

Saint's Sword

Chapter 1

Eastern Europe, 1332

Despite the presence of a full moon, Nicolai lost sight of the mysterious figure he'd been tracking when it disappeared amongst the gravestones, trees and shadows of the cemetery. He tethered his horse to the wrought iron gate and dismounted.

"I shall not be long, Costel. 'Tis likely I've lost this one to the shadows as I have so many times before. When I return, we shall find a place to rest our weary bones." He patted the great beast on his flank and walked toward the gate.

Nicolai drew his dagger from its sheath as he moved toward the center of the cemetery where he last saw the shadowy figure. His steps were quiet, careful and deliberate. This hunt was familiar and he knew his painstaking efforts were necessary.

The moon cast a yellow hue on the surroundings and the shadows of nearby trees and headstones flickered in the wake of a few passing clouds. Fortunately, the moon lit the trail well enough for Nicolai to find his way without alerting his prey of his pursuit.

The stones were old and simple—some graves were only marked by a wooden cross with a name scratched into it. Nicolai finally reached the knoll at the center of the cemetery and from this vantage point surveyed the grounds.

"Nothing," his voice sank in despair. He slipped the dagger back into its sheath but still caressed its handle, ready for battle if necessary. He stood silently for a few seconds, shook his head in disgust and turned to leave.

A slight sound to his right caused him to tense and reach again for his dagger as he turned toward the rustling. There he saw a man step out from behind a tree. In one swift motion the dagger was out and pointing at the stranger.

"Did I scare you? Forgive me. My intent was to kill you." The man's vicious smile sent a cold chill down Nicolai's spine, but he forced himself to stand steady.

Then in an instant, the stranger's face transformed into a grotesque façade resembling the monster Nicolai had seen clutching his daughter's throat as it stood over his wife's lifeless, blood smeared corpse. That vision was as clear this evening as it had been every evening for the past two years. It was the face he'd been hunting for what seemed an eternity and as grotesque as it was he was happy to see it.

"Be that as it may," the monster said. "I shall just take you now."

"*Fascia Diablo*," slipped from Nicolai's lips.

It was what he'd learned to call such a monster, any monster. It was the name his parents and their parents used whenever they saw someone accused of committing a hideous crime. It meant *face of the devil*. That name came back to him like a lightning bolt exploding in his head just as it did that horrific night, the night that was to be his last as a husband, father and Nobleman.

"Yes, yes, *Fascia Diablo*. I've been called that in many languages over the decades, but now prepare to die."

"What are you?" Nicolai's anger and need to gather information from this beast overcame his primal instinct to charge him and slip his dagger into his chest.

"I'm the embodiment of all you think evil. The image of the devil that makes grown

men beg for mercy. Do you want to plead for your life, mortal?" The monster took a slow step toward Nicolai. "Would you like to cry and plead for your life like a child?" he taunted Nicolai with his wicked hiss. He took another step forward, reaching out to Nicolai with his boney, gray hands. "If you do, maybe I'll be merciful and let you die quickly."

The monster's evil smile sent chills down Nicolai's spine yet he refused to budge or even flinch at the macabre sight and the icy cold voice.

Instead, he took a step toward the beast, the point of his dagger leading the way. "Come then, devil and you shall find the point of my dagger before you can do me harm. I beg no man and certainly not the devil. I've searched years for one such as you and your threats will not keep me from my mission." Nicolai waved him on with his free hand.

If I can capture this beast, I can force him to tell me the name of the monster that murdered my wife and give me the whereabouts of my daughter. The day of reckoning has come.

"Imbecile, your blade will not harm me. Have you learned nothing in those years since you lost your wife?" The beast began to move slowly toward Nicolai. His razor-sharp fangs dripped saliva and his eyes were filled with some insane hunger. "Ready to die, mortal?"

"You've already asked me that, devil. Why do you hesitate? Is it true you know you've met your match?"

"Foolish mortal," he sneered. "I'll suck the life from you until you beg me for the end."

"I think not. Not this eve, monster," a new voice sprang from behind the beast.

A look of confusion raced across the evil creature's face as he turned toward the voice. Nicolai jumped to the side to catch a glimpse of who had spoken, but before he could see who stood there, the monster exploded in a cloud of ash. The faint utterance of *free* floated in the air.

As the ash began to settle, Nicolai could see a woman standing there just beyond the gray cloud. She wore a white maiden's blouse, trousers and boots, but despite the manly garb, the figure he saw highlighted by the night sky spoke only woman. Her hair flowed gracefully down her back and even in the moon light he could tell it was crimson red. He was immediately struck by a certain strength in her stature. Her expression was fierce and ready for battle. She slowly turned a full circle and as she did she quickly withdrew a wooden stake held close to her side by her belt.

She stopped when she again faced Nicolai. "Nothing here," she said.

