

# HUNTING STRIGOI



VANYA DIMOVA

# **Hunting Strigoi**

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Vanya Dimova

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## ***Mission One***

*The Den of Vampires*

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The fight occurred in an old apartment complex, older than the town itself. Sounds of crumbling plaster paired with a metallic clang echoed throughout the vast corridor. There was huffing and shouting—curse words so obscene they could make a sailor blush from the sheer profanity. Were it not for the pitch of her voice, one would never guess they were coming from a woman.

The woman in question: a dark-haired renegade, the height of an average middle schooler, and ferocity greater than an entire colosseum of warriors. She wore a black tracksuit, worn out by the years of battles. Her deep brown eyes had a hint of yellow in them, like a wildfire purging a forest. Her bangs were held by a few pins, allowing her to get a clear view of the monster ahead of her. It bore the features of a human, but inside, she knew there was only filth held up by an obscure sorcery.

She groaned, sweat dripping down her temples as she swung her sword against the creature again. The blade went right through it, leaving a trail of mud on the putrid floor. She spat another insult, her eyes gleaming with rage. What a waste of time, she thought as she dashed back to catch her breath. There was now a good six feet distance between them, and she noticed that as long as she didn't charge an attack, the golem didn't attempt to strike either. It stood there, idly, staring with its lifeless eyes.

He was once a man, now reduced to a

puppet. She sheathed her weapon—a machete adorned with runes foreign to any person fortunate enough not to have a meeting with the supernatural. It was a blade capable of cutting through anything—an essential part of a hunter’s arsenal—but it had no effect against sorcery.

“So, you’re not gonna let me pass through?” asked the huntress as she sat down with her legs crossed, raising an eyebrow with a tinge of mockery. “No response? I expected as much. You dim-wits aren’t well-known for being talkative.”

She unzipped her top, pulling out a flask from beneath it, whose contents were chugged down in the blink of an eye.

She held it upside down to check if there was anything left; the look of disappointment on her face confirmed there was not. “Guess I’ll have to sit and wait until you change your mind.” A response didn’t follow. “Any minute now,” she muttered to herself, resting her head in her palm as she stared up at the ceiling.

The creature stood still until a drop of water shook him. Another one came crashing down, tearing a piece of its “flesh,” and then another. The sprinklers had gone off, setting it into a fit of panic. Any attempt at running away was squandered in a matter of seconds as the pouring water reduced the monster into a pile of bubbling mud, in the middle of which stood a purple orb that served as its core, holding its human mold together.

The huntress promptly smashed it. Her smile twisted into a sadistic grin as she lifted her boot and smeared the gooey insides of the orb against the muddy pool of its former shell. Upon hearing an exclamation of shock and disgust, she looked up to see her partner's distraught expression.

"Eww, are those guts that came out of that thing?" He gagged. "I thought it was just a crystal with sparkly things that pop out when you crush them, not... this."

"Took you long enough," she dismissed his remark. "How long does it take to activate the stupid sprinklers?"

"You should be glad I'm helping you at all after you literally dragged me here!" he fumed, keeping his voice down. "You know I'm too afraid of leaving the house during the day, Dani. Because of you, I have a fear of sunlight. Of sunlight!"

"Yeah, you're probably the only vampire with agorophobia in this whole damn continent." Her chuckle was met with a glare. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you when we get back home, I promise. But until then, I'll need your help. We're hunting vampires. Who better to do the job with than a fellow bloodsucker, eh? We'll split the profit fifty-fifty, what do you say, Ian? Are you going to be my trusty sidekick for the mission?" She gave him a wink, knowing full well what the response would be.

"Heck no."

“*Jebote!*” She sighed, rolling her eyes. “Then why did you come all the way here if you’re not going to help?”

“You put me in the trunk of your shitty ‘98 Opel Corsa while I was asleep and drove me here against my will. You dare have the audacity to ask me such questions?”

Dani opened her mouth to say it wouldn’t happen again, but then remembered it was the third time she had done it. It wasn’t her fault he was so easy to kidnap. The dark circles forming under his eyes were proof of the countless hours he spent in front of a monitor, and once the effects of caffeine and energy drinks wore out, he was as good as dead when it came to waking him up. Sometimes even a swift slap to the face served merely as a tickle, causing him to unconsciously scratch his face, roll over, and continue with his slumber. Dani’s little sister, Nastja, would at times abuse this fact and draw obscenities on his face while he was out. She was once reprimanded for that, but it didn’t take long for Dani to join in.

