

An excerpt from
Wolves of Pavlava
by Adriana Renescu

PART I

1960

1.

Mother Ierusalima of Pavlava was dead.

The Colonel had delivered the news while slouched at his desk, looking gray and miserable in the cold of the winter morning, his voice still locked inside his throat, barely audible over the sound of a shovel scraping the snow in the courtyard outside the French windows.

The only response that came from Captain Pavel Corbu, who stood in the middle of bare parquet floor, was the creaking of the new leather straps of his new uniform with new captain's tabs. What he wanted was an answer to his silent question as to why the death of this nun—of whom he knew nothing—elicited the early morning summons to the cavernous office of this powerful man—a sacred cow, or rather bull, of the Old Guard; so powerful that he was known in the shadowy world of the Ministry of the Interior of the People's Republic of Romania, simply as the Colonel.

How did a twenty nine year old nun die in her cell, in a monastery isolated in a deep valley within the forests of the Carpathian Mountains?

“She tripped on her rosary and got her throat cut,” the Colonel answered his own

question, punctuating his statement with a tobacco-thickened laugh and a ragged cough. He reached out for the cigarette smoldering at the edge of his desk, the glowing red tip threatening to ignite the fumes of furniture polish and floor wax. But he didn't take it to his lips. Instead, he held it in front of his face as he swiveled in his chair with leather cushions and stared at the two, side-by-side portraits on the wall behind him—on the right, Piotr Illich Lenin and on the left, Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin.. The cold light of winter coming through the window panes scathed the glass of the portraits and obscured the beatific smile of the one on the right and the Tartar squint of the one on the left.

The story Pavel Corbu had heard told many times was that in 1953, on the day Comrade Stalin died, the Colonel had cried like a baby.

The Colonel's hand shook, and the ashes fell on the front of his uniform. He flicked the ashes off him and drew from the strong Russian tobacco, grimaced and turned back to his desk. He stamped out the cigarette into the ashtray. "Sit down, son," he urged.

Corbu sat down, his posture still at attention.

The Colonel's dark eyes were on him, a thin smile fleeting across his face. "So, you're a captain now. Too young. But then, at your age, I had already been arrested and almost swung from the noose." The small eyes passed over him, disapprovingly. "The *new* Communist warrior for the revolution. A little bit less elegant and particular would be good."

Captain Pavel Corbu glanced at his own reflection shifting into the glass panes covering the bookcases, to observe what the Colonel was seeing. And there he was--young for his rank and looking younger, his dark hair trimmed close to the scalp, his eyes a faded, cold blue. He was angular and big boned. And yes, he was particular about his uniform and looks.

The Colonel let out a snort: "Be careful." He took a new cigarette out of the pack in front of him, torched the end with the blue flame of the steel lighter said to have been made from a piece of a German panzer on the Russian Front, and then drew from the burning tobacco long and deep. Convulsive, deep cough rattled inside his chest. He let out a long stream of smoke.

"So..." the Colonel said after a while, "you wonder what this is all about. I had hoped that you would be more vigilant. But, no matter." He pushed forward a folder of the color of mustard. "You'll read her dossier. And read it carefully, in great detail." With his tobacco stained finger he pushed the folder to the edge. "Take it!"

Corbu stood up and picked up the folder. He opened it and read aloud the name on the cover sheet, putting a question mark after it. "Zoë Vardaru?"

“Zoë Vardaru, younger sister of Alexandra Vardaru, who came back from Rome with the title of Princess Galata and a young son, Master Titus, the son of this same Prince Galata. You’ve heard of Alexandra Vardaru-Galata?”

Corbu was loath to admit that he hadn’t. He kept a blank face, making a neutral gesture with his hand.

“Hm,” the Colonel harrumphed. “Nothing special, I suppose—even if we believe the existence of the conveniently deceased Roman prince Galata.” He tapped the cigarette on the edge of the table and the ashes fell on the floor. “Except,” he paused for effect. “She’s General Vorontov’s whore. You do know who Vorontov is, don’t you? Please, do not disappoint me.”

“General Arkadii Vorontov, Soviet military attaché,” Corbu recited. He had sat back down and was now leafing through the dossier.

