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In Shakespeare's Shadow A NOVEL FROM TRANSYLVANIA

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Prologue

LONDON, 2012

It was cold that September night and the mist covered everything but the walls of the London houses, which rose from the gardens, while inside, under the warmth of tea and candlelight, silence reigned.

Reverend Thomas Kylie, vicar of the St. Leonard church, looked down the dimly lit street before locking the heavy iron gate that protected the church from thieves. Both large trees in the garden in front of the church were roaring in the evening wind and countless leaves were flying, carried away, yellow and tired, towards the ground. The vicar had personally swept most of them into a pile, although he was convinced that the next day all paths would again be covered with these slippery traps. Tonight, however, his fingers were numb from the cold and his guts were rumbling. Both streets, High Street and Hackney Street, were deserted. He quickly put up his coat collar and started to head home, when he was interrupted by a noise. At first, he thought he was mistaken, but the sound came once again. It seemed to be coming from inside the church.

"It cannot be", Kylie thought, as he felt his anger taking over. Is some youth gang mocking him again? He rushed to unlock the iron latch and ran toward the main entrance located between the four Ionic columns. The main gate was also locked shut, as he

had left it, and Kylie had to try several keys from his coat pocket until he finally found the right one.

The church was pitch dark, one could only sense the familiar smell of burned candles and incense; as Kylie was groping in the darkness trying to find the main light switch, he banged his foot against a candlestick. He barely held his cry of pain. He began to listen carefully and heard that noise again, which sounded like a scrape or a scratch on rock. This in itself would not have been unusual, because London mice always appreciated a dry, warm shelter; what caused goose bumps to appear all over Kylie's skin was that the sound seemed to be coming from beneath the church.

"The crypt!" he shouted, and rushed to turn on the light.

A few months before, archaeologists had started digging trenches inside the church. During the Tudor era, between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in this church, located in the vicinity of *The Theater* and the *Curtain Theater*, a lot of actors had been buried, in whose memory the church had even built a memorial. *St. Leonard Church's* connection with the theater and its actors had existed since time immemorial and was part of its identity. But a few years ago, a group of researchers shook the world of specialists with a crazy hypothesis according to which, beneath the church built at the beginning of the eighteenth century, there was the tomb, considered far gone, of William Shakespeare, the famous son of London. In support of this hypothesis, vicar Kylie had brought all kinds of evidence, that some doubters had considered farfetched. Nevertheless, someone decided to give credence to these ideas and so, just days before, they had begun excavations which disturbed the secular silence of the dead. Though details did not leak beyond the step of the crypt, rumors of these excavations probably still existed outside, and so-called treasure hunters now wanted to take their share of the legend of Shakespeare.



St. Leonard Church - London

Kylie hurried around the high altar. Behind it there was the entry to the crypt, lighted only by the dim light of dusk coming through the windows. He shouted: "This is holy ground, how dare you...?" He did not reach any further.

A dark figure came straight towards him. Something in the way in which it moved made Kylie's blood freeze in his veins. It seemed frighteningly inhuman, rather like a shadow that had only temporarily taken a solid shape, and which did not observe the laws of physics. The reverend stumbled, white with fear, and fell to his knees.

"Wh... who's there?" he whispered, wide-eyed. He couldn't say more.

The blow got him directly above the temple and made him collapse unconscious, on his side. He felt warm sticky blood running down his face and he could only vaguely see as the dark creature moved silently through the church corridor and disappeared.

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1. *The Devil's Citadel*

BAIA MARE, 1597

The mount was standing, dark and repulsive, in front of Joseph. On top, under the silvery moonlight, one could see the outline of the sinister battlements of the fortress. The young man was shaking, his body being swept by a wave of weakness, a feeling that he was more than familiar with.



Lissibona Citadel Hill.

Drawing after a photograph by Ionică Pop

Hunger had become, in recent weeks, an inseparable companion. Winter had designs on the people in Baia Mare and surroundings areas. First, one of the largest gold mines had closed over the summer; then, a serious accident in the mine had cost the lives of twenty-seven men. In autumn, a hailstorm had destroyed much of the crop, so that now, in February, many people were hungry. These were times of misery.

More than seventy years had past since the war of the Hungarians and Austrians princes raged against the Turks, who had defeated the Kingdom of Greater Hungary at Mohacs in the year of our Lord 1526, and then in 1541. After the conquest most of the territory, the central part, had become a Pashalik (with its center in Buda), a semi-autonomous kingdom from where the Turks were squeezing large tributes. The old voivodeship of Transylvania separated from the kingdom, to become, in 1575, a Principality in which Baia Mare was incorporated. The royal Hungarian family Szapolyai / Zápolya had proven weak in its conflict with the Austrian Imperials for possession of the Hungarian crown; and so the privileged upper classes of Transylvania, consisting of Hungarian nobility, Saxons and Szeklers, had chosen as vaivode the most powerful prince in Transylvania, from among the men in the Hungarian Báthory family. Now the power was held by Sigismund Báthory; but he was not made of the same cloth as his predecessor, Stephan. He renounced his principality and preferred to join the Jesuit brothers in the Kingdom of Poland, a kingdom that was also under his rule.

