

Chapter Six

CAPTAIN Kurt Shaffer entered the tiny village's church and sat in its front pew. The church was empty except for a cleaning woman, who upon seeing him, scooped up a bottle of amber liquid and several rags and fled quickly through a side door.

Shaffer quietly examined the church. It was a Catholic church and very small, although apparently large enough for the village's population. It was constructed entirely of wood and he appreciated the intricacy of the interior carvings, especially the many angels sculpted into the wooden support columns.

The building was very clean and well kept. In that regard, it was much like its village. The small town possessed one main street that was very clean. Even the pathways around the homes and barns were neat and uncluttered. And the flourmill at the town's end was in complete repair and a model of efficiency.

He enjoyed the morning light streaming across his lap from the nearest stained glass window. It portrayed St. Francis of Assisi taming the wolf that had terrorized the town of Gubbio. The fierce wolf was humble and docile at the saint's feet. The window was constructed of glass in various shades of deep yellow and green. It streamed a warm, comforting light in contrast to the outside chill. There had been a brief dusting of snow at dawn. The sun had burned it off the grass, but the cold remained.

The captain thought that he much preferred this little church to the stone cathedral that had been his place of worship back in Germany. Of course, he had never truly worshipped in that church. Even when he was a child, he had considered his Sunday presence there as a duty to his father and mother. He could not recall a single memory when he had prayed in that church and even though he liked this picturesque little wooden one, he felt no inclination to pray in it either.

Instead of praying, he merely leaned back against the pew and attempted to reconstruct the events of the past several days. In a series of separate attacks a dozen more soldiers had been killed by wolves, and now there were reports of similar attacks upon different units as far away as the outskirts of Vilna and Kaunas.

The captain had searched for clues about why the wolves had grown so fierce. He had his favorite corporal ask the peasants who helped tend their draft horses. All they told him was that demons had come to possess the animals and turn them into murderous beasts. They had nothing to offer but superstition and then one toothless old woman told the corporal about the tiny village with the flourmill and that there was a church there that some still called the Church of the Wolves. The woman was mostly addled, but the story was intriguing, and the village was near. So he had set off that morning with a small squad of soldiers to find it.

A squad of his soldiers were outside the church door and Captain Shaffer heard a strange voice speaking to them in passable German. He assumed that the cleaning woman had rushed out to find the local priest and tell him that soldiers had invaded the building.

Soon the door opened and a small, round priest with a pronounced limp bustled down the aisle to address him.

"Good morning, Captain," he said attempting to catch his breath. "I am Father Viktor. What brings you to our home? How can I help you, please?"

The captain guessed the priest's age to be about sixty years. He had a broad, open face and appeared to be a man without guile.

The captain did not rise, nor did he give him his name, but greeted him politely, "Good morning, Father. I'm hoping you can help me. My men and I are out today hunting wolves. Do you know where we might find some, or perhaps some of the villagers might help guide us to hunt them down?"

"Wolves?" the priest replied puzzled. "I don't understand. Why would you be concerned about them...I mean please pardon me, but you have an entire, army facing you..."

The captain cut him off with a wave of his hand and said quietly but very firmly, "I am concerned with wolves because I've had to look down at too many of my men's bodies ripped open by them. I mean to hunt down every wolf in the region."

"I see," the priest said. "Well I can ask for some men to help you hunt them down, but I doubt if you'll find many here who possess the skills you need. Most of the young men have gone and the older ones are either too old to go trekking in the forest or they fear it too much."

"Why do they fear it?"

"Oh, Captain, I can tell you are a learned man. You can't understand the superstitions these simple people have. They think the Devil himself is hiding around every corner or sitting in the branches of every tree."

"That's what I've been hearing from some of the peasants who help us around our camp. They say the wolves are possessed and that's why they come to attack men. Has anyone in your village been attacked?"

"Why no, Captain. There hasn't been a wolf attack here for quite some time."

"How odd," the captain said. "You are so close to our lines and the people here are fewer and unprotected and yet the wolves prefer to attack armed groups of men. Why would they behave so?"