"Nor here either," another voice came from Nicolai's left.

Nicolai spun to see a full-bellied giant of a man wearing a brown friar's robe. He too held a wooden stake and was crouched low in battle stance. The robe was secured tightly around his waist with a white rope while a scabbard and sword dangled loosely to one side and several wooden stakes were tucked between the robe and the rope on the other.

"Are you all demons?" Nicolai asked, still holding his dagger in attack posture. "You appear from thin air."

The man straightened and slipped the wooden stake behind the rope. "No, not demons, but when you hunt these monsters as long as we have, you learn to move as quietly as they. You can sheath your blade, sir. We aren't your enemy. I'm Gustav and this is Kiara." He motioned toward the woman with a nod of his head.

“Call me a fool if you will, but I think I’ll keep it at the ready,” Nicolai said. “I believe it possible you followed me here to rob me and the demon almost beat you to the spoils.” The point of his knife made a slow arc between the woman and Gustav. “And forgive me, preacher...” He paused before he spit out the remainder of his sentence. “...but your weapons betray the clothing of a Holy man.”

Gustav stepped forward. “Every man must carry the tools of his trade, my son, be it carpenter or priest. My tools happen to be sanctified steel and wooden stakes. ‘Tis your good fortune and by the grace of God we were here to set a soul free before your arrival, or to be sure you would be dead.”

“Set a soul free? I saw nothing here that resembled anything with a soul.” Nicolai maintained his battle ready posture even though the other two seemed relaxed.

“You heard the word *free* rise from the dust of the beast. That is the word of God I seek,” Gustav said.

“This is madness. All I saw was some sort of monster which I’m sure had no soul. What in God’s name was that?”

“Had nothing to do with God, but only the devil. I told you, we search for lost souls and return them to the hand of God. That is what Kiara did. Set a soul free to return to the Lord’s domain leaving behind all the evil in the form of ash and dust.” He motioned toward the dust still settling to the ground.

“All I saw was a monster liken to the one that murdered my wife and stole my child. I would have preferred to capture him and force him to tell me of her whereabouts and the name of the one who took her, but you prevented that. I didn’t ask for your help. Now be gone from my sight!”

Nicolai’s anger wasn’t unfounded. After all, this man—this *preacher* and this woman had just destroyed the only clue he had found in two years. Anger consumed him and it rose from the quickness of his heart to a fire that burned in his mind. He clenched his teeth to control himself, his jaw aching from the gesture.

“You still don’t understand, do you? May God have pity on your poor soul.” Gustav shook his head.

Nicolai fought the urge to plunge his dagger into this alleged man of God’s chest. Anger boiled his blood and demanded him to avenge the wrong played upon him this night. “I need not your pity. I need to avenge my family. You have no idea of my mission.” He realized he was screaming but didn’t care. Who would he wake? The dead? Still brandishing his knife, he waved it freely, first at Gustav then at Kiara.

Gustav buried his head in his hand. “As dumb as a stump I fear, Kiara.” He snorted a deep laugh.

Kiara stepped quickly between Gustav and Nicolai. “I believe no truer words could be spoken, Gustav.”

She laughed contemptuously and that was all it took to push Nicolai past the limits of his control. Unfortunately for Kiara she was the closer of the two and in a wild rage he rushed the woman with his dagger leading the charge. He had a vague plan. Take her down and threaten her throat with his blade until she repented her callous laugh. She apparently had a different plan.

Catching his wrist with one hand and using his own momentum against him, she hooked his arm with her other arm and tossed him flat on his back.

“Hrumph.” The wind rushed from his chest with the impact.

“Not a stump, but possibly a rock.” She laughed again, turned and began to walk toward Gustav.

Gustav’s eyes widened and his mouth opened to speak but it was too late. Nicolai grabbed Kiara around her waist, binding her tight to his side. His blade flashed in front of her face and came to rest deadly close to her throat.

Not exactly as he’d planned but at least he found redemption through a threatening gesture.

“Can a rock cut your throat as I’m about to, wench?” he hissed.

Gustav’s eyebrows arched in surprise. He shook his head, took a few steps back and muttered to himself, “Big mistake. Should’ve never have said that.” He leaned against a tree and folded his arms, resting them on his belly. “On with the show,” he mused under his breath.

Kiara sent an elbow to Nicolai’s ribcage and turned into the arm that held the knife. With her throat safely away from the edge of the blade, she reached down and grabbed his wrist to reverse the hold he had on her waist. The dagger fell harmlessly to the ground and Nicolai suspected she allowed him to break away. He faced her.

“Gallant try, sir, but you underestimated me and underestimating your enemy in this fight against these monsters will be the death of you. You’ll have to be more level-headed if you want to survive this hunt.” Kiara’s voice was calm and unthreatening.

