity afflicted me far too much in order to be immortalized inside the fountains of history and see my name whispered in the minds of the generations to come.

In this devotion of mine, one which was encouraged partly, coercively so, by the conjectures of the time, I had discovered the promiscuity of war, for I have been summoned often to witness this pitiable strife of man, vying for power or desperately clinging to liberty. Let there be known that I had found neither enjoyment, nor guilt in this pain I participated for I had committed myself solely to the necessary, for I knew the inevitable, unavoidable character of man's lust for violence.

However, one such manifestation of uncanny barbarism, and sadism that far outmatched the occultist artistry of any demoniacal fiend known to laic, esoteric scriptures that managed to confound me in spine-shredding fear and an agonizing terror that plagued my mind with quaking storms and forsaken slumbers as I found myself trying to regain solace by gazing deep into the warmth of a candle light for several nights before I had come to transpire these words.

One would have the predicament, and every liberty to assume that an Empire which kneeled the bastion of orthodoxy, exerted its might across lands between the rising of the foretelling sun, and of the crowning moon, would neither see nor hear of the murky tragedy that I had to witness, a sighting so damnable that it left me with a scarring wish to have had my eyes pierced and their light enshrouded eternally by the stygian rivers of perpetual nothingness and their blind curtains of the void.

The precipice to such an odious event that reeked of doom and fiendish lusts all originated at the moment when I was to ride off alongside the Sultan's army into the lands of north, separated from the core of the Crescent Empire by the gaping maw, and body of a watery

serpent, the river Danube that vomited forth its insides upon the somberly Black Sea which is said to harbor in its very fathomless depths, a writhing chaos where no life dares dawn.

We were to march into the land of the son of the Dragon, a ruler so Draconic Draco would have been revered for his benevolence, in contrast. Such tyrant was known under the name of Vlad Dracula. I, alongside many other officers below and especially above me, hierarchically, had been tasked to pull the Ottoman army to this ruler's gates and carry a punitive war against him.

Our just quest brought us beyond the river Danube, amidst plans barred only by blue horizons from all directions as we marched deeper into the Dragon's lands. I cannot help but recount the mortifying silence that plagued the plains, the towns, and the villages we passed through as if something preternatural possessed the land and waited anxiously to sink deep its monstrous fangs in our throats.

Truth be told, we were not the first army to march into these lands. Many before us were tasked by the Sultan himself to make the tyrant's knees meet the ground but not even words of their quest returned our way, clouding the minds of every soldier who were to march after them in worry and superstition. Wives and children never came to hear of their husbands and fathers. Many were presumed death by the blade of their enemies, however, none was accused of cowardice as no foot of Ottoman soldier ever came to return home from a failed mission and that was a most puzzling event. Undoubtedly, many camps during nights when the moon was most unnerving as it reflected the sickness of these wretched lands through a wicked green light were spurred by maddening whispers coated in fear of superstition: words of monsters that claim home to dark forests, wraiths that hid inside wells, awaiting to leech the life out of oblivious passers and other twisted machinations of flesh and lore that tormented a man's mind.

But as I travelled yonder dark forests, where trees perform twisted contortions and the woodland grows so dense it steals the skies from our sights with its gargantuan crowns I came to realize that there was no horror amidst these forests, no monster, only the tranquil sounds of wildlife and the blissful chirping of attractive birds, singing melodies of peace that brought momentary solace to the hearts of soldiers. The real horror that plagued everyone in their sleepless nights, concluded the death of many valorous men and came to breed the chaos of insanity inside of me is far more wretched than anything superstition could ever manifest.

As our army traversed this woodland, and passed some villages whose folk were methodically persuaded through the employment of Machiavellian ingenuity to handle food and supplies for our just cause, we came to meet defiant hills standing adamant in our way, taunting us with their very size. We climbed them, slowly, and marched even deeper in these forsaken lands only to feel our presence more and more possessed by an apparition that crawled from the underworld, a sightless being from the shadows.

