

Chapter VI

The Diary of Kristoff Topoliakov

October 11th in the year of our Lord 1873

At my request the First Mate had commandeered two of the crew to assist us in our task and the four of us made our way aft. As we wrenched open the hatch to the cargo hold we were suddenly assaulted by a blast of freezing air, which rushed against us like a blizzard. A cloud of insects swarmed within that icy breath, rising up out of the darkness of the vessel's depths hurling themselves into the night with such ferocity they collided with our faces, their brittle bodies and madly buzzing wings stinging our eyes. As suddenly as the frenzied attack began it was over and we lowered our arms away from our faces. We looked about at the enshrouding night then at each other. The insects had gone as suddenly and as unexpectedly as they had appeared. Not one solitary creature could we detect flitting away in the night sky. A chilling ominous breath could still be felt emanating from the depths of the hold yet we descended apprehensively, the First Mate holding aloft an oil lamp as he took the lead.

The area below decks was dank and musty, cobwebs hung splayed across the timbers like ragged silken curtains. The deck groaned beneath our combined weight as if the wood was rotten and splintering with every step. I asked the First Mate how often they cleaned down here and to my surprise he replied that he had been in the cargo hold but two days ago and it had not looked like this. As we spoke to each other we could see our breath leaving our mouths and hanging in the air in wispy clouds like floating spectres wafting among the shadows.

"It's so cold down here and these cobwebs could not have formed in only two days, not to this extent. They completely cover the place." One of our escorts commented but we ignored the two men not wishing to add anything that could possibly add fuel to their already active imaginations.

"What do you wish to inspect first?" Mr Kreskin enquired of me. "The food stock is aft if you care to

begin there." He added helpfully.

We wound our way between the larger items of personal luggage and cargo taken on board for use by the crew or to be unloaded at some port along the course of the river. The temperature appeared to drop steadily the deeper we went into the hold, the atmosphere

seeming to hold a tinge of irrational mounting dread the farther we progressed. The First Mate led me to a separate room at the rear of the vessel and as he reached for the door handle he stopped and lowered the lamp. The light shone on the handle and Mr Kreskin jiggled it lightly with his fingers. It appeared loose and he began to inspect the surrounding wood, which appeared rotten with decay. He looked over his shoulder at me and I could read the concern in his eyes. The riverboat below decks at least had begun to change as if some interloping species had begun to nest here and started adapting the environment to its own needs. Kreskin turned the door handle and I could hear the wood crack like dry brittle bone then a moment later he held the handle up for us all to see it had come away in his hand and left a jagged gaping hole in the door. Dropping the rusted handle on the floor where it clumped noisily onto the deck the First Mate pushed the door open and we watched as it swung slowly inward upon a black interior. Mr Kreskin held the lamp aloft once more and we entered the darkness.

The room stank of decaying cadavers and we were forced to place our hands tightly over our mouths and noses and hold our breaths. Even with the lamp's illumination the cloying shadows seemed reluctant to retreat from our advance and we could barely see more than a couple of feet in front of us. We could see enough to recognise packing crates. Through the wooden slats we could perceive the remnants of rotting fruit and vegetables. Fish lay packed in ice exposed in open crates but the flesh appeared discoloured and dishevelled as if they had been lying there much too long. I took another deep breath and walked over to inspect the fish. Large misshapen clumps hung from the ceiling and as I stepped between them I banged my shoulder. Mr Kreskin immediately stepped forward holding the lamp up toward the swinging object. It was a large joint of meat possibly a pig by its size hanging from a meat hook secured to a beam. It swung unsettlingly like a man on the gallows, its stretched body spinning slowly in the eerie illumination. The normally pink flesh had begun to turn green as if it had been hanging there for some time this also appeared evident by its rank offensive odour. As it spun on the hook the open belly gradually became exposed to the light and we watched with sickened fascination as maggots spilled from inside the carcass tumbling from the open slit in the abdomen onto the floor and over our shoes. Backing away Kreskin held the light high and turned it toward the other hanging corpses. Some of the meat had turned black and were similarly infested with crawling parasites. Grabbing the lamp from the First Mate I held it over the fish for a moment only to see the disgusting larvae spilling from the creature's permanently open mouths and wriggling in and out of gills and vacant eye sockets. Unable to withstand the horrifying sights and stench of the larder any longer we vacated the room and hurriedly closed the door behind us.

