

Vlad: The Last Confession

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Vlad.

THE LAST
CONFESSION

C. C. HUMPHREYS



– PROLOGUE –

Confession

‘Have you committed a sin? Then enter the Church and repent your sin. For here is the physician, not the judge: here one is not investigated but receives remission of sins.’

– ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

– I –

The Summons

Wallachia, March 1481

All was still in the forest. The last snowflakes of the sudden storm had just fallen. Everything paused.

In the crook of a copper beech sat a man. His arms were crossed, gloved hands folded into his lap, the right beneath to support the weight of the goshawk on his left. They had been there for a long time, as long as the blizzard lasted. Man and bird – part of the stillness, part of the silence. Both had their eyes closed. Neither were asleep.

They were waiting for the first sound. Something else to recognise that the storm had passed, be the first to stir before the next one arrived.

There. A twitch of nostrils, their pinkness the only colour in a white world. A sniff – the first sound, followed by the faintest of breezes coming up the valley. The hare could not scent those behind her.

It was hardly a sound – but the man and the hawk both opened their eyes. The bird's were red, fire-red, hell-red, because she was old, nine years old, five past her prime when she could take ten hares, a half-dozen squirrels, a brace of stoats all in a day. Not for their flesh, she didn't need so much. Not for the skins that clothed the man on whose fist she sat. For the pure pleasure of the kill.

Four eyes stared at the snow pack in the glade, seeking the source of the sound they couldn't have heard.

The hare pushed her whole head above the snow-crust. When the blizzard came, she had been caught between stands of beech and aspen, digging for a root. Surprised by the sudden white ferocity, she had frozen. The new snow was as deep as her body but her rear legs rested on the hard pack beneath. Shelter was just twenty leaps away. There, among the deadfalls, she would be safe.

In the tree, the man raised his fist, a wall of soft snow tumbling from his arm, thunder in the silence.

The hare leapt. Young, fast, she was halfway to safety when the man flung out his arm and the bird fell from the tree. Five beats and into its glide. The hare wove, so winter-lean that in the shallower snow near the tree line she skimmed the soft surface. Before it, a fallen branch made an arch, like a cathedral's porch.

The hawk struck, talons thrusting through fur, into flesh. The hare twisted, ripping one triumvirate of claws free, a spray of blood following, a red arrowhead pointing towards darkness and the sanctuary of wood.

Then the jerking stopped and all was still in the forest again.

The man dropped carefully from the tree, groaned, despite the softness he fell into. Snow tumbled from his coat, from its alternating stripes of hare, squirrel and weasel, from the pyramid of wolf-skin on his head. He moved slowly forward, brushing the dirty white beard that curled thickly up to his cheekbones clear of ice.

Stooping, he wrapped his fingers around the bird's back, pulled gently. Hawk and hare slid from the drift. The bird released instantly, her eyes fixed on the leather pouch at the man's waist. With his free hand he reached in and pulled out a piece of fresh flesh. She took it, making a small noise in her throat.

The hare stared up, unblinking in terror. For a moment the man stared back. Then he moved his thumb slightly, pushed down and snapped the neck.

It made such a little sound. Too little for the snap that came a moment after to be an echo. He listened . . . and soon heard men trying not to be heard.

Another snap, this one from down the valley. More men there, and that told him. There was little game on this small mountain at the end of winter; these men were coming for him.

He was surprised they were coming now, through the new snow. But the blizzard had hit fast, winter's late shock, so they must have set out before it began. There were only a few ways off the mountain and, if he knew them all, he assumed the men who hunted him did, too. They would spread like a net through the trees – soldiers and woodcutters and gypsies. They would have dogs . . . *There*. A short bark came from below, another responding from above, neck chains jerked too late to silence them.

He'd known they would come for him eventually.

Dropping the hare's corpse into his pouch, he made his left hand into a fist. The hawk hopped onto it instantly, red eyes watching his.

'It is time,' he whispered.

She put her head slightly to one side, as if in question. But she knew as well as he. The blizzard had been an echo of winter only.

'Go,' he said, 'Find a mate . . .'

He broke off. Every spring he'd let her go, then find her nest in the late summer, take her fledgling, train it, sell it to a dealer in the town for a dozen gold pieces, so prized was a broken-in bird. But this year? She was old, and perhaps would not mate. Besides, the men moving towards them from below, from above? Perhaps he would be the one who didn't return.

'Go,' he said again, and flung out his arm.

Five beats and glide. Yet before she passed between two trees, and perhaps out of his life, she flipped briefly onto her back, as she would to take a pigeon. Her talons stretched, as if in salute. Then she was gone.

He closed his eyes, listened, then moved in the opposite direction to the hawk's flight. Soon the trunks grew closer, branches twining overhead, and the snow was not so deep. He broke into a stumbling run.