As days succumbed to the passing of time we felt our faith strangled by a demonic grip, a portent of doom. Food grew scarce as the plains of lush green we used to drench our feet upon were replaced with sceneries from Hell, earth so scorched it offered nothing that could be

consumed, other than an ill-fated haunting landscape that petrified our hearts. Men crumbled alongside their spirits and they had to be left behind only to never be seen again while we struggled desperately to seek human settlement amidst this dreary, hellish landscape, only to come across desolated villages devoid of all life where even more of our men succumbed to poisoned wells.

At that point, we all wanted anxiously to return home and elude the grasp of death and the sight of this infernal place, but the circumstances of that time forced us to move on. The Sultan wouldn't have accepted to leave the loss of able men over a failed fool's errand without punishment.

We pressed through woodland again, except the dismaying forests we now travel through bear not the sounds of peaceful birds or any wildlife. There was nothing but a deafening silence that polluted the heavy air. Crooked trees and sky-less roofs projected haunting sceneries in which men were lost mysteriously, as if they were kidnapped by spirits of the forests and buried beneath the ground.

Fortunately, light broke through the bodies of crooked bodies of trees that reeked of death even though they were alive and stalwart, and everyone welcomed this light with open arms as an escape from the dark tunnel they found themselves in. Soldiers and officers ran towards the light, escaping the bewitching timbered limbs only to find themselves standing erect upon the margin of a hill, frozen like statues of bronze in most congested plazas. Perplexed and curious of whatever witchcraft beset them mysteriously, I rushed to aid my troubled companions and fellow soldiers only to drown myself in their horrified faces and empty eyes that stared into the abyss projected by the jaws of a universal serpent of darkness.

These men, trained soldiers of the Sultan army, proud warriors of the Crescent Moon have experienced their bodies rooted into the ground and their spirits crumbled, obliterated by something beyond the hill and deep inside the valley.

Futilely, I tried to muster the hearts of many now broken soldiers who ran away back into the embrace of the forests they so desperately sought to escape mere moments ago. When I turned to my superiors and noticed not even a reply or a scheme of an expression on their faces, I then dared turn my eyes towards the valley in front of us and witness the oddity that turned them all into stone...

...It was then that I found out that these lands were plagued by a monstrosity much more horrifying than anything superstition could ever spawn, for the sadistic deeds of this abomination were real, and right there, before my eyes, deep inside the God-forgotten valley that was only cloaked by the shadow of perpetual death.

I ran away, as fast as I could, and I promised never to remember the sight of this valley were a forest, unlike any other forest stood proudly, flashing its crown of pain and blood, for this forest, was an endless sea of stakes raising high into the skies upon which laid bodies of men impaled by the phallic projectors of wood. My heart trembled and my ears bled agony as they heard cries emerging from some of the bodies that were alive still, wriggling and writhing

desperately while their body was violated by the contraption of utter torture and evil, a stake that held them still into the air, and locked them to a slow, painful death as their bodies slid down the wooden mass. Some cries came to be silenced not by death but by the wooden tips forcing their way out of the victims' mouths while others, in their last screams, succumbed to death at last.

As I failed to erase the images of lagging, twisted bodies and rivers of blood gushing out and flowing down the deathly trees, drowning the grass, corrupting it and consuming the lush in a giant crimson lake of blood and other uncanny fluids and manure, I wondered what sort of monster could revel in such vulgar pleasures of blood and pain. Unfortunately, this was the same monster that swayed power amidst these lands, and in his blood driven mania, he was determined, and driven by some inhumane force into decorating his demesne with hellish forests and their screaming clouds, undoubtedly prone on adding me to the collection.

How foolish we were to respond to this demon's insults and march into his lands only to walk inside the trap he sprung. After all, no man walks through the Devil's domain and escapes unscathed, and we were oblivious enough not to witness the countless omens.

Therefore, to any who may come across this journal of mine, know that my name was Ayberk Boran, soldier of the Ottoman Army and that I had undoubtedly perished under the hand of a great evil, a monster named Vlad Dracula, son of the Devil.