"Why...I don't know," the priest admitted and the captain could see that he was genuinely puzzled by the thought.

The captain continued, "But I've heard that years ago there were many attacks in the region. People from here did die. I heard that dozens died in this very area. Although that number is probably exaggerated."

"Oh, yes," Father Viktor said. "That's why all the older ones are so frightened. There were killings here, but the numbers are not exaggerated at all. Hundreds died. I saw the old church records when I was first assigned here fifteen years ago. Some of the younger people don't believe those numbers because the truth is so horrible. Hundreds, Captain, I counted them in the records myself. Many of the villages in the area, including this one, never recovered their populations."

"In what years did the records state these wolf attacks occurred?"

"Oh, oh," the priest hesitated and wrinkled his forehead to remember. "I believe that was during the 1870s and 1880s."

The captain did a quick calculation and remarked, "So thirty or forty some years ago. And there's no one in the village who could talk to me about that time."

"Perhaps a few might. There was one man here who I believe could greatly help you, but he left over a year ago. His granddaughter told me he was going on a religious retreat."

"What's his name?"

"His name is Petras Kleiza. His granddaughter lives here in the village, but I'm sure she can't help you."

"Why do you think the grandfather could have helped us?"

"Well, he was a learned man like yourself. Petras was born here but studied at the university in Vilna and became a teacher. He was a young man when the wolf attacks happened and he returned here from Vilna to help his father hunt them down."

"A pity he's no longer here," the captain agreed as he stroked a scar across his face.

"Oh, yes," the priest said. "Petras is probably the last man living who helped destroy the pack that killed everyone in the forest at the Wolf Church."

Captain Shaffer stared sharply at the Priest and said, "The Wolf Church? Excuse me, Father, but one of the reasons for us coming here this morning was that a peasant told us something about this church being what she called the Wolf Church."

"Oh no, Captain, she's very wrong. The story gets confused these days. You see back then, many homes in the region stretched through the valley further west into the forest. Some people then lived as much by hunting and gathering fruits and nuts and mushrooms as by farming. They had small gardens and didn't plant fields like we do today. Way out there in the forest there was a small church for them, much smaller than even the one we're sitting in right now."

"What happened to it?"

"Well, I suppose it's still out there crumbled and buried in the forest. I saw it only once, years ago, and a few of its walls were still standing. By now they must be down."

The captain asked, "Why was it abandoned?"

"Well, there are various legends but the one mostly repeated is that the wolves attacked the church during Sunday Mass and killed over forty people. After that, anyone still living in the valley fled. They moved from the region entirely."

The captain gazed to the front of the church, where a beautifully carved crucifix hung. Quietly he said, "An interesting story. It seems that the entire region is filled with stories and legends about wolves. I think the people here have wolves in their blood."

"Oh indeed, Captain, everyone has a story or two about wolves," the priest said, and settled down in the opposite pew. "Maybe it's because the founding of the old Kingdom of Lithuania was so tied up with wolves. Its first king Giedymin was a great warrior who traveled to Vilna, and as his legend goes, he met and slew a giant beast there. Then it continues, depending upon the version, that he either actually saw a large wolf or saw it in a dream. There was a great howling from its belly and it split open and a hundred wolves came bursting out. Giedymin believed these wolves were protectors of his new kingdom and Vilna became his capitol."

"I see," the captain replied. He stood up and the priest stood as well. Then he offered his hand and said, "Thank you, Father Viktor. I enjoyed our talk. One more thing

though...could you show me the way to the Wolf Church? You've made me very curious about it."

"Well, I couldn't take you there," the priest said as he limped to a low table. "My leg isn't good enough for that, but I can draw you a map."

He proceeded to pull a small stub of a pencil from his pocket and an envelope. He removed the letter and began to draw a map on the envelope. As he drew, he said, "There are a number of ways to get there, but this is the easiest way to find it. You see this little triangle...this is the flourmill at the end of town. I'll draw a little waterwheel here to mark it. Follow its stream up from there. You will go south for a short while and then it bends to the west. You will pass three tributaries entering its left side and then two entering its right. It's this second tributary on the right that you must follow...you see? You walk a bit further and the stream forks evenly...walk along the right fork again. Follow along until you come to the next stream entering it on your left. It's a small one only a foot or two wide, no more than that. Follow that one uphill for about a half hour or so and the church ruins will be there. That's where it is, but if the walls are down, the forest may have buried it by now."