“There’s something that you won’t see in there, Comrade. Someone is paying a lot of money so that young Titus would be comfortable and unmolested, and protected from the justice of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Corbu’s gaze flew up to the Colonel, trying to discern whether the old Communist disapproved. There had been a distinct note of sarcasm in the recitation. The thin face had a cold look of disgust; and something else. Disappointment? Bitterness?

“Wealth they left behind in the West?” Corbu chanced. He pointed at a page he had looked over. “It says here that they owned, while in Rome, a very fancy, historical house, Villa Mignoli, on the Aventine; a rich area of Rome. And they sold it before they left Rome. They didn’t bring the money back with them.”

“Yes. And, it is our duty, as defenders of the people’s common good to ensure that one way or another this money is returned to those they have exploited to get it.” He made a face, the flexible skin creating a passing mask of sarcasm. “But, I digress,” he said suddenly. “That is not where the problem is. The problem is Zoë Vardaru in her incarnation as Mother Ierusalima. When she became a good Orthodox nun in Pavlava, it was a bit of a surprise—she was an even better whore than Alexandra and she also came back from Rome a Roman Catholic, but that’s all. As a matter of fact, when she became Mother Ierusalima, I thought it was a good thing. One problem less, I thought. Until after years of silence she started to see visions of archangels on the ceiling. Three of them, no less. Michael, Gabriel and—“ He waved the hand with the cigarette in a circle, looking up at the ceiling. “—and whatever is the name of the third one.”

“Raphael.”

“Ah...” The Colonel started to sing the air of an old drinking song, the voice like broken glass: “*Saint Peter and Archangel Mike opened a tavern in the sky, hey, hey, yoh, yoh...*” He paused. “She told her followers that the trio from the sky gave her a prophecy for the Romanian people. That’s the rumor being spread out of Pavlava by the subversive forces swirling around this. What the subject of the prophecy is, we don’t know; although I can imagine.”

Pavel Corbu allowed a little shrug of his left shoulder and the leather strap creaked again.

The Colonel raised his hand holding the cigarette, the thin wrist and hand protruding from the large gap of the sleeve. One of the brass buttons was missing. “Now to the heart of the matter. The rumor of the prophecy has reached Bucharest; it’s no longer just barefoot peasants bleating around a nunnery.” He paused for effect. “This business at Pavlava has a string attached to it that goes all the way to *Rome*; and beyond that.”

“Rome?” Corbu echoed, his eyes on his mentor.

“The *Vatican*.” The Colonel puffed a few times from the cigarette, again appearing to cogitate.

“Pavlava is Orthodox,” Corbu countered quietly. “All the villages and towns around are Orthodox.” His voice trailed and he shrugged again.

The Colonel made circles in the air with his cigarette. “Do you think those oxen out there know the difference?” He snorted with contempt. “They’ve been coming from everywhere to hear about her visions and her prophecies and have her heal them of pimples and warts. Now they gather for her burial expecting the earth to stop, the sun to dance in the sky and the world to be covered with darkness; then, they’ll go home and kiss her icon and the sun will come out again. A miracle!” The Colonel leaned forward, the cigarette between his fingers, the smoke rising and filling the space in front of him with the acrid smell. “Mother Ierusalima is the string to Rome. This business at Pavlava happened because someone was plucking at that string to see what sings.” He paused. “Master Titus is another string to Rome and the West. Someone might strum on that string one day. One day... when he grows up.”

Corbu nodded and felt a tingle at the base of his skull.

The Colonel stood up and paced behind his desk, his steps sounding hollow on the parquet floor. Once a straight backed man, now his shoulders and back were rounded and bent. “Does the name of Dan Mazilu mean anything to you?”

