

# MIDNIGHT TREASURE

*Also by Piers Torday*

The Last Wild  
The Dark Wild  
The Wild Beyond  
There May Be a Castle  
The Lost Magician  
The Frozen Sea  
The Wild Before

*With Paul Torday*

The Death of an Owl

*Plays*

The Box of Delights  
Christmas Carol – a fairytale

# MIDNIGHT TREASURE

PIERS TORDAY

Quercus

QUERCUS CHILDREN'S BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Hodder & Stoughton

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN 978 1 786 54142 0

Paperback ISBN: 978 1 786 54143 7

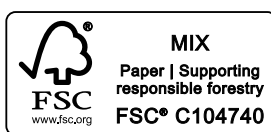
Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,

Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by

Clays Ltd., Elcograf S.p.a

The paper and board used in this book  
are made from wood from responsible sources.



Quercus Children's Books  
An imprint of  
Hachette Children's Group  
Part of Hodder & Stoughton Limited  
Carmelite House  
50 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company  
[www.hachette.co.uk](http://www.hachette.co.uk)

[www.hachettechildrens.co.uk](http://www.hachettechildrens.co.uk)

*To the memory of my grandfather Buci, who first  
showed me the mountains*



*Sometimes a lantern moves along the night,  
That interests our eyes. And who goes there?*

**‘The Lantern out of Doors’,  
Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1878**

[pviii- pix – map TK]

[ARTWORK]

[MAP OF THE CLAW – TO FOLLOW]





# THEY KNEW WE WOULD COME

A CHAIN OF LANTERNS winds slowly through the night over the dark sands. These explorers march at night. For although they have, like all their kind, developed a tolerance of daylight, they cannot abide the dazzling, high sun of the Southern Claw.

‘Hurry! It cannot be far now,’ says the elderly female vampir marching five steps in front of the rest, her words just audible through the thin scarf wrapped around her face.

With her large straw cartwheel hat, tailored suit and lace-up boots, she looks set for a summer garden party in the City of Castles, less so for leading an archaeological expedition this far from home. But Miss Barbara Miloth is no ordinary vampir and no ordinary archaeologist.

‘Miss Miloth,’ says the second vampir in line, mopping

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his ruddy brow with a handkerchief, ‘the mortals are complaining again. They say a sandstorm is coming. Perhaps we should make a camp here and sit it out?’ Count Pronay pauses for breath, leaning heavily on his brightware-topped malacca cane. Sweat patches bloom over his cream linen suit.

Miloth glances behind her at the two underfed sand horses, swaying over the dunes, weighed down by packs of bedding, food and tools. The five mortal guides accompanying them carry further supplies on their backs. They look down, away from her gaze.

‘A tiny sandstorm is nothing to the dark clouds that await us if we fail,’ she says. ‘We don’t have time.’

But as she marches over the crest of the next dune, the sight that awaits stops her clean in her tracks – and her companions, too. It is just as the frayed scroll in her leather handbag described.

She holds up her lamp.

Ahead, on a rocky plateau, its forbidding silhouette framed by the new moon, is the Forgotten Fortress of Our Fathers.

So vast, so intimidating, and so utterly abandoned.

She hopes.

Barbara Miloth has long awaited this moment. A glimpse of the empire that existed long before hers. The empire of the ancient ones.

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At a snap of her gloved fingers, a porter rushes forward. He bows his head as he offers the archaeologist a chilled steel flask, which she snatches from his trembling fingers to drain in big, quenching gulps. When she returns the vessel and wipes her lips on her glove, she leaves behind a dark stain.

The porters have reached the summit of the dune, too. They can all see the looming hulk of the fortress, dark and silent. Beyond the horizon, a gathering cloud is visible in the moonlight. The porters point at the dust and begin talking to themselves in the local tongue, which Miss Miloth has studied but does not care to speak. The guides turn their sand horses around in the opposite direction.

Count Pronay roughly grabs one porter by the arm, his long nails digging into the skin. This one is just a boy. ‘Shall I make them stay, Miss Miloth? I hear the local blood is of excellent quality.’

She waves their escort away without a second glance.

‘Let them go. We can take it from here.’

Miloth marches down into the plain, striding through the scrub towards the plateau. Count Pronay shakes his head and stumbles after her with his cane and a kit bag that the others left dumped on the sand in their haste.

He glances up at the sky. Just as his former companions predicted, a storm is coming in.