“How long has that food been lying down here?” I asked the First Mate gasping for air after holding my breath for longer than I could stand.

“Not that long. They were the fresh supplies we took on board only two days ago. I inspected it myself. I don’t understand how it could have rotted in such a short space of time.”

I admit quite unashamedly that I had my suspicions based I admit purely upon superstitious conjecture but the circumstances appeared to be fitting together like a twisted jigsaw puzzle created inside the mind of a madman. However without more tangible evidence I did not feel that I could present those suspicions to anyone particularly not a rational man like Mr Kreskin.

“Has anyone consumed any of that food?” I enquired.

“No, it hasn’t been touched.”

“Which means that the food isn’t the cause of the contaminant. We’ll have to look elsewhere.”

“Yes but where?”

“The cargo itself starting with the passengers’ personal luggage. We’ll begin with the largest items first. Do you have the cargo manifest?”

“I have no authority to rifle through the passengers’ personal belongings without their permission.”

“Seeing as more than half of the passengers are either dead or dying I really don’t see that any of them are really in much of a position to protest but I’ll leave the decision with you. If we can’t find out what’s causing this we could all be dead. It’s just a matter of time.”

After a brief moment of indecision the First Mate handed the lamp to one of the sailors and took the cargo manifest down from where it hung on a nail secured to a wooden support.

“What do you want to look at first?” He asked resignedly.

“The largest items you have on board and then we’ll work our way down from there.”

“Do you have even the slightest idea what you are actually looking for?”

“I’ll know when I see it?”

Holding the manifest up to the light Mr Kreskin went through it slowly and deliberately scrutinising every item on every page, checking size and weight as he searched for the largest items on board. One entry on the list seemed to catch his attention and he returned to it time and again.

“That’s interesting.” He noted casually.

“What’s interesting?”

“Three crates came on board during our stopover in Bratislava and I have absolutely no recollection of seeing them being loaded, unusually large crates too for passenger luggage.”

At the news I was feeling every bit as intrigued as the First Mate but I also began to experience sensations of extreme trepidation for fear that my nightmares may soon come to fruition.

“What was in these crates?” I asked. Mr Kreskin rifled through the manifest, concluding his search by shaking his head.

“It doesn’t say.”

“Then who do they belong to?” He checked the manifest again.

“Property of the Countess Rubelov.”

My heart could have not felt more open and vulnerable than if a lance had skewered my chest. Could it be possible that my Countess is the carrier of this pestilence? The incidents of sickness among the passengers and the disappearances of a number of crewmembers had not taken place before she and her mysterious entourage had come aboard. Her sickly companion had not emerged from her cabin since stepping onto the deck and the Countess’s bodyguard was certainly a formidable and threatening presence easily capable of breaking a man’s back and throwing him off the boat. I can certainly testify to his brute strength and his total disregard for human frailty. Could he have been the assassin behind the destruction of the Chief-Engineer? Could he also be responsible for the other disappearances among the crew and some of the passengers? I prayed that he was acting alone without the knowledge of his mistress but I could not escape the mounting possibility that he was merely a mindless drone executing the desires of the Countess. I put my trepidation aside, I had to know even if the truth was more than my soul could bare and I turned to the First Mate.

“Show me those three crates.” I insisted.

He led the way between packing crates and large bulging items covered with thick ropes, netting and dusty tarpaulins all the time matching numbers on the manifest. We squeezed between two giant crates and found the three boxes lying at the back of the storage area. My unease increased greatly when I saw them. They were rectangular in shape and resembled three coffins secreted within a dusty, cobweb encrusted crypt. Taking the lamp from one of the sailors I approached nervously my limbs trembling and my heart pounding against my chest with every forward step. Setting the lamp down on top of one of the boxes I crouched down toward the nearest crate reaching out with shaking hands. My trembling fingertips barely touched the lid when I suddenly recoiled. The top of the box was unnaturally cold as if covered with a thin layer of frost. My fingers felt numb at touching the crate and I was forced to flex them continually in order to restore the circulation. I instructed the First Mate to fetch a crowbar and I sat on the floor staring at the three rectangular boxes as if mesmerised pressing my fist to my mouth and biting my knuckles. Inexplicable fear gripped my spine and I realised that I was absorbed by irrational terror, for I feared the contents of these boxes may grant confirmation to all of man’s superstitious nightmares.

