

Chapter 1:12



Chief Inspector Armin Murnau. Correspondence to his Sister, Viola Croasdell.

May 1st, 1890.

Dearest Viola,

In my left palm I have a river stone of impressive quality. I found it this afternoon while walking in quiet contemplation. The riverbed contained many stones, but none more remarkable as this. It lay among grey stones like a stranger. The eye line between it and myself was taut and undisturbed by the constant flow of water. Its enticement seemingly arranged just for me; just for us. I plucked it from the river and carried it home.

It measures three and a quarter inches long, two and three quarters inches wide by one and one-eighth inches deep. Its colour is primarily blue-grey with veins of richer blue angling across width-wise. This colouration alone would be enough to make the stone desirable, though there is another, much more stunning feature that creates a signature accent underscoring the stone's allure. An undulating band of yellow minerals, ranging from as thin as one thirty-secondth of an inch to half an inch, splay across the what would be the stone's equator. Canary yellow veins flow against an ethereal background of deep ochre, rising and entwining between two hemispheres of smooth blue. The stone is effortlessly smooth to the touch and rich with a refined polish. I will keep it palmed while I compose this letter well into the evening. By the night's end I will find a place for it among our assemblage of trinkets. May you connect to the stone as my composition unfolds.

Let me begin with a confession. Do you recall my mentioning an envelope at the end of my previous letter to you?

I am shamed by my arrogance and waggish dismissal regarding the matter of Alewski and Runkel. The envelope, which was delivered to my new office and thoughtlessly stuck beneath my desk lamp, enclosed a plea heavy with disparity. Alewski and Runkel were not combatants embroiled in a small town scuffle, as I prejudged. They were, in fact, unaccounted for and had been missing for the past five days; six days, if you include the time I wasted indulging self-admiration and pride in my new office. The men were missing and the responsibility to locate them rests within my charge.

Humbled, I set out for the Alewski farm immediately after reaching the letter's end. I went alone, as I did not want to dally waiting for Mr. Spierig to

arrive. This meant I travelled on horseback along the north road to Cugir, a small and once prosperous rural community. Now however, the hamlet offers little more there than a tannery for employment. For the locals, it is either work at the tannery or make the hard slog that is farming in this rocky region; either plight would be suffocating to any man rich with pride but poor of pocket.

Once outside of the hamlet, I continued north to the verge of the forest. After quite some time, I would eventually lead my horse along a long laneway ending at the Alewski farmstead. There, a surprised Mrs. Alewski met with me. It was half past eleven in the morning. She was preparing to feed her five children, and apparently was not expecting my arrival. I waited in the front entrance of the home while she instructed one of her elder children to complete the lunch arrangements and to serve the young ones. Outside on the porch is where Mrs. Alewski and I would speak of the disappearance of her husband, now almost a week in duration.

Alewski's wife was anxious and spoke quickly of how her husband, along with Mr. Runkel, set out for the train station in Bistritz over six nights ago. The round trip was to take four and a half days, but it has now been twelve days since their expected return. I inquired about the purpose of their trip. Her response: *"I don't know what they were up to. Father (Alewski) was taking a load to Bistritz for somebody. I don't know what it was. I didn't ask. He had to meet with the train before Saturday at ten in the morn. Father (Alewski) set out on Thursday morning with that half-wit belonging to Noris; Noris's lad from down the road, yes? I don't know what they've got themselves mixed up in."* (Mrs. Alewski's description). I asked her to elaborate on the cargo and its owner. *"I don't know. I don't want to know. Father (Alewski) made it clear I was not to ask and the children were to mind his command. I was not to go in the barn. This was none of my concern until Father (Alewski) didn't come home. Now it's my concern, all right."*

Mrs. Alewski obliged me when I asked to examine the barn. Along the way we spoke about the background of Alewski's employment status. She was reticent at first, but eventually proved quite forthcoming with the details; provided that I kept her talking, that is. It seems the family farm had been in decline for many years now. Alewski had been forced to seek employment elsewhere. None too surprisingly, he found employment at the tannery as a skins-runner; a position essentially steeping Mr. Alewski in the aroma of bovine carcasses of varying degrees of rot. It was not exactly the sort of position a former farmstead manager would eagerly accept. The job though, kept the Alewski's financials limping along until two months ago when Alewski found himself out of work again.

I urged Mrs. Alewski to continue describing her husband's actions over the past few weeks. Any detail has the potential to be of importance, I assured her. While she spoke I surveyed a wagon in the centre of the barn. *"I told you I don't*

know what he's (Alewski) been doing. Father (Alewski) went out two weeks ago at night. Two times he left late. Past midnight it was. He (Alewski) hitches the ponies to the wagon (Mrs. Alewski points to the wagon in the barn, indicating it was the one used) and drives out. I don't know where. I don't know for what. I don't want to know. Father (Alewski) said he picks up Noris's lad down the way and the two of them do whatever it is they do. I don't know. He comes home with an empty wagon each time. But that is strange. Father (Alewski) said he was transporting crates to Bistritz. He didn't store them here. I heard Father (Alewski) come in late that night. More like early morning. I didn't ask. I don't want to know." (Mrs. Alewski's description).