“You know nothing of my hunt. You and this false man of God prey upon the innocent and take what you can get. Now leave me.”

Gustav stepped away from the tree and walked up next to Kiara. The rising fog mixed with the yellow moonlight, creating an eerie aura around them. “No. We only hunt the beasts that take peaceful souls such as your wife’s from this earthly plane. Sometimes they use the innocent to quench their thirst for living blood and discard the empty vessel, but other times they drag them into the darkness with them to do their bidding. ‘Tis impossible to tell whom they have chosen until the dead try to rise from the grave.”

Nicolai took a step backward, shaking his head in confusion. “You two are insane. Do you expect me to believe this impossible tale and run whimpering into the night?”

Kiara eased a little closer to him, her palms open and facing upward. She was unarmed. “From what you’ve told us, I believe you’re hunting dark and evil creatures of the night called vampires. We were not here this eve because of the monster we just put to rest. We were here to see if his servant would rise from her grave and if so, we would set her soul free to return to God’s good care.”

“His servant? What servant would he be here to collect?”

“The one there, behind you, clawing her way from her cold grave.” Kiara pointed to a spot directly behind Nicolai.

He spun to see a pale arm breaking through the fresh earthen mound near the cross marked *Rohord*. Slender alabaster fingers clawed at the dirt as another arm rose up out of the black soil. Nicolai scooped up his dagger and turned back to witness what he knew was impossible, yet was happening before his eyes. Had these sorcerers, Kiara and Gustav, used black magic to summon up the dead? Why else would they seem undisturbed by what was transpiring before them? He didn’t know but he would surely find out.

He realized it wasn’t the exact face, but a face that could be nothing less than kin to the monster that had destroyed his life. Too many times the only way of escaping his

memories was to drown them out by way of ale and wine until he lost consciousness. To see it here with these people present was something that demanded to be reconciled in his mind. Coincidence? He didn't believe in coincidences. Somehow these things were connected. But how?

He turned back toward the ungodly event that played out in front of him and as the unearthing continued he brought his blade to bear.

"We told you. Your dagger will not harm these creatures, but this will." Gustav drew a stake from his belt and tossed it, handle first, to Nicolai. "You must pierce the heart."

Nicolai watched as the stake lofted easily through the air toward him, but he refused to reach for it. Instead he watched it drop to the ground at his feet.

He couldn't trust these people. Did they think him a fool? His blade and sword had never let him down in battle before and they wouldn't this night either. He didn't believe in ghosts or goblins or these things called vampires. Such stories were told around a campfire to scare women and children, not warriors such as himself.

Nicolai turned and saw the creature now half-exhumed from its grave. She bent at the waist and clawed at the earth, pulling the rest of her body from the so-called sacred ground. Her fine burial clothes were tattered and covered with dirt from the struggle and cuts in her flesh lay open but no blood flowed from them. She—no—*it* growled and its sunken, dirt smeared cheeks began to stretch over her cheekbones as her mouth opened—exposing hideous fangs. The creature stood and stared at him. Its eyes were lifeless. Then it charged.

"Die now beast," he screamed as he charged it. They collided and he thrust his dagger deep into the monster's heart.

A backhand of unnatural strength sent Nicolai reeling, lifting him off his feet. For the second time that evening he was on his back, but this time at the mercy of this ungodly she-monster. It walked up to him and lifted him by his collar toward her open, hungry mouth. Her fangs reached for the vein in his neck, but then her hell-sent face dissolved into ash, her body soon followed.

A faint *free* was heard.

Nicolai fell backward as the beast's grip disappeared. He held the stake he'd managed to retrieve during his last encounter with the ground and examined it closely, his eyebrows furrowed with curiosity. "Amazing."

Kiara walked over to Nicolai and extended her hand to him. He cocked his head and looked at her, but finally accepted her hand. "Thank you." He smiled as she pulled and he hopped to a standing position.

"Well done, my friend." Gustav laughed and brushed some ash from Nicolai's shirt. "You have the pleasure of our names. May I ask yours?"

Nicolai paused before he replied coldly, "Nicolai."

Kiara reached down and picked up Nicolai's dagger and handed it to him. "Yes, I agree. Well done. Not a bad warrior when you finally decided to use the right weapon." Nicolai accepted the dagger and slipped it in its sheath, but kept a firm hold on the stake. "But why do I hear such coldness in your voice? You should be rejoicing the destruction of the beast," Kiara asked him quietly.

Nicolai's face drained of all emotion and he failed to make eye contact with her. "I had hoped to wring the whereabouts of my daughter from him, but that's now lost to me."

"I can understand. You're on a mission, but we had no choice if we were to save you

from certain death. Our missions may be kin and we can help each other.” Kiara pointed down the path toward the gate. “Let us walk to the inn and talk.”