“You have nothing better to do anyway,” the huntress continued, putting oil into the fire. “It’s not like you were busy working. I’m giving you an opportunity to make quick cash here,” she said without looking him in the eye, while carefully wiping the mud off her machete before putting it back in its scabbard.

“I’m in between jobs right now, FYI.”

“That’s just a better-sounding way of saying you’re unemployed.”

“Do you know how hard it is to find a job in the IT sector these days!?” he fumed.

“Keep your voice down, *budala*<sup>2</sup>,” she put her index finger in front of her lips, making a ‘shh’ sound. Her expression went from playful to staid, making the vampire flinch from the sheer coldness in her eyes. “We didn’t come here to bicker. We’ve got work to do.”

“Feel free to do it on your own.”

“Ian!” She spat his name through her teeth, the flame in her eyes flickering with each letter.

“Fine,” he muttered, trying to keep his cool. The woman was more than a head below him, but that didn’t stop her from sowing fear into people, even creatures of the night. “I’ll give you a hand, but then we’re driving home ASAP.”

“Deal.” She smiled, and without any delay, she handed him her phone before heading toward the staircase at the other end of the corridor. “Now read me the e-mail and let’s see what kind of vampires we’re dealing with.”

“How can you accept a request without even looking at the type of vampire you need to exterminate?” Ian rolled his eyes before putting on his glasses and sifting through the list.

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” Dani shrugged.

“Winter is coming, you know what that means.”

“You need to change your tires.”

“Exactly.”

The e-mail didn't have a name attached to it, only a location and links to news reports of the gruesome murders that took place in recent weeks in the town of Bayfield. The pictures were unsettling to look at. The sight of blood was abundant enough for Ian to make his stomach turn, even though his existence depended on drinking it to survive. He was never comfortable with hurting people, despite his nature, and instead of feeding on them directly, his resolve was to steal it from the hospital or, if push came to shove, drink his partner's when she offered it.

Ian skimmed through the photos in order to extract as much information as possible to determine what they were dealing with. There was a world of difference when it came from vampire to vampire. For example, the Chinese Jiangshi were creatures who fed on a person's life force instead of consuming their blood. One could use a mirror to scare them away or scatter a handful of coins to make them kneel and count them all, which slowed the creatures down and made them easy to kill.

He had once had the misfortune to encounter them after being dragged to yet another mission with Dani. He recounted the two of them running through an alleyway when the huntress tripped and fell face down in a puddle. All the quarters

from her pockets fell, dispersing around the concrete, and to her surprise, the Jiangshi had stood in his tracks. Ian also distinctly remembered how she patiently waited for it to reach for the last coin, only so she could kick them out of its hand and watch the creature start the process all over again. She cackled and then kicked the coins away again. After the fifth time, she grew bored and used her machete to detach the head from its body. It was a curious experience for Ian, but it also left him thinking whether or not she was the real monster in that situation.

“I can’t find anything,” said Ian after a short while as they ascended the stairs. “Though judging by the images, I doubt it’s gonna be a piece of cake. What if—” He felt a lump forming in his throat that prevented him from finishing his sentence.

“What?” Dani noticed the lack of footsteps following her.

“What if it’s an Upir?” Ian said with a tremor in his voice.

“So? I’ve hunted scarier things than an Upir,” she sneered. “What I still can’t wrap my head around is why there was a golem on the first floor. As far as I know, vampires can’t use spells.”

“If it’s one of the demons you keep talking about, I’m out.”

“It’s not a demon, budala. They are called ‘fake sorcerers,’” she argued.

“What does that even mean?” Ian left an

exasperated sigh. “What’s the difference between a real and a fake one?”

“The fake ones derive their powers from making a deal with a powerful old witch who lives in the forest, while the real ones...” She stopped herself as she remembered the promise she made. “Actually, never mind. I’m not supposed to tell.”

“It’s because you don’t know.”

“It’s not because I don’t know! I’m not going to tell you everything just because we’re friends.”

“Friends don’t kidnap each other!”

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Room 904 was on the ninth floor of the building, right in front of the broken elevator, between two dried-up ficus pots. When passing by, one could hear the murmur and subtle bickering.

There, hunched over the desk, with one hand drawing circles on the mousepad and the other scratching his dark, curly hair, sat a pale-looking man. His clothes were as ancient as his dialect, and his ragged teeth were as crooked as his character when one disturbed his long daily slumber.