By the time they reach the plateau, they can no longer

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see further than their fingertips. But it is not just the swirling grit, scratching his nose and throat, that makes it hard for the Count to breathe.

There is something else. A vile scent in the air, one he has never smelt before. It makes his eyeballs want to shrivel in their sockets, and his flesh leech into his bones. His red face grows pale, his mind turning so faint he might topple over. His airways tighten.

‘Miss Miloth!’ the Count cries out in a strangled croak.

She turns to him and looks different, like a deep-sea diver encountered unexpectedly in the midnight desert. A swollen but airtight gas mask encases her head.

‘Mask!’ she barks through the ventilation mesh over her mouth.

Pronay’s air fading, he desperately digs through his knapsack, eventually discovering a similar contraption, which he pulls on just in time. Miloth shines her light on glossy green weeds growing in the sand between the boulders. Pronay taps them with his cane. They slide innocuously apart. The acrid stench is weaker but still detectable.

‘I had no idea it could grow here,’ she says.

‘What is it?’ says Pronay. ‘A herb? Poisonweed?’

She does not answer his question. ‘So they knew we would come. Even then. Intriguing.’ Miloth glances at the sky, which is already beginning to lighten. ‘Quick, we do not have long.’

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Pronay looks up at the jagged battlements of the fortress directly above and the sheer wall of rock between them. He is sweating inside the mask and dabs ineffectually at the glass visor with his handkerchief.

But Miloth does not delay. She is unfastening her jacket, tossing it aside, and there, poking out of her lace and cotton blouse are two enormous, leathery wings. They unfurl and flap, and then she is off. The archaeologist has become a giant bat soaring into the sky, her long skirt billowing as she gently lands on top of the plateau – not once casting a single shadow as she does.

Moments later, Pronay emerges from the clouds with a few flaps of his wings. Miss Miloth removes her mask, taking deep gulps of the clear night air above the gathering storm below. They have landed in the central courtyard of the ancient fort. War, weather and time have erased much of the original structure.

Fallen masonry – capitols, pillars and chunks of canon-blasted rock – litters the ground like boulders, making it hard to navigate. But Miloth's map is clear, and her lantern shows the way.

A set of stone steps, well-trodden, that lead down into the ground.

She glances at Pronay, her wrinkled face gleaming and pallid in the lamplight. In return, the Count gives a small smile of encouragement, but it is more to steady his nerves,

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which is strange. Vampirs are immortal. They are over five centuries old and fearless. This world, their empire, lives or dies at their command. So what is it about this place that chills his veins?

Miss Miloth heads down the steps. Behind, in the vast deserted courtyard, a rock slips off another with a clatter. Count Pronay looks over his shoulder, his lantern swinging, but nothing is there. He follows Miloth straight into a draught of subterranean air, fetid and cold, fluttering his hair.

They are in a passage lined with heavy stones, and the pair pick cobwebs out of the way, their hair, their faces . . . that is no matter, spiders are friends to the deathless ones.

The way ahead remains dark despite the flickering lanterns.

Underneath their feet, the floor crunches with every step. A soft, gelatinous crunch. They are stepping on hundreds, thousands of tiny things. Count Pronay prays it is giant cockroaches, poisonous centipedes or scarab beetles. Something friendly of that nature.

‘Don’t look down,’ warns Miloth, closing her eyes and pressing ahead.

But the Count cannot help himself. He swings the lantern low – and there it is. The rough stone floor is strewn with rice grains. *Rice?*

And immediately, he falls to the floor and begins sorting

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them into little piles. A hopeless, futile task. Yet he cannot stop himself. He is compelled by ancient instinct. They *must* be counted, even if it takes for eternity.

Then Miloth hauls him up by the scruff of his neck.

‘I told you, don’t look down!’ They hurry on, the passage sloping deeper and deeper into the ground. ‘Whoever laid these traps knows of the old ways. When mortals defied our kind. Scattering rice grains for us to count as a distraction is one ancient trick we know of.’

‘What is this gloomy place?’ he asks. ‘Where is all the treasure you promised me? I hardly need to remind you how much I paid for this expedition.’

‘You’ll learn soon enough.’

The air grows damp and harder to breathe. With each heaving step, they descend further underground. But the pair do not hurry. They are on the lookout for any further snares or tricks. And do not have long to wait.

A shallow trench blocks their path, cutting straight through the ground. The fountain spout mounted on the left wall tumbles fresh water into the trench, slopping over the edges, flashing fish silver in the lamplight.

Miss Miloth hisses and recoils. No vampir can cross running water so directly.