"Are there any other landmarks around it?" the captain asked.

The priest scratched his head and said, "Yes there's a hill right behind it. A small one, but half the hill...I remember now, half of it was all boulders...a very odd hill in that forest."

Captain Shaffer thanked Father Viktor again, tucked the paper into his breast pocket and walked from the church.

Chapter Seven

PETRAS Kleiza's vision cleared and he saw that he had returned to the high field. He stared down at the light snow covering the meadow and became aware that he was barefoot. He thought it was odd that the cold did not bother his feet or the rest of his body as he was clad only in trousers and a light shirt.

There were moments when he remembered who he was and others when he seemed to drift into a type of dream where he had no single identity but became a piece of everything that surrounded him.

During both his times of clarity and dreams though, Petras knew the field was very important to him. He drifted partially back from his dream and knew the field was significant because it spilled down a north-facing slope; and that in the warm months, sheep grazed over it. It wasn't the sheep that were important, but their droppings. It was their droppings that fertilized the field.

Petras's mind sharpened into focus and he recalled that both were needed. The field had to face north and it almost always had to be fertilized with sheep or cow dung. And the field had to be wet but not too wet. There were other conditions he could not remember but he knew the field must possess them as well. He knew this because this was where he had collected the special mushrooms that were the key to his potion. There were many ingredients that he could gather in any number of places throughout the forest, but the special mushrooms only grew in this field. They needed a certain slope and light. They needed the proper fertilization and drainage. They needed...but his mind could not grasp the other elements.

He did know the mushrooms were beautiful. Not beautiful in their appearance...they had long gangly stalks capped by conical helmets. They clustered together like unruly patches of hair sticking out from a head at odd angles. But they were beautiful in their scent. Most would think the scent too bitter, especially when he cooked them in his iron pot and they colored blood-red. But Petras learned that after tasting them, the scent changed, or rather, his judgment of the scent changed and both their smell and taste would be sweet to the tongue.

When he swallowed his potion the first time, his sense of smell was the initial change he experienced. It became acute. He could smell a man's sweat from a hundred feet away. Even now in the lightly snow covered field, he could smell the dormant mushrooms buried in the earth. He stooped and clawed at the earth with his hands until chunks of it broke away and crumbled. He rubbed the dirt back and forth across his palms and the aroma of the mushrooms that had leached into it rose up to him. Then he licked the earth from his hands to draw out every minute bit of its taste. For a few seconds he was nearly giddy with the gritty smear that coated his tongue.

The wind blew from the north and dragged his long hair behind him. It blew back his beard and exposed his lips and teeth. Petras closed his eyes, clenched his jaws and felt the air whistle into his mouth. For an instant it seemed to him that his mouth was as large as a cavern.

When he opened his eyes, he stared over the hills that leaned towards each other to form a long, low valley. At the valley's end there were columns of smoke rising in the air. He knew they signified chimney smoke rising from a village. He recalled vaguely that the village was his own...it was the village where he had been born and raised. His feet began to move in that direction and he soon found himself wandering through the valley. By then he had companions with him. They were strong, four-legged, shaggy masses at his side. They brushed against him as they walked. Petras would reach down and scratch his hands against their heads or stroke their tails. Occasionally, he would reach into a small leather bag he carried beneath his shirt and draw a few pinches of blood-red powder from it. Then he'd reach down with it and one of the wolves at his side would greedily lick his fingers clean. Every time a wolf finished, it would stagger and drop to the ground for a few minutes. Then it would rise again and follow Petras, joining him and the pack that was gathering around him.