“I cannot understand this stupid magic book for the life of me. It’s utterly broken!” fumed the man.

“Settle down, Matei,” his roommate said, trying to comfort him. “Remember what the human used to say when we had an issue with this strange

artifact?”

“Have you considered turning it on and off again?”

Matei pressed the laptop’s power button, effectively switching it off. He pressed it again, and to his delight, this time, it connected to the Wi-Fi. He then looked at the note left on the desk next to the computer, his eyes searching for the poorly made drawing of a browser with the words “for finding information” written underneath it.

It was by sheer coincidence—or one could say, a misfortune, that the bunch found themselves in Bayfield of all places. The ship they boarded way back at the beginning of the 20th century was set to arrive in New Orleans, but instead, due to an unpredictable sea storm, they spent the last hundred years in their coffins on the bottom of the ocean between corals and seashells, quite literally living under a rock. It was by the eruption of an earthquake, which shook them away from their prison and sent them to the shores of Colorado, that they could, at long last, see the light of day, or rather, luckily for them, the pale moonlight.

Matei began typing on the keyboard, slowly and carefully, glancing at the screen after each keystroke. He was the youngest and by far the only one willing to learn how to work with the “magic book”. By the words of his friend sitting next to him, it was nothing but modern gypsy witchcraft, and it was best they all avoided even touching the

“artifact” lest they get cursed.

“What got you so enamored with that thing?” he asked, keeping his distance as if the icons on the screen were going to pop out and hit him. “You’ve spent the last hour trying to operate it.”

“We must understand the ways of the new world, Gavril. It is the only way forward,” said Matei, somewhat absentmindedly. “It is a night for hunting, I’m trying to see if there are any virgins nearby.”

“Virgin blood doesn’t taste any better than regular one. You must stop believing in myths other vampires tell you,” Gavril scoffed.

“Says the man who believed his cousin was turned into a donkey.”

“I told him he should never have gotten involved with that gypsy girl! He didn’t listen, that fool! And now you’re going to get us cursed with that thing. Look at it! It doesn’t even have pages. What kind of witchcraft is that?”

“Quiet down,” Matei scolded him. “You’re going to wake up, Vladislav.”

“My apologies, but you should know better than to fool around with magic.”

“This is not magic. It’s called a computer, and humans use it to seek knowledge.”

Matei’s face lit up as he scrolled down the first page of the search results. He saw the title *Hot Virgins in Your Area*, and being the naive young vampire, he clicked on it, much to his dismay.

Gavril almost shrieked in indignation, slapping his friend on the back of his neck.

“What are these harlots?! You’re too young to look at such indecencies!”

“I’m only thirty-seven years younger than you!” Matei retorted, but that didn’t stop him from receiving another slap on the same spot.

“What are you two looking at?” a third, deeper voice called out upon entering the room. It belonged to Vladislav, the eldest of the three.

“Nothing,” the other two vampires answered in unison with the same note of penitence.

“The sun is soon to settle. You’d better get ready for the hunt,” said Vlad, heading to the fridge only to be met with nothing but empty shelves. He clicked his tongue in vexation before turning back to his roommates. “Did you drink all of the blood again?”

Matei pointed his finger at Gavril, saying it was him, to which his friend responded by repeating the same gesture, shifting the blame. Their act was acknowledged with an eye roll, followed by some words of disapproval in Romanian. Even after decades of living together, they still had the same quarrel concerning rations. Matei would argue that the blood would go bad if he didn’t make use of it, but Gavril countered that they wouldn’t have that problem if he simply remembered to put it in the fridge.

Their dispute was broken by a loud knock on

the front door. They ignored it. The knock turned into a kick and then a yell. Fearing it might be an angry neighbor, they decided to keep silent.

“I know you’re there; I can hear you!” an angry female voice shouted.

“There’s no one home,” said Gavril, to which he was immediately reprimanded with a slap for his stupidity.

“Who’s there?” asked Matei.

“I came to check your water meter,” Dani said, changing her voice to that of an old lady.

“The water lady already came last week.”

“Oops, I meant to say...” The huntress quickly searched her head for another lie. “The water leak. Your downstairs neighbors were complaining of a leak.”

“We don’t have downstairs neighbors.”

“Your upstairs neighbors?”

“This is the last floor. Besides, why would an upstairs neighbor be complaining?”