After Stephan Báthory's death in 1586, Transylvania was always on a downward path. Removed from major trade routes in Europe, it was left as prey for the incursions of Turk and Austrian mercenaries. Though closely related to the House of Habsburg, the soldiers themselves took their pay directly from the goods of the country, robbing, stealing and pillaging.

Respect There was always resistance against the Habsburgs, so in recent years there had been several bloody rebellions; moreover, at the request of the Pope, a new military campaign against the Turks was being set up, which was to be paid in blood, especially by the people in Transylvania.

For decades, Baia Mare had been haunted by pestilence, famine and robberies. The discovery of the New World, almost one hundred years before, had reduced the price of gold and silver, so now ordinary people were struggling to survive. Joseph's family was of Romanian origin; he and his brother, Radu, worked as day laborers in the mine, where they had to perform the most difficult and dangerous work. For weeks there had been no more work, and he and his family had not eaten anything in days. He got a lump in his throat every time he thought about his sister Mary's emaciated face. She was so weak now she could barely move. Though dangerous and even prohibited, him and his brother had sneaked into several collapsed galleries, hoping to find some small gold nuggets, to sell for money; but these incursions brought them nothing but bruised knees and lungs full of coal dust. As Orthodox Christians, they could not hope to receive any support here, where almost all were Lutheran. Rather than someone helping them they were left to starve. There was, however, a last resort.

Joseph shook his head and looked up at the castle. Up there, somewhere behind the thick dark walls, was the gold of the mine holder Georg Lissibona, the richest man in all of Transylvania. He had come here years ago from the Netherlands as a wine and fabrics merchant, had gradually taken hold of one mine after another and then even the mint in Baia Mare. Although he had a large house in the city, he preferred to live up here in his mountain castle, away from the streets. The mountains with dense forests, Oriental Carpathian hills, formed a natural barrier with their deep and

Respect | inaccessible ravines; not even the Gypsies were crazy enough to venture up the road.

“The devil lives there”, people whispered. Everyone knew that Lissibona haunted the forests around the city. It was said that Lissibona was a powerful sorcerer and a vampire who feeds on the blood of the living. Others claimed he had a frightening monster up there, half man, half beast, just waiting to tear apart anyone brave enough to venture up to the citadel. It was said that the monster was always hungry and that during a full moon, the master and the beast go out together to hunt the innocent.

In some days, the waters of Antochi, a small river that flowed through the area, was red from the blood that was shed above the city. People also said that the waters of the other river, Borzeș, was poisoned.

Joseph’s grandmother, Anna, said that Lissibona was a *strigoi*, a creature resurrected from the dead to bring harm to the living. The only way to stop it was to drive a stake through his heart. He was frozen to the marrow, and not just because he was almost barefoot, his feet insufficiently covered by a pair of rags, or because of the moth-eaten scarf wrapped around his shoulders. This place was not good, he could feel it in every fiber of his being. Something dark and menacing seemed to be running down the mountain from the citadel, through the forest. He shouldn’t be here. But what choice did he have? Mary’s thin frame, and sunken cheeks sprung into his mind again, making him very tense. He was not afraid of Lissibona. He would eventually find the gold and his family’s hunger would come to an end.

Joseph ran a zigzag through the trees, up the mountain, making as little noise as possible. The only road was to the south, but he avoided it by going straight through the forest. To the north, west and east the castle was surrounded by deep ravines, where sudden death had come for many curious visitors.

Respect An owl's cry, not far away, startled him. Did it not sound like the mourning of a man or a ghost? He kept walking with determination. His only hope was that the wolves which lived in the surrounding caves would find other prey tonight and let him go. Joseph had not told anyone about his endeavor, he knew that neither his father nor his mother would have allowed it. At last, he saw before him the thick castle walls, which had a single gate. The gate was closed and two guards were posted in front of it. It was clear that Lissibona had something very valuable inside; or he was hiding that monster people were talking about, Joseph. He quickly put the thought aside. Now there was no time for doubts – he had to act. But how could he enter the castle without being discovered? His eyes were searching the walls up and down. In the dark, he could not see if they were guarded; however, he believed Lissibona had put at least one guard in the watchtower, who was most likely doing his round. Now he just had to wait for the guard to return.

He sat for a long time in the freezing cold and jumped every time he heard a crackling sound in the thicket. Finally, he saw a movement on the battlements and then he heard a voice:

"Susanna made a terrible bean stew today!" the guard said from the top of the wall and let out a loud fart.

"Better be glad you're getting something to eat!" cried the two guards on the ground.

The guard mumbled something and continued his round. Now was the time. Nimble as a weasel, Joseph untied the rope ladder he had carried on his shoulder and threw it over the pinnacle. Nimbly, he climbed the wall and jumped on the other side. He carefully looked around. The wall itself was covered in darkness. To his left he managed to take a glimpse inside the guard's room. Below was the courtyard, which was lit only by a few torches.

Joseph took a deep breath. Which way was he supposed to go? He took a silent bow and eventually, decided to go right.