The more creatures that joined the pack, the more heat Petras felt radiating from his body. He began to believe that they possessed one body, and even more. He sensed that their one body was greater than the sum of their parts. Eventually they reached the outskirts of the village. By that time there were nearly a hundred wolves with him. They all lay down together in one mass, their bodies pressed tightly together. And there were others...several children lay within the mass. Their eyes were glazed and they wrapped their arms around the wolves' necks.

The children had first observed Petras months before; these were the older children who could steal into the forest. Their parents had little reason to enter the forest and their grandparents avoided it. But for the children, the forest was both their playground and escape from authority. They met Petras on one of his many excursions, mushroom picking or seeking herbs. At first they were frightened by the old man. But they reasoned he couldn't be dangerous. They knew he had once lived in the village, moved away and sometimes returned for short periods to visit his granddaughter. He had not visited her for more than a year and it was said he was on some sort of religious retreat. They didn't know why he was wandering in the forest, but their natural curiosity drove them to him.

He became their friend, showing them where to find the biggest berries in the woods and where it was best to fish in the many streams that laced through the trees. He became a teacher to them, demonstrating different uses of the many herbs he collected. And then there were the wolves.

Petras could call the wolves to him. He would stand in a clearing and sing an old song. He would usually have a few rabbit or squirrel carcasses with him. A wolf would come and he would feed him the carcass and then give the wolf a pinch of red powder from a leather bag he always carried with him.

At first he had the children sit in a tree when he called the wolves. But after the second or third time he would have the bravest among them descend and approach the animals. He had to pick the bravest because he told them that the wolves could smell their fear in their sweat and then would only see them as prey.

He would have them slowly descend from their limbs and then tell the children, "Good...now this is all a game for you. Stand on your heads...here I'll help you. And you two...stand back to back, now lean over but stay jammed against each other and turn in a circle."

Petras explained to the children that wolves always studied their potential prey. This was especially true if they had never attacked a certain type of creature before. Surely they all had observed humans in the forest or when they skulked near villages. But if humans began standing on their heads or balancing on one leg while waving their arms in the air, or hanging upside down from a tree, the wolves would be perplexed by the antics and would not attack.

It was their intelligence that made them vulnerable. They would become curious and approach the children. They would attempt to understand. And that was the moment when they could be touched or offered food...that was the moment when a relationship, no matter how tenuous, could first be established.

All of this Petras had learned when he was a student in Vilna. He was always fated to seek out and learn from any teacher, whether it was inside or outside the classroom. There had been a circus in Vilna and he had befriended some of the animal trainers, who mostly worked with ponies and bears, but one of them worked with wolves. It was this knowledge he brought home with him when the wolf attacks occurred against his village. He had been the one who had finally led the way in hunting them down and destroying so many of them those long years ago.

But during that campaign, he had discovered something else in the forest. It began as a mystery. Then he realized the mystery contained an ancient knowledge beyond anything a university could offer him. Perhaps he was a bit like a wolf in that his curiosity consumed his other sensibilities. He became obsessed with the mystery, even turning down teaching positions in large cities to return to his village. He had spent his entire life seeking to solve the mystery. And only in his last years did he succeed.

Gradually Petras introduced the wolves to the children and the children to the wolves. He never fed the red powder to the children until they asked for it. Of course it was only a matter of time before they all asked for it.

Petras pushed aside some thick pine branches and studied the village. The water wheel at the mill was slowly turning. He glanced to his left to watch a man pushing his cart into a small barn. As he did so all the wolves and children behind him swiveled their necks to the left. Then the man disappeared between the large doors.

He turned his face again to flourmill and the heads behind him turned again. The miller—Petras had known him his whole life but could not recall his name—was walking along the mill's spillway carrying a long, wooden pole. The pole had a hook on its end. The man dipped it into the water and withdrew a tree branch.

Petras thought, and the thought was shared by the pack, about how easily it would be to charge from their forest cover and kill the man...how easy it would be to race silently into the barn through its open door and attack the other man...how swiftly they could race through the streets and open the latches of all the village's doors and slaughter everyone. He could almost taste the hot blood in his mouth.

Then he rejected the images. He closed his eyes and pushed them away. If there was to be blood, it had to be somewhere else, not here. There was another place he had to visit; he

could allow the blood there. He turned his back on the village and began to walk into the forest. All the pack followed except for one wolf.