Dani, exasperated and without any other excuses, slammed her fist against the door, causing it to tremble as if struck by a sledgehammer.

“Open the door be, *jebom te*!”

The group of vampires was just as confused as they were startled. The next thing they heard was a gunshot. Their front door swung open, revealing a cloud of smoke coming from the lock. There in the shadows stood the small frame of the livid Ser-

bian huntress, her eyes beaming with rage and a hint of lunacy.

She stared them up and down, noticing their old-fashioned clothes from a bygone era. Their skin had a sickly pallor, just like that of her companion, with dark circles that stood out underneath their red eyes. Their windows were nailed shut and covered with black paint, preventing any ray of sunlight from entering. That was all the information she needed to confirm they were her target, and without a warning, she quickly drew her weapon, dashing in their direction.

Matei barely escaped the attack; she slashed his forearms as he tried to redirect the sharp blade away from his face. In no time, she threw him off balance by ramming her heavy boots into his calf and pinned him to the floor. Gavril attempted to save his friend by pulling Dani away from him, but he was just as quickly thrown to the ground. She kicked him in the face, knocking a few teeth out. Matei scurried away so he could get back on his feet, but was met with the same fate. The shock and bewilderment kept them both staggered. How could such a small creature do so much damage?

The two vampires seemingly accepted that their time on this earth was over. Each following effort to get up or fight back was futile and often followed by an even nastier injury. They silently watched as their attacker stopped for a minute to catch her breath, resting her hands against her

knees while spitting out some curse words in her home language. Sweat dripped down her forehead, mingling with the vampires' blood that splattered on her hair and face.

She finally picked up her machete, ready to execute her coup de grâce, witnessing the sheer panic in their eyes. The edges of her lips formed a vicious smile.

Her blade was inches away from Gavril's head when she was promptly pulled away by the collar of her tracksuit and slammed against the wall, causing her to drop her weapon. She looked up to see their leader. He had long hair and a mustache like that of a musketeer. He was stronger than the other two, his presence cold and domineering. Dani swallowed the pain and sprang up, kicking him in the chin with a spin. He ducked effortlessly, much to her surprise. So far, even monsters hadn't been able to evade her secret move. They paced around in a circle, waiting for the other to strike, and as they waited, they analyzed every look, every breath, every twitch of their bodies that could signal an upcoming attack.

Dani was the first to throw her fist at him, but the vampire caught it in his palm, which the huntress anticipated. She then used the momentum to move her legs between his extended arm, which was still holding her clenched fist, and used her body weight to slam him down and twist his elbow. The vampire yelped in agony but continued to fight.

He had the advantage of his physical strength and greater stamina. In time, as the fight progressed, he managed to push her down and grab her by the wrists, preventing her from moving, and pinned her to the ground.

“Who are you, and why are you attacking us?” he asked, blood dripping down his broken nose.

“I’m a Girl Scout selling cookies,” Dani huffed as she wiggled vigorously to escape his grip.

“A Girl Scout?”

“Haven’t you heard? These days, they are pushing us to pursue more aggressive sales tactics.” Her tone of irony shifted into ire. “What does it look like, moron?! I’m a hunter, you’re a vampire. Put two and two together!”

“And you came here on your own?”

“Of course not.” She turned her head towards the open front door. “Hey, Ian, help me out here!” There was no response. Her expression was a mixture of disappointment and tragedy as she saw the other two vampires drag her friend out of the hallway. He was whining and pleading before they dumped him on the carpet next to her, where he immediately assumed a fetal position.

“Please don’t kill us!” he cried out. “It was her idea to come here in the first place!”

“Ian, stop embarrassing me.” Dani sighed. “Where the fuck were you?”

“Looks like your friend left you for dead,”

said Gavril with a slight grin, revealing his missing teeth.

“I’m not talking to you,” said Dani, the ever-growing anger in her voice showing no signs of dissipating. “Ian, how dare you leave me to fight alone?! Damn, coward!”

Ian paid no attention to her and instead continued with his sobbing. He never wanted to be a part of this, and now he feared his life would end at the ripe age of twenty-one before he even got the chance to find a girlfriend. His life flashed before his eyes. Most of it, regrettably, were screenshots of video games.

“Vlad, what do you think we should do with them?” Matei asked, rubbing his shoulder, hoping that would ease the pain.