“Yes. Counter-revolutionary fascist criminal brigand,” Corbu recited the full litany of evils in earnest.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” The Colonel stopped his pacing and turned to face Corbu. “Dan Mazilu is thought to operate around Pavlava.” He came around the desk and started to pace again, drawing from his cigarette with a pensive mien. “The funeral is next Thursday. Mazilu might be among them; or his men. Our Soviet comrades are watching this.” He walked up to Corbu and put his hand on his shoulder. Corbu jumped to his feet. “I have chosen you to take care of this. This business must be wiped out, from the root.” He made a gesture with his hand to indicate pulling something up and squashing it in the fist. “We have complete confidence in you. I have confidence in you, Comrade. I don’t have to tell you what you need to do. Erase Mother Ierusalima off the face of the earth.” He looked long at Corbu. “Anything you find, anything you have to say, you tell me first before you get your report going. Understood, Comrade Captain?”

Comrade Captain stiffened at attention and nodded.

The Colonel’s drifted towards the window. The scraping of the shovel had stopped. “We have information that Ierusalima kept a diary. The prophecy is written there. There are whispers about it everywhere, and that concerns us greatly. Whispers make it a dangerous piece of work; whispers mean that there are those who believe that it can be used by many, in many ways. When her room was searched by those idiots who botched up the whole thing, nothing was found.” He took a piece of paper out from his tunic’s pocket. “Except for this.” He lifted it up in the air for Corbu to see. On it was the hand painted picture of a blue and red winged creature with dragon tail and the head of a shrieking raptor. Its talons were stretched out, and they held a sword. “Do you know what this is?”

Corbu stared down on it.

“It’s a wyvern. It was the only thing found in her room, under the bed. What do you think it is?”

“A symbol of something...” Corbu tried. “A message?”

The Colonel put the paper back in his pocket. “Find the diary, whatever it takes. And when you find it, you bring it to me, and to me only. Got it? *You* look for it and you find it.”

“Yes, Comrade Colonel,” Corbu saluted and a wave of exhilaration filled him. The Colonel was showing great trust in him. If he did this well, he could be on his way to major. And then to... Best not to think too far ahead.

“Don’t forget Dan Mazilu,” the Colonel added.

Corbu nodded. One could not help but think ahead.

“And now,” the Colonel said and picked up the phone receiver, “you come with me to

visit a couple of spiders. We go to them this time so that you can see and listen. And learn.”



The black, Russian made Tchaïka drove up to the two-storied house nestled in a quiet side of Bucharest, screened from the street by a high wall and solid iron gate. The gate opened inward, and then closed behind the car as it turned inside the quiet garden with leafless trees, the snow neatly piled up against the walls. The windows were shuttered and a Securitate man in uniform loitered at the door. At the sight of the official car, he snapped at attention, in a pose somewhere between a bow to a Turkish pasha and a salute to a Field Marshal.

Corbu looked with disapproval over the large, elegant baronial house that contained only one man, while in the rest of Bucharest several families crowded in one house or apartment. This was where an avowed foe of communist struggle and collaborator with the enemies in the West, was under house arrest; while the workers of the country lived in miserable abodes. Corbu felt the outrage in his throat. Now a captain, he was beginning to discover a lot of deviations like that.

One adapts.

Archbishop Valerian Sidagi, deposed head of the Roman Catholic diocese of Bucharest, received the Colonel and the young Captain in a small study at the back of the house, filled with fine, but unkempt furniture. The pink brocade upholstery, discolored and frayed, gave the room a peculiar feminine feel. The Archbishop was seated behind the carved mahogany desk, leaning back in his chair, his long, angular figure encased in a black cassock that bore no sign of his rank.

But then, he would not be allowed to wear the signs of his rank. At least that much.

The archbishop did not rise, nor did he offer a greeting. The Colonel sat down without invitation, heaving himself into the armchair at an angle with the desk. Corbu remained standing. The Colonel took out his cigarette case, opened it, extracted a cigarette, put it between his lips and snapped shut the case. “A light?”

The archbishop pushed a box of matches across the desk. The Colonel took it, lit his cigarette and then threw the box back on the desk. “I’m sure you’ve heard,” the Colonel said,

smoke coming out of his mouth with his words, “that Mother Ierusalima is dead.”

“No, I have not,” the archbishop answered. There was no emotion on the bony face and the voice was soft and even. The long fingered hands were draped over the chair’s armrest.

“She’d been raising quite a ruckus around Pavlava. A lot of people think she’s a saint.”

“How do you plan to change their mind?” The voice was sardonic.

“We start with you, archbishop.”