The First Mate returned with a crowbar and he obliged me by setting about the task of wedging the metal lever into the crate and prising off the lid. The nails screeched in protest as they were stretched away from the wood. The two sailors offered their assistance and the wooden lid cracked and splintered as it was roughly dislodged. Retrieving the lamp I waited in the shadows until the task was complete my limbs shaking uncontrollably as if they were preparing to take flight at the first instance of danger. I watched as the lid slowly pulled away from the crate the rusty sharp nails protruding through the wood like rows of sharp teeth jutting from a mouth, which was little more than a black slit. Once the cover was free of the box I approached apprehensively as Mr Kreskin hooked his fingers beneath the edge of the lid and heaved it open. Raising the lamp over the murky interior we stood around the box and stared at the shocking contents. Inside the box lay the figure of a man, his eyes open and staring sightlessly at the dark shadowy ceiling. I did not recognise him but he was dressed similarly to the crew. I looked at Kreskin and his two companions. The surprise and bewilderment reflected in their faces was evident in every line and crease of the skin.

“Do you know him?” I asked and Kreskin nodded.

“Lars Drushkin.” He replied. “He’s one of the crewmen that went missing. There can be no doubt now. As well as this disease to contend with we also have a killer on-board. Your hypothesis Doctor that the Chief-Engineer was killed before he became entangled in the wheel seems to be more probable.”

“What could be even more likely, Mr Kreskin is that this disease and your killer could most likely turn out to be one and the same.”

Kreskin and the sailors stared at me curiously as if unable to fully comprehend the hidden meaning behind my words. I did not believe it profitable to explain my theories at this juncture and did not elaborate upon my cryptic claim. Instead I insisted that they open the other two crates, which they did diligently fuelled with curiosity but without much enthusiasm, forever fearful of what they might find. Cranking open the second box they discovered the body of a young woman she was one of the missing passengers, the third revealed yet another absent crew member. As we stared down at the three corpses the hold apparently grew colder and the light from the lamp seemed to dim. All of us seemed fixated by the horror of our discovery as we gathered around the three crates staring at the corpses within with ghoulish fascination. It was then we noticed the faces beginning to twitch, the nostrils flare, cheeks inflating and drooling bulbous lower-lips beginning to flap. We watched the hands tremble as the fingers made jerking spasmodic movements. The two sailors were ready to flee but they seemed rooted to the spot, unable to move or react only to watch the petrifying spectacle. We all seemed unable to tear ourselves away from the horror.

The flaring nostrils began to widen until the nose became just two black pits sunken into the face. The flabby lips split apart and we stared, as something seemed to be moving behind the teeth. What appeared to be two hairy fingers projected from the mouth and started moving with deliberate slowness over the lower-lip and chin as if feeling the texture of the skin. Then another two black hairy fingers slipped from between the lips and the mouth bulged as a hairy body forced its way through the wet flabby slit spilling onto the chin covered in a mess of stale saliva. A hairy jointed finger emerged from the right nostril and began tapping the face as if testing the firmness of the flesh before heaving its large hairy bulk through the gaping hole and plopping onto the dead man's countenance like an ugly black bloodstain. All three bodies began to swell grotesquely as large black spiders pushed their way through every human orifice, splitting the skin and crawling out of the cadavers through jagged tears in the flesh. I gaped as an eye-socket bulged, the eyeball seeming to enlarge in the hole pushing one side of the face out of shape until the eye popped out of the reddened socket and slid down the sallow cheek. A moment later a pair of creeping feelers emerged through the red fleshy hole tentatively tapping the bloodless waxen face before heaving its large black bulk through the vacant eye-socket as it joined the other arachnids.