I inquired about the crates. *"I saw no crates! There weren't any in the barn. I never saw crates. Maybe they stored them at Noris'. I don't know."* (Mrs. Alewski's description).

We left the barn and Mrs. Alewski escorted me back to my horse. Her concerns were earnest. She believed her husband had no ambition to labour at this mysterious job for any longer than he had to. Meaning, something had befallen him and Runkel along the road. In her mind, there was no other explanation for his tardiness. I ensured Mrs. Alewski that I would uncover the details. With that stated, I rode off to meet with Runkel's Grandfather and Aunt. The trip would take twenty minutes.

Noris Runkel emerged from his doorway in a plume of pipe smoke.

"My boy is a good boy. But, he's dead now." (Noris Runkel's description). This was the response from Runkel's Grandfather when asked about his grandson's disappearance. I spoke with Noris Runkel through the doorway of his home, as there was no invitation offered to enter. Behind the elderly man was a middle aged woman that was never introduced to me, though I did make an attempt at engaging her. I have assumed this to be the younger Runkel's Aunt; Noris Runkel's daughter.

It was obvious to me that Noris Runkel's emotions were a wink away from unravelling. I thought it best to avoid any subjects laden with such raw sentiment. I began by asking about the younger Runkel's employment history, thinking this to be a soft manner in which to broach the more delicate subjects yet to come.

I learned that the younger Runkel was employed at the tannery just as Alewski was, however the nature of his employment was uncertain. The Grandfather implied Runkel was a general labourer and not likely able to hold a job of any real importance. Three months ago, his employment at the tannery ended and Runkel was left without a means of supporting his elderly Grandfather and Aunt. Forced by desperation, the younger Runkel first tried his hands at bird-catching before venturing to Budapest for a two week slog as a Rag-and-Bone-Boy. With barely enough coin to pay his way home, the younger Runkel returned to his

seniors.

“He was filthy when he came home. His coat black with grime and weighted with fats. None the richer, mind you, just slicker and more pathetic. He needed to find work. What can I do? I’m an old man. He (younger Runkel) said he had been offered a job. A few weeks work. But, the purse was heavy. I asked, how much? He says, he doesn’t remember, but that it was plenty. Plenty, Bunica! Plenty, he says. I asked, where? He looked down the road and glances up the mountain. Quickly, he looks back at me with this on his face: shame. I asked again. I said, tell me boy. The pass, he told me. But there’s nothing up the pass, I say. There’s no work up there for decent men. Foolish. Shame is all he brought back. Shame and now he’s dead.” (Noris Runkel’s description).

Noris Runkel admitted he did not know when his grandson was expected to return. However, this did little to sway his opinions regarding his grandson’s fate. I eased into a line of questioning concerning whom the elder Runkel suspected was the employment benefactor. *“He (younger Runkel) never said. I asked. He pretended not to listen. I asked. He rushes out. It’s all a waste, now. He (younger Runkel) and that big fellow (Alewski) are dead. As sure as I draw breath before you now, they are gone. I know, though. I know what my boy and his partner aligned with up the mountain pass. He (younger Runkel) doesn’t listen.”* (Noris Runkel’s description).

Gently, I encouraged Mr. Runkel to elaborate. *“Working? They were stringed. They danced for the devil. Foolish. You can’t dance while the devil plays and think you can stop when you like. You dance and keep dancing until it’s over; until He says it’s over. I’ll say no more. I will not welcome evil into my home. You’re no longer welcomed, either. Go. Take the evil with you and go. I do not want the evil to know of me.”* (Noris Runkel’s description).

I retreated to my horse and took for the road leading back into the tiny hamlet of Cugir. Once on the other side of the near-bare town, I started upon the mountain pass in search of evidence. Newly rutted wagon tracks were present and easy to distinguish, suggesting this path sees little traffic. They ran upwards along the winding roadway and snaked with a bend into the forest.

After quite some time, the road decayed into little more than a cart path. Still, the gouged earth and snapped branches were as conspicuous as a signboard directing the way along. Eventually, the scrub opened up to reveal a large, rusted gate blocking the path. To the left and right of barrier, an ancient wall of blackened stones receded into the woods, slinking behind the cover of dying bramble. As I approached the gate, my horse grew agitated. I decided to dismount and continue on foot along a path that was devoid of any, let’s say, *healthy* appearances. The patches of grass that did find purchase in the oily soil were ragged and in decline.

The sparse vegetation, along with any signs of the tracks I had been following, faded with every yard passed until the ground began to steeply fall away on the right hand edge. Beside me now, yawned a rocky valley flooded with dark ferns. Ahead, the path concluded at the mouth of a lengthy stone bridge. I was glad to not be on horseback at this point, as the bridge was twisted; askew from years of weight pressing and settling below. Adding to the worry was the fact that there were no guarding walls to prevent an errant step from blundering into an ungainly plummet over the sides.