“I have no interest in the matter. She’s in an Orthodox monastery, and her jabbering is a matter for His Beatitude, the Patriarch.”

“I hear she came back from Rome a Catholic.”

The sharp blue eyes examined the Colonel, and then the young officer in his new uniform with new captain’s tabs. The light of the cold day filtered through the window covered with ice flowers and fell on the archbishop’s face like a sheath of glass. “That was then.”

“She had vision of archangels,” the Colonel continued.

“I have no knowledge of any of it. In its titanic wisdom, the People has put me under house arrest and isolated me.”

“Do not insult my intelligence. Word does get through to you. The prophecy of the three Archangels; we know that one exists.”

“The Church has not spoken on whether the visions were real, or from God, or from Satan; let alone who the apparitions were.” Sidagi was looking at the two men in front of him with angry, cold blue eyes. “As for the so called prophecy...” He shrugged his shoulders. “You tell me, Colonel. This is the first I hear about it. What else?” The mock in Sidagi’s voice was unrelenting.

“Who is the wyvern?”

Sidagi answered with a pedantic mocking note in his voice: “It’s a sort of griffon with wings, dragon tail and talons.”

Corbu looked down on the pattern of the Persian rug at his feet.

“That’s *what* it is, not who it is,” the Colonel allowed himself a vague smile. He echoed Corbu’s own thoughts. “Mother Ierusalima used it as a religious symbol; it was a message to someone.”

Sidagi let out a derisive sound.

“I think,” the Colonel continued evenly, “that this whole thing is part of the Church’s game to undermine the communist struggle. I think the wyvern is the symbol of a secret

subversive society you have created. She was recruited in this society under the pretext of conversion to Catholicism, and then she was sent back to Romania to gather converts into this criminal group. The visions and prophecy are part of the recruitment strategy.”

Sidagi let out an impatient sigh. “Are you writing a comedy of the absurd, Colonel?”

The Colonel shook his head and spread out his hands with a look of sheepish resignation on his face. “This is the theory being advanced by some less refined in thinking than you and me.” He clasped his hands. “Who was the priest who recruited her?”

“First, we don’t *recruit*...”

“The Church *militant*?”

Sidagi closed his eyes for a second in a gesture of exasperation. “Second, the priest is out of your reach, Colonel, believe me.”

“Humor me, Excellency; I am a man of insatiable curiosity and I never let a piece of information pass by me. I am like a dog; I never pass by a scrap, even if I just bury it in the garden.”

Sidagi relented with a grimace. “The name of the priest was Ruggiero Carmine Rantolla; a Sicilian; now, His Excellency, Ruggiero Rantolla, archbishop of Palestra.”

“Palestra? Where is that?”

The archbishop smiled amused. “Planning to call on him there? It’s nowhere, Colonel; it’s a titular see; doesn’t really exist.”

“Would he remember Zoë Vardaru?”

This time, the Archbishop’s answer came after a hanging pause: “I would imagine so.” Then, he asked: “What did she die of at twenty nine or so?”

“Poor health. Now,” the Colonel raised his voice slightly. “Let’s return to the prophecy.”

Archbishop Valerian Sidagi stood up and came around the desk. He was a tall, angular man, towering over Corbu who was still standing. His eyes were now both jeering and coldly suspicious, as if he was reading something inside the young man in dapper uniform. “Neither her ramblings, nor her imaginings, nor her passing away took place as a Roman Catholic.”

“Do you believe in any of it?”

“Let’s be serious.”

“Then, it would not trouble the Catholic Church, and you as its representative, to say so in an official announcement.”

“I am no longer in position to do so.”

“Rome still recognizes you as archbishop. You will be reinstated for the occasion. Will you write such a paper?”

“It’s called an interdict. And yes, gladly.”

The Colonel raised his eyebrows, but made no comment on the archbishop sudden willingness to cooperate.

The Colonel stood up and concealed a grunt and attempted to straighten his thin body lost inside the uniform. A purple color flushed his sallow face.

Sidagi threw the Colonel a long, sardonic look. “What about the boy, Titus? How does he fit in this presumed conspiracy against the state?”