We backed away as the caskets filled with spiders until they were climbing over the sides and spilling onto the floor, flopping onto the deck like dead men's hands. They began to scurry toward us and we turned and ran through the narrow alleys between the cargo

heading for the ladder and safety. Reaching the bottom of the steps we started to climb taking the rungs two at a time when above our heads the hatch swung down slamming shut and plunging us into almost tangible darkness. If it were not for the diminishing light from the lamp we would have found ourselves totally at the mercy of the shadows. Seized with panic the First Mate and I immediately pressed our backs and shoulders to the hatch in an effort to force it open but it seemed to have been secured from without. We hadn't any tools with which to force our way through except for the crowbar but Kreskin had dropped it as we had attempted to flee and now it was secreted somewhere on the darkened floor, which was quickly being covered by a carpet of crawling death.

In desperation his eyes snapped around looking for a means of securing our salvation when he noticed that he still held the cargo manifest. Scrunching the paper up into a tight cylinder he lifted up the glass covering on the lamp and held the edge of the rolled up paper to the flame. The fire caught instantly and he hurriedly descended to the deck bending low and waving the flaming makeshift torch among the spiders. The creatures scattered before the fire like the parting of The Red Sea but soon started to close in around him again like shifting sands isolating him in the middle of the floor and cutting off his retreat. The lamp was burning low and even in the uneven light I could tell that the parchment was burning quickly and that the flame was almost down to Kreskin's knuckles. Once he dropped his makeshift torch he would be at the mercy of the arachnids. They would be all over him.

"Look for something else that will burn, then get down here and help me look for that crowbar. And do it quickly for God's sake."

I could hear the rising panic in his voice and I could see the perspiration staining his forehead standing out like droplets of crimson blood in the hellish glow from the flickering flame. Apprehensively the two sailors jumped down from the steps and ran over the backs of the spiders scrunching them into the wooden floor as they made their way over to the crates and started to strip down the ropes and tarpaulins. They looked down briefly at the spiders trying to ignore their presence as the creatures crawled up their bodies, clinging to their legs like gripping hands. Striking at the monsters they tried to brush them away from their trousers but they clung on with grasping spindly legs. One of the men began to scream as the spiders burrowed beneath his trouser leg and started to ascend. He dropped the lamp only to have it enveloped by a black mass in a matter of seconds. The squirming black bodies blotting out the dull illumination from the lamp completely and plunging the hold into almost utter darkness. The only light available now came from the First Mate's makeshift torch and that was burning down all too quickly, the rolled up paper being steadily reduced to

a clump of blackened cinders in Mr Kreskin's shaking hand. I stared in muted horror from the top of the steps as the sailor's screams intensified and he backed away into the shadows his body gradually becoming enveloped by a rapidly creeping dark stain. He attempted to issue one last terrified cry only to have his voice abruptly silenced as crawling spiders filled his mouth and clogged up his throat causing him to gag hideously as his windpipe became constricted and we were forced to watch helplessly as he choked on his own bile. The poor unfortunate man was soon consumed by the darkness but we were still forced to listen to the coughing and spluttering and vile gurgling of his death throes, unable to offer assistance or to alleviate his suffering.

Running to the top of the steps I began beating upon the hatch, desperate for anyone to hear me. Kreskin's torch had almost burned down completely and the second sailor was engaged in beating away the spiders as they crawled over him, determined not to suffer the same horrible fate as his colleague. Continuing to pound upon the hatch until my fists were bruised I chanced to look behind me in time to see black shapes moving up the steps, covering the lower rungs with a spreading dark stain. Looking toward the First Mate I could barely distinguish him in the dying light from his flickering torch. I repeated my efforts to pound my way through the hatch then as I looked over my shoulder for the second time I caught a glimpse of something briefly captured in the dying light of the torch. Kreskin was waving the folded paper around trying desperately to fan the flames back into life when the flickering light briefly lit up the narrow alley between the heavier items of cargo. The passage led back toward the place where the three rectangular crates were located and just for a brief moment I could see them on the other side of the cargo hold captured in the uneven illumination provided by the dying torch. The image only stayed with me for a second but within that fleeting drop of time I thought I could detect movement. I could feel my entire body grow cold from within and my blood begin to flow with the sluggish weight of ice through my veins as I thought I could see figures rising up from the three coffins. Then the image was plunged back into darkness as suddenly as it had appeared and I was left with the eerie phantasm imprinted on my mind.