Hunter had become the hunted. Now he was the one seeking sanctuary . . .

Mist rose. Despite the tapestries upon the walls, the sheepskins under her feet, winter still seeped into her cell. So the water in the tub sent its heat up into the chill and, where it met stone, turned to liquid. Drops joined, ran and halted as ice.

She had removed all her clothes, save for her shift. Shivering, one foot on top of the other, she waited. The water was just off the boil, still almost unbearable to the touch. Yet it had to keep its heat, for she needed to lie in it a long time, for the easing of her pains, for her pleasure.

She thrust an arm in. It reddened but she could keep it there. It was almost time.

She uncorked a flask, tipped it carefully, watching the viscous liquid drip out. Two heartbeats, enough, the steam savoured now with camomile, with clary sage, with sandalwood. She closed her eyes, breathed, sighed. It was fresh, young, but it lacked something in the

base. Oil of Bergamot, she thought. She wouldn't be able to get any till the Turkish traders came to the Spring Fair. One month away.

She was shaking with cold now, yet still she waited. She'd been taught – long ago, by those who knew this well – that pleasure delayed was pleasure doubled. Yet she waited for another reason also. When she removed her shift, she would see her body once more. There were no mirrors in the convent. She, who used to stare at herself delightfully in the finest Venetian glass, had not looked in one in the nineteen years since she took Holy Orders. The body that princes once fought for had changed.

She shivered again, not only from the cold. It was the moment. The water, perfect. The mingled scent, perfect. Her body . . . as it was. She crossed her arms, gripped cloth at her broad hips, pulled it up, over. Looked.

A month before, in a village near Targoviste, a statue of the Virgin had blossomed stigmata. The wounds of Christ the Son appearing on Mary the Mother, on each of her palms, at her ankles, weeping blood. Thousands had come to marvel, from all over Wallachia, some even struggling across the passes from Transylvania, despite the hardest winter in anyone's memory.

How many would come to see her wounds?

She lowered herself slowly into the tub, groaning at the exquisite pain. Finally she lay back and traced her fingertip along purple lines that stood proud of the reddening skin, aching with the sudden heat. Aching more with the memory of the man who gave them to her. Aching most when she recalled the other ways he touched her.

Water flooded her, penetrated her, released her, her wounds and her memories. Scent and heat made her mind slide, away from pain, to pleasure; thence to joy. Her orphans growing stronger with each day, just three lost to the winter, brought too late even for her care. The rest, all five, thriving. On her cot lay a plait woven of rosemary sprigs, that the littlest, Florica, had given her only that morning. It was threaded through with a lock of her wheaten hair. The child could spare it, had as much as she herself once had, before she married Christ.

She felt the hammering on the convent's main door at the same time she heard it. Three strikes that travelled through stone, up wood, rippling the surface of the water. But she did not open her eyes. The Matins bell had called the novitiates to prayer some time before. No

visitor would be admitted to the convent till dawn, however great their hurt.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Whoever it was did not use the iron knocker upon the wood. And then, recognising the sound, she sat up. She had heard it once before, on the day the scars were made.

The door was being struck with the pommel of a sword.

She heard the distant scrape of the door grille, the whining of Old Kristo the gatekeeper, then a low voice, commanding. She could not hear the words. But she knew what they were. She'd always believed she would hear them, one day.

'By order of the Voivode, I am here to arrest . . .'

The gate was opening and she was rising. There were sheets to dry herself upon, but she barely used them. It was more important to be clothed, concealed. Then, just as she was about to pull the shift over her head, she stopped. For the man whose metal-shod feet were now striking sparks on the courtyard flagstones probably knew who she was. He was coming to ask her about the last man to see her naked, the first to see her wounds. The man whose corpse she had prepared for the grave five years before.

All things end. Nineteen years of life in the convent were over. Nun, Abbess, these were just titles, already in the past with her others – Slave, Concubine, Royal Mistress. She was only sorry that she wouldn't be there to see her orphans grow stronger; but others would take care of them, sure.

She was not shivering yet. And suddenly she wondered how it would be to see herself again, naked in the mirror of another man's eyes.

Throwing the shift aside, she picked up the plait woven of rosemary and young girl's hair. Rosemary, she'd told Frolica only that morning, was the herb of remembrance. So now, holding it before her, she remembered everything and turned smiling to the opening door . . .

In the perfect darkness of the dungeon, the knight was hunting.

He did not move. Not simply because he was near blind, that did not matter much there. But every terrain required a different skill, each type of prey a different technique. Some quarry you pursued, some you drew. In the five years he had lived in constant night, he had learned the way of this, his world, as once he had read valleys and forests, deserts and seas. He had shaped it, from what was available to him. The floor reeds had not been changed since the autumn and so

were thick with filth; when the temperature rose above freezing, as it had that day, it made them malleable. So he had fashioned passages from them that a creature, as hungry as himself, might follow. They twisted and bent round the cell, a labyrinth with him at its centre. He had not made it too easy, all game was wary; but the starving less so, and there was mouldy bread at his feet.