Petras felt the presence of the animal behind him. His presence was a detachment; a pulling away from the whole. He turned and stared at the wolf. It was a strong creature, larger than most others in the pack. Its one ear was missing and there was a scar across the top of its head and down the left side of its face.

Petras's eyes locked with the wolf's eyes and he felt the animal's presence join with the group once again. They all moved together quietly through the woods, flowing like one, dark, low creature. Only the scarred wolf continued to linger. He followed, but paced at a slight distance from any of the others. Unlike the others, he darted his eyes around the forest erratically, like he trusted nothing—not even the pack.

Chapter Eight

AS the courier approached the downhill section of the road, he slowed his mount. At one time all along its entire curve, two wagons could have passed side-by-side. But from a year's worth of monotonous experience, the rider knew that just around the bend, a tree had fallen and reduced it to a narrow lane about fifty feet long. The forest was thick with pines on its upper right side and the other side dropped off in a steep decline. Even when the road was dry, it was an unfortunate rider who took the bend too swiftly.

But he also slowed his horse for another reason. His instinct told him that danger was waiting. Even with the sun overhead, it was still an evil looking place. Perhaps earlier in the war, he wouldn't have thought of the road as "evil," merely just one more broken section among countless others caused by collapsed bridges and shell holes and general disrepair. He would only have considered it a small bit of the chaos that he rode through every day.

But what he had learned in Minsk by eavesdropping on the generals, before they handed him his sealed courier pouch, had colored his vision of the road. And it wasn't just the generals, but the common soldiers he'd encountered during the last two weeks and their tales of horror.

At every rest-station, the soldiers had stories of hideous deaths in the night. Men swore that wolves were attacking in packs and murdering entire companies. Others whispered that it was not wolves at all that were doing the killing. They quietly and nervously confided to him over vodka by the campfire that werewolves were stalking the army.

The courier was a Don Cossack and no stranger to the legends of werewolves. Legends of werewolves, werebears, werhorses and every possible type of werebeast were tales told across the Steppes, east through China, down into Ottoman Turkey, west through the Ukraine and north through all the Russian land until the land disappeared and became Russian ice.

Unlike many members of his tribe, the courier did not believe in werewolves. He was a practical man who believed in his own abilities as a rider and warrior. He believed in his horse, gun, and saber. He had lived for almost forty years upon his own abilities and those of his brother warriors. He had survived the worst blizzards of Asia and the heat of its greatest deserts. From the back of his horse, he had battled up and over mountains and swam across flooding rivers. And through all his experiences he had developed a keen sense of survival.

It was this instinct that made him slow his horse more than any other reason. He rode slowly around the bend of the road and a hundred feet ahead of him saw a dozen soldiers laboring and swearing loudly over an overturned field gun. Their team of horses had taken the bend at too great a speed. A wheel must have caught on one of the tree's fallen branches and tipped the cannon enough that it had completely overturned.

Six of the men were using the fallen tree trunk as a fulcrum and leaning into a beam to pry the gun upwards. Even from his distance, the courier could see that their effort wasn't intended to right the gun completely. They were just trying to lift it enough so the team of horses could pull it from the tangle of branches. Once free, it would be relatively easy to tip into its proper position.

He slowed his horse to a walk as he approached nearer. The soldier in charge saw him and raised an arm in greeting. Then from the corner of his eye, the courier saw a large gray shape jump from the woods, race across the fallen trunk and leap through the air. The wolf hurtled directly at the soldier, caught his arm in mid-flight and nearly tore it from his shoulder.

In the next instant dozens of wolves leaped simultaneously through the air at the soldiers. The only time the courier had ever seen animals act with such synchronous movement was once when he was a boy and saw a dog act in a traveling circus. For an instant he was stunned at both the macabre violence and the unity. It was like the pack was possessed by one mind.

The courier drew his saber with his right hand, put his spurs to his mount and charged the pack. His horse plowed through the mass of writhing bodies and he swept low with his sword like a scythe. He struck the first wolf across its back and the mass of the man and horse behind the blade nearly cleaved the wolf in two.