“I don’t know yet. Tie them up for now. We’ll consult the human as to how we should proceed once he returns from his occupation,” said Vlad.

“The tall one appears to be a vampire like us. Maybe we should kill him. If he works for the hunter, that makes him a traitor. He is a danger to our kind.”

Vlad glanced at the pathetic sight that was Ian, grimacing.

“He is no danger to anyone.”

“What about the hunter?” asked Gavril.

“We’re not killing anyone,” Vlad said, this time more sternly. “I admit, he’s a formidable opponent, but even in my prime, I wasn’t as ruthless as

to end the life of a prepubescent boy.”

Those words nearly caused the bulging vein on Dani’s forehead to burst. She concentrated all her might into a swift, wrathful kick in the ribs that finally caused him to loosen his grip. She hit him in the nose using her forehead, making him tilt his head back. He found himself with his back against the floor and a pistol between his eyes. She pulled the hammer and gritted her teeth.

“Who the fuck,” she fumed, “are you calling a prepubescent boy, *pichko*<sup>4</sup>? I’m a thirty-two-year-old woman. Be careful what you say next, or I’ll turn your brains into minced meat. These bullets are coated in silver. They are not going to kill you, but they are enough to turn you into a vegetable for a week.” Her threat was interrupted by her partner’s continued crying. “Shut it, Ian! I got the upper hand, you can stop whining.”

Ian stood up, wiping away the tears and trying his best to regain his composure. On the few missions he’d been on with her, he had never gotten used to the violence. On a different occasion, the overwhelming sight of blood caused him to vomit. Something even he acknowledged was a laughable reaction from a vampire.

“Now...” Dani shifted her attention back to their leader. “Let me know if I heard this right. You don’t want to kill us?”

“No,” said Vlad.

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“But you are vampires.”

“We are pacifists. We don’t kill people, only drain them for sustenance.”

“Pacifist my ass. The only good vampire is a dead one.” She heard Ian faking a cough, clearly taking offense at what she said. “Not you, Ian.”

“Who sent you here?” asked Gavril, instinctively taking a few steps back out of fear she might strike him.

“The request was anonymous. It had pictures of the attacks and your address attached to it. What else do I need?”

“You wouldn’t even stop for a second to make sure it was us?”

“Sure thing. I always sit down for some tea and biscuits with the enemy before killing them. What, do you think I’m stupid?”

After their conversation went back and forth for a while, Dani concluded that it was indeed a big misunderstanding, and she didn’t have enough evidence to ensure they were the true culprits. She put away her weapon and helped Vlad get up, after which she apologized with the sincerest awkward smile she could muster. Gavril and Matei were still skeptical, but they were told not to show any hostility until everything got cleared up.

“Let me set things straight. I’m not yet fully convinced that you guys are innocent, but in case you are, it means the real culprit is still out there,” said Dani.

“Don’t worry. We don’t trust you either,” said Matei. “The best you can do now is leave before we decide to press charges. We might be immigrants, but we still know our rights!”

“Anyways,” she dismissed him, “I heard you guys have some issues with that old thing,” she pointed at the computer. “I’ve got a trade offer: I take your friend Dracula over here with me so I can finish the job and you can have Ian.”

“What?” said Ian.

“What?” said the other three vampires.

“I know he’s a bit of a wimp, but he’s really good when it comes to technology. He can fix everything,” the huntress continued with a smile. “You can have him for the rest of the night.”

“Stop pimping me out!” Ian protested. His worry grew as he began to grasp she wasn’t joking.

“Deal,” said Vlad, much to his roommates’ dismay. He turned to them, saying, “If there is someone out there slandering us and sending hunters our way, it is my duty as the eldest to get to the bottom of this.” He shook Dani’s hand and introduced himself. “My name is Vladislav Rusu. The one with curly hair and a black eye is Matei, and the other with the missing teeth is Gavril.”

“Daniela Drakanovic. They call me the ‘Nightmare Slayer’.”

“No one calls you that...” Ian muttered under his breath, still pissed that his friend sold him off.

“You can call me Dani. That whiny fellow over there is my roommate, Ian. I swear I’ll make it up to you once this is all over.”

And so they shook their hands, and the real quest began.

### Strigoi



They are creatures of the night, whose appearance and abilities might vary in different regions. What most strigoi have in common is their aversion to sunlight and the need to consume blood in order to stay sane. Their name derives from the Romanian word "strigoi" meaning "to cry out".