

Chapter Four

The Cave Hermit

“Vampires!” spluttered Arthur Canarthy, quickly swinging his lamp around to see if there were indeed any of these blood thirsty creatures in the vicinity. “Where?”

“Ssshhh! Keep the noise down,” hissed the voice, “they’ll hear you and then we’ll all be done for! Now go away before it’s too late, and stop drawing attention to my hiding place.”

“If what you say is true then we’ll need to hide too,” replied Mr. Canarthy, clearly

looking most alarmed. “We have money, we can pay you.”

“I’ve no need of money. Now get lost and don’t try to follow me! You’ll have to take your chances like the rest of the corpses out there.”

“But we’ve got children with us!” pleaded Arthur Canarthy.

“Did you say chicken?” exclaimed a funny looking man, who suddenly poked his head up out of some bushes and sniffed the air. “I haven’t had chicken for such a long time. Alright, you can come in so long as you give me some to eat. Quick follow me! But leave the horses, there isn’t room for them. Come on hurry!”

Arthur Canarthy was about to correct the quirky little man’s mistake but then

thought better of it until they were safely ensconced in the hiding place.

Though the man appeared rather shrivelled and old, he was actually quite agile on his feet as he darted this way and that to the mouth of a nearby cave, which had been carefully hidden by a huge curtain of branches and leaves.

“In you come, fast as you can,” said the old man, as he ushered them in to what turned out to be a remarkably homely abode.

There was a crate for a table and a chair fashioned from old bits of wood tied with rope. A small ledge had been turned into a bed with a mattress of sheep skins, a cow’s hide bedspread and a hessian sack stuffed with dry grass that acted as a pillow. There were various old jars containing berries and

nuts and a bucket filled with water. All in all, as caves go it could have been a lot worse.

The little old man carefully replaced the curtain behind them so that the cave was once again concealed and turned around expectantly, rubbing his bony hands together. “Right then, where’s the chicken?” he asked, licking his withered lips and chomping the few remaining teeth that his gummy mouth contained.

“Actually about that...I think there’s been some sort of misunderstanding,” started Arthur Canarthy, looking positively awkward in the flickering light of his lamp. “You see I was actually talking about these children.”

“Children!, I might be hungry but I’m hardly going to eat a child am I? And quite frankly I think it’s a disgrace that you assume

a stranger would want to eat human flesh. The very idea! What sort of people are you?”

“No! You’ve got the wrong end of the stick!” protested Arthur Canarthy.

“What?” shrieked the old man, clearly getting increasing agitated, “What do you mean I’ve got to pick! You’re honestly expecting me to choose one of these children for dinner!”

“NO!” yelled Ebenezer Smythe, rolling his eyes irritably, “E said CHILDREN an’ for some reason you ‘eard CHICKEN. You wouldn’t be a bit ‘ard of ‘earin’ would you?”

“What? You should tell your friend he really needs to speak up if he’s going to make himself understood, it’s just that I’m a bit deaf. So where’s the chicken?”

“There is no chicken,” groaned the children’s guardian through gritted teeth, “that’s what I have been trying to tell you.”

“Yes there is Uncle Arthur. Look ! We have some right here!” exclaimed Florrie suddenly, as she rummaged around in the hamper that the baker’s wife had given them earlier that day and pulled out four drumsticks. “There are all sorts of delicious things in fact, salami, potato salad, cheeses, bread and even some apple tart!”

“Then at least we shall eat well tonight even if we don’t sleep well,” nodded Arthur Canarthy, handing the chicken to the old man, who despite his lack of teeth still managed to devour it as if food was going out of fashion.

Once their bellies were full and the night wore on, the strange cave hermit, who’s name was Dimitri, explained how he came to

be in such a situation and certainly it was a most woeful tale of tragedy and loss. It transpired he had been a farmer living peacefully with his wife and grown up son in a village not far from the valley, until one fateful night the village had been attacked by Russian soldiers. They had been forced to flee for their lives and had entered the valley late at night not realising it was inhabited by a community of vampires who ambushed them. He had somehow managed to escape but the vampires captured his wife and son. The following morning he had gone to search for his family but to no avail.

“Why didn’t you just leave?” asked Albert, “Why stay in such a dangerous place? Aren’t you afraid the vampires will find you?”

“I cannot leave until I know for certain what has happened to my family and even if

the worst has befallen them, what is there for me in the outside world? At least here I am relatively safe,” shrugged the old man, his eyes suddenly bright with sorrow and unshed tears. “Anyway, you should try and get some sleep. The children can have my bunk and we shall have to bed down on the floor. Once dawn breaks, you will be able to continue your journey – the vampires only come out at night you see.”

“Yes, indeed, try and get some rest children, Mr. Smythe and I need to make plans for tomorrow.”

Albert and Florrie gladly clambered into the make-shift bed which whilst was not as comfortable as the beds they had at the baker’s house and smelt a bit stinky, was still a place to lay their weary heads.

They had just begun to drift off when they became vaguely aware that something was not quite right, and they were about to discover what that something was.

There was the sound of a horse whinnying and snorting in terror and then silence. The curtain to the cave was drawn back and in stepped a man, his mouth smeared with blood.

“Ah, there you are,” he smirked, “I knew there must be humans around here somewhere and your horse was obliging enough to lead us right to you.”

“Andrei? Is that you? Thank God, you’re alive!” cried the old hermit in disbelief.

“Take them,” commanded the vampire, his eyes dead and devoid of any emotion as he completely ignored the hermit.

“Andrei! It’s me! Do you not know your own father?” urged Dimitri, as he tried to grab his son’s arm. “Don’t you recognise me?”

“Take them back to Prince Alexander,” his son said coldly, as he shoved the old man away and thousands of bats suddenly descended on the terrified group, a haze of beating blackness swallowing them up.

“Wot the ‘ell...” started Ebenezer Smythe, as he raised his arms to try and defend himself.

“Quick! Albert! Florence! Run for your lives!” shouted Arthur Canarthy, but it was too late.

The bats surrounded them and they found themselves been lifted off into the night.