He used his body to follow the cutting stroke of the saber forward and whirled it over his horse's head and to his left side. The blade caught a wolf leaping from that side and slashed deeply into its skull. A second beast fell dead. Then he scythed to his right once more and killed a third.

His horse burst from the melee and sprinted a short distance. The courier turned it for a second charge. He readied himself to kick it forward again, but instead halted. In shock, he saw that the killing was done. Not a man stirred, but neither did the wolves move. The entire pack stood frozen, merely staring at him.

Questions raced through his mind. Why weren't some of the wolves biting or licking at their wounds? Why weren't others tearing at the dead bodies? And the stillness? It was like the entire scene was one massive statue.

Then one wolf detached itself from the pack and stepped towards him three paces. It was the largest wolf in the pack. It had an old scar across the left side of its head and its left ear was missing. Only a mangled lump was there where an ear should have been. Its mouth snarled back, exposing its teeth, and blood dripped from its jaws to the earth.

The hideous beast took three more steps towards the courier. The rest of the pack had yet to move; not a paw stirred nor did a tail twitch. Again it stepped three more times, but this time as it did so; the rest of the pack moved with it...in complete unison, all the beasts moved exactly three steps. Their eyes locked upon him like there was no other object in the world. Until that moment the courier had been fighting with pure instinct. He had felt no fear. But now beneath his uniform, a trickle of sweat ran the length of his spine. He was a hard man and a brave soldier. He had never feared any animal or man in his life. But he realized that he was facing something unnatural; something he could not understand or define.

He breathed out loudly, jerked on his reins and spun his mount around. He dug his spurs into its flanks and the horse bolted away from the wolf pack. A collective howl rose up from the wolves and they charged after him.

Still clutching his sword, the courier leaned forward over his horse's neck. He knew he was two miles from the next outpost and if did not outdistance the pack to it, he would die like the soldiers behind him. His horse pounded forward and began to glide into its racing rhythm. This was the critical moment. He knew if they were trying to escape the wolves over the great expanse of the Steppes, it was only a matter of time before the wolves would pace next to the horse, wear it down, and then attack. But this wasn't the Steppes; he could beat the wolves to the outpost, if only they didn't catch his mount's legs at the beginning of the chase.

He was ahead of them slightly but they had a greater explosion of speed at the outset. Would his small lead be enough? His horse was shattering the hard packed clay beneath its feet as it pounded ahead. For a brief instant, he thought he would clear the pack, but the youngest and swiftest of the wolves were right behind him.

The courier tilted his head to spy over his shoulder and he saw one of the wolves charging from his right side. The creature was snapping its jaws only inches from his horse's rear leg. He could see that it was beginning to jerk forward on each snap, readying itself to leap. The rider couldn't swing about fully to slash at it, because his motion would slow the forward momentum of his horse. Instead he slipped his grip from the handle of his sword to its pommel. He leaned backwards holding on by gripping only the lip of the saddle with his left hand and squeezing his thighs into the horse's flanks. He extended his body prone, face to the sky, and shoved the sword at the wolf like a spike, catching it just as it leaped. The blade sunk nearly a foot into the wolf's chest and it crashed into the road, the weapon still sunk into it.

The rider pulled himself into a seated position once more. But even as he did so he grasped the pistol attached to his saddle and pulled it free. He leaned forward and reached around his left shoulder with the gun. A second wolf was charging from that side. He fired the pistol and missed. The wolf was ready to leap. He fired again and this time the creature tumbled to the side of the road and disappeared over the lip of the hill.

The courier leaned into his horse and began to pull away from the rest of the pack. Behind him the wolves slowed to a halt. They gathered around the great beast with the missing ear and scar across its head and watched the rider recede into the distance. Then they turned to walk back to the bodies of the men they'd just slaughtered. In unison all the wolves moved together, like they were of a single mind. They walked slowly, every paw on every leg touching the earth at exactly the same instant. Soon they were standing over the soldiers' bodies. They were hungry and it was time to feed.