Suddenly I was beating upon the hatch like a madman, more afraid of a half-captured and inconclusive shadow than of the deadly spiders, which crawled around me. The spitting embers of the torch fizzled for a moment longer then were gone plunging us all into pitch darkness. As soon as the light went out I heard the anguished cries of the First Mate and his associate dementedly beating off the spiders as they crawled over their writhing bodies. I imagined I could feel the large black creatures upon me but attempted to ignore the sensation continuing to pound upon the hatch until my fist felt raw. Then in my crazed state of mind I fancied that I could feel a breath at my back, a stale rotting breath then something

grasped at my shoulder and a freezing chill coursed along the entire length of my spine. I admit that at that moment my remaining vestiges of courage deserted me and I was almost reduced to whimpering as I awaited the inevitable.

At that precise moment I became aware of the sound of bolts and latches rattling above me and I could see shapes moving between the gaps in the wood. A mixture of desperate panic and relief gave my actions renewed impetus and I launched myself at the wooden hatch, bracing my shoulder against it and pushing with my remaining vestiges of strength. I felt the door rise, yanked open from above and suddenly I was spotlighted in a halo of floating yellow balls, encircling the silver glow cast into the hold by the moon. There were dark shadowy shapes moving behind those floating lights but I didn't hold back to distinguish the faces of my rescuers, I hurled myself gratefully through the hatch into the waiting arms of my dark saviours. Collapsing onto the deck I swore at them, urging them to close the hatch quickly and seal the demonic cargo in the hold. I did not inform them of the plight of the First Mate and the two sailors so convinced was I that they were done for.

I watched the men as they obeyed my command and closed the hatch. They seemed to be moving with interminable slowness and I willed the hatch to close faster as if my will alone could influence the speed at which the sailors toiled. Then as the door had almost met the wooden frame in, which it was housed it stopped as if obstructed by something below. A dark slit leading down into the hold beckoned to me like some cynical toothless grin as if mocking my freedom and then the grin started to widen as the hatch started to rise as if something was pushing at it.

I lay on the ground, my breath trapped in my chest as I watched the hatch slowly rise. From out of the murky shadows below I could see a pale white hand cut and bleeding emerge from the darkness pushing at the door. Spiders were scurrying onto the deck and the terror of the moment was instantly forgotten as I leapt to my feet and side stepped the crawling arachnids as they vomited forth from below decks. My rescuers perplexed by the appearance of the spiders jumped out of the path of the vile crawling mass but our attention was immediately drawn back to the hatch as it was flung open with some force. We waited the tension straining like stretched sinew, the hatch yawning wide like the mouth of hell. The bloodless white hand emerged from the darkness clawing at the deck as if scratching at infected flesh. A black bulk began to rise up from the depths and we could feel our breaths suspended as if entwined and constricted by invisible cords. Then the white face appeared scratched and bloodied beneath a mop of bedraggled black hair. The shape gasped and croaked as if strangling upon its own tongue before collapsing in an untidy heap upon the deck.

Once the initial shock of watching the unholy apparition drag itself onto the deck had abated we rushed forward as one man to offer our assistance. For the godless hulk of pale bloodless features was finally recognised as Mr Kreskin, the First Mate. As we surrounded the distressed man I instantly ordered the cargo hold closed and locked so convinced was I that the other two sailors could not have survived. The men did my bidding and I squatted down by Mr Kreskin's side and gently turned him over. His face, hands and neck had been severely lacerated by the spiders' fangs and in the moonlight his skin looked as grey and as cold as stone. I instructed the men to take the First Mate to his cabin. I would make my way there momentarily but first there were a couple of important things I must do. Firstly I must convince the Captain to stop this vessel. Waiting until we reach the next port of call may prove to be a fatal delay. He must draw in to the riverbank now and put the healthy passengers ashore. Then he must cast the boat adrift, setting it on fire if necessary destroying this foul plague and its cursed carriers once and for all. Then finally I must confront the Countess. I want explanations, I need them if only to put my mind at rest and ease this dull ache in my heart.