The Colonel took the gloves out of his pocket, preoccupied with smoothing them out. “Do I detect an interest in the little snake?” He lifted his gaze.

The archbishop looked back at the Colonel with unconcealed hostility.

The Colonel sighed. “The boy needs to be gelded so that he grows up just another dumb ox; so that he does not beget other little snakes or clever ideas.” He laughed with a thin pain in his voice: “Too bad this is not the court of the sultans—we would geld him for real, make him a vizier and be done with it. As it is, we’ll make a monk out of him.” He let out another chuckle. “I hear he’s quite a strapping young man already; and quite beautiful like the rest of his family. He will make a nice ornament in a church.” The Colonel put on his left glove. “But, not in your church, archbishop. I am giving him to the Orthodox Church.”

“You should destroy him, Colonel,” the archbishop answered with a strangely quiet voice. “If you don’t, he will become the seed of your destruction. You won’t destroy Mother Ierusalima as long as he’s around.” Sidagi shrugged. “But, you won’t destroy Titus Galata; he’s the calf of gold.”

“Like all of your kind, you know too much.”

“At the end, you are all greedy; greedy little peasants, who revolted not out of outrage, but out of envy, and destroyed their masters out of envy; now, you want to be lords.”

“Go to Hell, priest.”

Outside, in the cold, clean light, Corbu took in a deep breath. The air rushed in his lungs. He exhaled. There...

“Bastard,” the Colonel rumbled pulling on his gloves. He was shivering now. The driver opened the car door.

“He was willing enough to prepare the interdict.”

The Colonel took out a cigarette and the driver sparked a lighter for him. He drew from the cigarette as if it was his last breath of air, and said, his face veiled in smoke: “From all the enemies of our world, and from all the creepy things, I fear most Sidagi’s kind of enemy; refined, clever, and of a faith transformed by ambition.” The cigarette smoke veiled his face and seemed to get caught in his rare, white hair. He looked hard at the young man. “Also, I value them as the greatest allies, if I could win one of them to be that.” The old man peered at his protégé, his head veiled in smoke, his eyes bright and ferreting. “This one knows a lot more than we will ever know. Be careful.”

Corbu didn’t answer.



The Colonel stopped at the double leafed door on the second floor and leaned on the wall with one hand, trying to catch his broken breath, his eyes closed with the effort of walking up the flight of steps. Captain Pavel Corbu came up from behind him attentive to the sounds and smells of the mansion that had once belonged in its entirety to the Vardarus. He imagined that it had been filled with luxury and light, and the smell of perfume. Now it was like all other such houses in Bucharest—dark and gray, lightless and choked in a rancid smell of poor foods and of too many people living in one place. From behind doors lining the hallways and up the dark stairwell guarded by a lightless chandelier seeped the vulgar sounds of communal living—radios, voices, clattering dishes, a sewing machine, a woman bickering. He listened the tinny sound of music coming from behind the double leafed door—Swan Lake.

Corbu pushed the red button above the small square of paper that announced with faded ink that A. Galata lived behind the double leafed door.

“It’s an apartment of five rooms,” the Colonel had rumbled on the way there, “and only Alexandra, the boy and an old servant live here, quite against the directives of the housing administration; while in the rest of the house you have one family per room.” He shook his head with disgusted disapproval. “We allow the privilege, we, the ones who fought against the privileged classes.”

One observes and adapts. Corbu pushed the doorbell.

It rang loudly into what sounded like a cavern. All noises behind the doors up the

hallways ceased. However, the lilting music of the big swans continued, louder in the deepening hush.

The door was opened by an old woman; Corbu assumed that it was a servant; and he bristled some more. The black eyes examined the two officers standing in front of her.

“Is Comrade Alexandra Galata home?” Corbu asked, as the Colonel stood like a shadow behind him.

The old servant led them through a dark foyer and an etched glass door into the salon. “I’ll see if the *Princess* can see you,” she said, emphasizing cantankerously the title, and slipped away through another door, leaving Colonel and Captain at the edges of a blue room, the light pouring through the tall French windows, scintillating with the blue and gold of the furniture, brocaded walls and porcelains. From the high ceiling hung a chandelier, a confection made of a thousand pieces of shimmering white and blue glass, some in the form of leaves, other like flowers. The Persian rug stretched from wall to wall and it was a sea of blues.