He waited, but not in the dungeon. There was no need for him there. A part of him had to stay to listen but the rest was free to depart, to other hunting grounds, bigger game. He did not just think himself elsewhere, in memory. He went wherever he chose, with whomever he chose.

One was always there. As boy, as youth, as man.

Yes! They are in the Fagaras now, among those peaks, chasing down those valleys. They are boys, barely ten, but still they have left the others far behind, for they have the best horses and the greatest skill in handling them. And they have the desire, not just for the kill. For the beating of the other. Winning is all, for now, for ever.

Their quarry is boar. There is one that they saw and lost in this valley before, a monstrous silverback with tusks like scimitars.

The boar breaks cover. Their spurs redden with blood from their stallions' flanks as they strive to reach it first. There is a grove just ahead, whose interlocked boughs will not admit hunter and steed, only prey. So they kick in their heels, stride matching stride. It is a long throw, a last chance. He takes it, throws and his steel blade slices over the silvered back, its razored edge drawing blood, slowing, not halting. His companion, his brother in all but blood, has thrown also, but thrown true. The boar tumbles, over and over, until the tree that would have saved it, halts it. It is dying, yet it lives. And for the last moments of its life it is at its most dangerous.

'Don't,' he murmurs, in sudden fear, as his companion slides from his saddle, another boar spear already in his hand. 'Wait till it is dead.'

It was strange. Most faces faded from memory, from dreams. Even the most familiar – parents, children, lovers, enemies. His never had.

He pauses now, looks up from beneath that black hair, with those green eyes. The smile comes. 'How many times, Ion,' he says, in that soft voice. 'You have to look into their eyes as they die.'

In memory indistinguishable from dream, his friend advances. The boar rises, bellowing, blood pouring from its mouth, the shaft quivering in its side. It charges and the boy plants himself, his spear couched like a lance in the lists. As the beast swerves, the boy steps to the side,

thrusts. The leaf-shaped blade takes the animal in its chest but doesn't halt it. Steel precedes shaft into flesh as the boar pushes the length of the weapon up its body. Only when it reaches the steadying hand, when it has absorbed almost all the wood, does it stop, lay its great head down, lower a tusk onto the hand, gently, like a caress.

'Die well,' says the Dragon's son, smiling.

Far above, a bolt was shot. It was a whisper of a sound but a shriek in that silence. While he'd been hunting elsewhere, he had heard another beast, snuffling its way out of the sluice pipe. The noise had sent it back. He cried out now in frustration, his chance for fresh flesh gone – all because they were bringing in a prisoner, one destined for a cell far above his own.

Then another door opened and he jerked his face up, as if to see through stone. Rarely did a prisoner make it to the second level. Someone of higher rank perhaps, or more heinous crime? He sighed. At the second level, a grille would be cut high into the wall and though his eyesight was poor now, he'd still be able to see the patch of sky change shade. Better, he'd be able to scent . . . a hound's fur wet with snow, applewood burning, mulling wine. Hear . . . the snort of a horse, the cry of a baby, laughter at some jest.

Then, on the level directly above his, a bolt was worked loose. He was excited now, lost prey forgotten. It was not his feeding day; yet someone *was* coming. He lifted his eyelids open with his fingers and thumbs to make sure he didn't blink. The rare flicker of light beyond the opened grille was all that stopped him going totally blind.

He knelt, pressing his lips to the ceiling, moistening them on wet moss. The cell door above creaked open. But then he heard just a single footfall . . . and cowered down, crying out. For guards always came in pairs. Only a priest or a killer would come alone.

His eyes were wide now without need of fingers, terror in the sound of that one man approaching the round stone in the floor. For if he was a killer and not a priest . . .

He groped before him for the sharpened bone, clutched it, pressed the sharpened tip into the pulse in his neck. He had seen prisoners tortured to death. He had tortured some himself. He had always vowed that he would not die that way.

Yet he did not thrust. He could have killed himself before, ended this misery. But to do so before he had made his last confession? Then the torments he'd suffered for these five years would last for all eternity. Worse! Unless he was absolved of his sins, the suicide's fate

would be as nothing to his – for the ninth, last and deepest circle of hell, just like the oubliette in the castle of Bucharest, was reserved only for traitors.

He heard the clink of metal. It was not the bolt on the grille being pulled back. It was a bar slipped under a hook. And then the stone, that had not been lifted in five years, was.

The torch flaring above him was like a desert sun at noon. A dark shape held it high. Priest or killer?

He pressed bone tip into flesh. Yet still he could not drive it in, could only croak his one, his ultimate hope. ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.’

For a moment of silence, nothing moved. Then an arm reached slowly down . . .