I crossed, making my way towards the gatehouse. The once mighty gate was hoisted upward and frozen in place. Upon inspection, I concluded that the gate's position was a recent development. Great scratches in the rusty encrustations showed where the gate had been forcibly angled agape. Once inside the building I discovered the gate mechanism in working condition. Whomever last opened the port did so in haste, I suspect.

Beyond the gatehouse lay a ruin, though some might once have called it a small castle. Long in years of disrepair, it was. The eyesore squatted in the courtyard like a brick dropped in mud. Of its four corner towers, only one remained; and that is a kind description for me to employ. Its windows were masoned in and the main door was locked. The two other doors at the rear and side were not only locked, but appeared to be masoned as well. From the ground there appeared to be no entrance, unless one had a long rope and the daring to climb. For you see, high above in the sole remaining tower there was an open window.

Of course, there was no answer at the door; which in actuality was a double door and wide enough to allow passage of men carrying crates. I spent a good deal more time investigating the property and building exterior. The day was well into its ending by the time I returned to my loft and began collecting my thoughts on what I had learned during the day.

I believe I have learned an appreciable amount, Viola.

Regarding the events leading to the disappearance of Alewski and Runkel, what do I know with absolute certainty? Very little, I'm afraid. As for the *less-certain* claims, of these I can infer quite a bit, actually.

I know the wife of Alewski is terrified of something she doesn't fully understand. I know this not only because of her comments or attitude, but because her home was adorned with an assortment of religious symbols and paraphernalia from multiple faiths, both pagan and common. Mixed in with those were folklore inspired charms, amulets and remedies meant to ward off all manner of beasts, creatures, and villains. This scattering of protective idols and whatnot shows no pattern, but speaks of being purposed out of desperation rather than conviction. Whatever has Alewski's wife afraid, it was unknown to

her.

I can also reasonably presume that Mr. Alewski was paid in advance for his efforts transporting the crates. The mid-day meal being fed to the Alewski children was a fair sized roast of beef. The Alewski farm has no animals and has not been a working farm for at least a year. A family suffering a prolonged, financial downturn surely would not be dining on beef, nor risk spending money for sweet-cake supplies as stored on the sideboard near the hearth in the Alewski farmhouse. The meal I interrupted today was one that spoke of a poor family treating themselves well, perhaps for the first time in many months. Perhaps the meal is a means to distract the children from the unknown state of their father. Perhaps, but my guess is that Alewski was well paid for his troubles; well paid by someone that held no fear of being double crossed by Alewski. Not that I am suggesting Alewski is the sort of man who would do such a thing. Either this means Alewski's employer is trusting, or they are powerful. Whomever this person is, they obviously fancy themselves as one used to getting what they want.

Evidence of more solid foundation was uncovered in the Alewski barn. The state of the wagon supports Noris Runkel's claim that the mountain pass was taken. I discovered dried mud with ill-looking grass still clinging to its wheels and undercarriage. As you have likely inferred, these are the same examples of flora and earth noticed along the mountain pass.

This brings me to the young Runkel. It is obvious that his grandfather is frightened. Like Mrs. Alewski, the elder Runkel has his home adorned with charms and symbols warding against unnatural influences. The difference between he and Mrs. Alewski: his symbols are targeted and specific to a demon of local legend. The elder Runkel knows what he is afraid of, *and so do I*; so does every old person within a five day ride of these parts. The elder Runkel is far from unique with his fears. It is the myth that attracted me to this region months earlier; the reason for my begging to be stationed here, beneath the mountains. It is the myth that assumes the blame for every tragedy, including a recent sickness yet creeping among the foothill residences. Unfortunately, it is also a myth that has been shrouded with more mystery than facts.

Believe me, Sister, if there was a Strigoi hunting throughout the mountain side, I would have found evidence supporting it. Sadly for me, but lucky for the population at large, no such creature was ever proven to exist, or have existed within this region. Therefore, there is little to be learned from either Runkel or Mrs. Alewski's charms and talismans.

For the time being, I have run the course of evidence. Since my budget is shorter than my jurisdiction, I will be unable to personally trace the path of Alewski and Runkel to Bristriz. Before beginning this letter to you, I had previously composed and couriered one to the officials there, asking them to

investigate on my behalf. Until their response comes, I will continue working from here.

Tomorrow I will meet with the local Moneylender with hope of learning more about the mysterious castle and whether or not its owner will be available for interview. My intellect conspires with my instinct, leading me to the castle and to the fate of Alewski and Runkel. If the castle owner had hired the two men, he will not be forthcoming as to the reasons. This is suggested by the nocturnal and obvious clandestine actions of the hired men. There are secrets yet to be discovered; secrets that even the most ardent examinations may not fully reveal. If only I had your skills of clairvoyance, dear Sister, I could make short this investigation and bring peace the two families involved. Peace or closure, depending on the outcome. If only you could reach out to me. If only you could guide me.

If only.

The candle is lit. Your brother, Armin.