“What do you want?” a man in the uniform of a Soviet General greeted them in Russian from across the sea of blues. His voice was both snarling and rude. He was a tall man, blond, and quite young for his rank. He held a cigarette in an onyx holder between his thumb and index finger, the pinky poised.

“Comrade General!” Corbu saluted smartly.

The Colonel did not. He drifted to the window.

The General drew from his cigarette, which he held with unexpected daintiness, his blue gaze expressionless. He looked at the old man standing at the window. The Colonel was preoccupied with something outside the window, while a dry cough rattled inside his chest.

“Do you have a cold?” the General asked, sounding irritated.

“No,” the Colonel answered, in Russian. “Lung cancer.”

The General recoiled visibly, as if the contagion was spreading his way. He sat down on the blue settee at a good distance from the diseased being.

A thin woman dressed in a black fur, brimmed hat and high heeled shoes came into the salon from the adjoining dining room, looking as if she was ready to go out. She had the face of an icon, long, oval and pale, the nose straight, the eyebrows arched and long, the eyes a deep, lustrous black. Her mouth, red and curved, was tightly closed in anger.

Alongside her was came a boy of no more than ten, if that, protected against the cold outside by a little fur coat and fur hat.. He boy peered at Corbu with feline eyes of gray and

green. That gaze startled Corbu even more than the elegant woman. The boy slipped behind her, and spared Corbu the green stare.

“What brings you here, my dear Colonel?” the woman asked, her voice conveying a light French accent; an affectation Corbu would’ve found laughable in anyone else but this woman. The aristocratic accent belonged to her.

The General watched, smoking.

“My dear Alexandra,” the Colonel sighed, as if the sight of her was a balm to his aching body.

“How is your health?” Alexandra asked solicitously. “Please sit down.” She turned to the boy. “Titus, love, go outside to play; but don’t get dirty.” She signaled the servant, who took the boy by the hand and led him out of the room. “We’re going to the opera,” she added, now speaking to the Colonel.

“We’re going to be late, Alexandra Petrovna” the General rumbled in French, indicating that he did understand Romanian.

“This is a short visit,” the Colonel declared, and remained standing. “As for my health...” he waived his hand, dismissing the concern. “I bring distressing news--your sister, Mother Ierusalima passed away two days ago.”

Alexandra started to put on her gloves. Her face registered no emotion, other than vague puzzle.

“Why does the death of that holy idiot bring here someone like you, Colonel? I expect a note from Mother Vadosia would’ve sufficed.”

The Colonel took out a cigarette, but he did not light it. “Because of the visions and a secret prophecy that she may have told a selected few; may be just *one* person. May be she told you.”

Alexandra Galata let out a great laugh and sat down on the settee next to the General, her left leg over her right, her finely shaped foot in fine patent shoes swinging lightly. “Oh, Colonel! How can you say such a thing with a straight face?” Her voice was now pleasant, almost sweet.

“She told you nothing?”

“You, Colonel, know better than anyone else that I have not seen my sister since the day she left for Pavlava. We were not on speaking terms at that time; we still not in speaking terms.” She allowed her perfect mouth to curl in a smirk.

“What was the reason for the estrangement between the two of you?”

“It was territorial; the territory being a bed.” Then her mien changed to something akin to angry outrage. “She’s brought nothing but trouble and disaster, no matter where she was. You are here because of another disaster she has wrought upon us, I suspect.”

“Do you believe your dear sister had visions?”

“As much as you believe, Colonel.” She sounded mocking.

“Perhaps I believe that while there were no visions, there *is* a prophecy; and while I don’t believe in prophecies, I believe that there is a subversive reality behind them.”

“You give her too much importance.”

“Tell me, Alexandra—who is the wyvern?”

If Alexandra Galata had been taken aback by the question, or if she had an inkling of the meaning of the words, the moment passed over her face like a fleeting shadow of ice. “A wyvern?” she echoed.

Corbu suspected that the echo was to give her time to think her answer.

“It is the symbol of the Catholic Church’s victory over the proletariat, isn’t it?” the Colonel prompted. “Your sister was the head of a secret subversive society.”

“Who came up with that nonsense?” She twisted her mouth again, mocking.

“It is serious *nonsense*,” the Colonel said very quietly. “Some believe this.” He took out of his pocket the piece of paper with the black and red wyvern and raised it in front of Alexandra. Her face had an air of bemusement on it; it was too perfect; to Corbu it revealed that she was hiding recognition. “I hear,” the Colonel said watching her carefully, “that your sister showed this to peasants and told them to look for this creature to give them a sign of the Anti-Christ.”

Alexandra turned to the Russian General and said in French: “Did you hear that, Arkadii Andreevici? A female Rasputin.”

The General looked on, and to Corbu’s eye, he was pretending incomprehension.

She let out a sound of contempt. “The idiots would be waiting for eternity, long past the time you and I would even walk this earth, until anything that she conjured would come to pass.” She curled her lips in disgust. “Especially a wyvern.”

“You seem quite certain.”

“Have I ever deceived you, Colonel?”

The Colonel held her gaze. “No matter.” He tore the paper in small pieces, which he then drizzled into a large crystal bowl. With one finger he stirred them around. He let out a sigh. “We

are placing you under house arrest, for your protection.”

“I see...” She didn’t seem to be particularly concerned. She had a greatly amused glint in her eyes as she glance slipped past the Soviet General, as if to remind the Colonel of her relationship with someone who was not only higher than the Colonel, but as a Soviet general, a lot higher than the whole Romanian apparatus. “Protection against what?”

“From the wyvern,” the Colonel answered softly. “We are so concerned for your safety—and so are our Soviet comrades—that we are going to place within the protective walls of Pavlava.”

Alexandra Galata at first stared at the Colonel incredulously, and then quick understanding came to her. Her head shook slightly. She turned to the General, her eyes wide, questioning. The General flicked the cigarette into the ashtray and said in French: “We’re going to be late at the opera, Alexandra Petrovna.”

“What about all this?” Her voice wavered. Her hand circled her possessions with a fluttering gesture. The skin of her face had turned ashen under the powder, her eyes filled with the agitation of someone who finally began to understand the enormity and reality of what was happening. “Arkadii...” Her voice called, suddenly pleading.

The General shook his head and said, again in French: “I don’t understand what this old man is talking about. We’ll deal with it after the opera.”

Corbu understood that the Russian had no intention to interfere and save his elegant whore. No doubt he had had foreknowledge of all this. Of course he had. No one would’ve dared otherwise.

The Colonel acted as if the Russian General was invisible. “None of this is yours; Alexandra. Not the apartment, not the furniture, not the money. You have nothing, Princess. All this exists because of your son, Titus. And that is an illusion also. You’ve lived on borrowed time.”

Alexandra Galata started, as if she had suddenly remembered some obscure detail that had slipped her mind, and that could possibly save her: “What about Titus? Is he coming to Pavlava also? If you do that, then--”

The Colonel interrupted her. “A strapping young man like that, among consecrated virgins? Would I put such a temptation in their midst? Titus Galata stays here,” the Colonel informed quietly. “Please be ready to leave for Pavlava by next Sunday.”

The Colonel ended his statement with a most gallant bow.

He left without another word, with Corbu in tow.

Corbu felt a great glow of satisfaction in his very gut.

In the narrow garden in front of the house, Titus Galata's strangely alien eyes followed them slowly.

As the car speeded down the empty boulevard, the Colonel lit his second cigarette, taking in small puffs, his lungs incapable of drawing in more than that. "She won't last long." He looked dreamily out the window. "Two down, one to go."

Corbu shifted his weight. "Is there really a secret society?"

The Colonel let out a long stream of smoke. "If you don't believe in prophecies, and you believe in conspiracies, yes, there is. And you being a rising star in the communist-socialist firmament, I suggest you firmly believe what I tell you." The voice brooked no further argument.

But, Corbu was not satisfied. "You tore the paper."

"Because it means nothing. You heard the whore. This one time she told the truth."

Except, this time, Corbu did not believe his commander and mentor.