‘Whatever is buried here,’ she says, ‘they did not want a vampir to find it.’

‘So how do we get to the other side?’ says Count Pronay,

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half hoping she volunteers to abort the expedition and return home to Princeland.

‘Like this, you fool!’ she snaps, pushing him towards the trench. He trips and falls flat across it with a cry. Steam rises as the fresh water burns his chest and stomach, making him howl. But before he knows it, his companion has stepped lightly across, using him as a bridge, and hauled him to his feet.

His exquisite linen outfit is filthy, scorched and unrecognisable, but he is not seriously hurt.

The corridor expands into an underground, domed chamber. Miss Miloth pauses on the threshold, shining her lantern around. They can see faded paintings on the walls. There are ancient rowing galleys tossed on waves, strange hybrid animal-human creatures with bull’s heads or horse bodies. Beneath sit three great carved stone urns decorated with vines.

At last, Count Pronay understands where they are.

A tomb. The only place his kind used to know as home until the Dawn of Darkness, when they rose forever.

Most extraordinary is the impressive chest at the dome’s centre. It is split in half, as if struck by lightning, with more bounty spilling out than the Count has ever seen. A flood of gold coins shimmer in his lantern’s beam. Rubies the colour of blood, dazzling gold plates, gems as clear and sparkling as tears.

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For if there is one thing vampires crave as much as blood, it is treasure. He steps gleefully into the chamber, his arms open wide.

‘Wait!’ hisses Miss Miloth. ‘Don’t move a muscle!’ But she is too late. Her words are drowned out by the sounds of things flying through the air.

The Count does not move a muscle.

He will never move a muscle ever again – he has become something unimaginable.

An ex-vampir. Dead. Mortal, after all.

His body is pierced by five sharpened stakes of the purest hawthorn: spring-loaded and fired from concealed positions in the tomb, forever passing through his stomach, neck, eyes, brain and . . . heart.

‘Greedy fool,’ says Miloth, who was never here for gold. She touches his shoulder, and then he is gone, disintegrating into skin, flesh, bone and ash . . . scattered across the floor by the faint breeze.

She turns her attention to her wristwatch. Dawn will soon break in the sand-swept skies above. There is not a moment to lose. With her lantern held high, she scours the broken tomb. There is no golden treasure; of course, there never was.

Only dust spills out of the ancient casket. Sticking out of the grit is what Miss Miloth has travelled all this way for.

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‘There you are,’ she says. Pulling on a pair of gloves so she does not touch it directly, she picks up a small, tarnished statue.

It is a brightware sculpture, not much bigger than her hand, about a thousand years old.

And it will change everything.

**PART ONE**  
**HOUSE OF GOLD**



# WATCHERS IN THE WOOD

*One year later*

TIBOR AND ROZA HURRIED through the cellar tunnels, trying not to breathe in the damp air as they explored the depths of the Baron's house. The dark labyrinth wound through crumbling vaults, each stacked with crates of dust-covered bottles or packing cases.

Stone carvings of vampires and dragons set into the walls loomed out of the shadows as Tibor swung his lantern. His light caught a flash of brass. He stopped, reaching for the handle of a large steel safe, moss green beneath the cobwebs.

Roza sniffed at it suspiciously. A black Alsatian, her velvety black fur and pointed ears meant people often mistook her for a wolf, which suited her and Tibor both

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fine. But once, Roza knew, she had been a vampir. She had been so young when she had been transformed into a dog. Vampirs could transform themselves into other beasts – bats or dogs, most often – and could only turn others into vampirs through their bite. But there were immortals who possessed the magic gift of transforming others.

Roza did not remember the act of transformation – she and Tibor had both been only four years old when the Baron adopted them from the Orphanage. She could scarcely remember what it was like to *not* be an Alsatian.

Only that she knew – would always know – that she was not meant to be trapped in the body of a dog. One day, she would be free.

Tibor rested the lantern on the ground and tried to turn the safe door handle. It refused to budge. Grunting with the effort, he tried again.

‘I’m not an expert in safes,’ said Roza, ‘but don’t you normally need a key?’

‘I thought maybe we could hide in there,’ Tibor said. ‘You know. For a game. Give the Baron a big surprise!’

Roza stared at him for a moment, unblinking. ‘You know dogs can always tell when people are lying?’

His hand fell away from the handle. ‘I just want to find out where I’m from, that’s all. I thought there might be something in here . . . like a letter or a diary.’

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‘You’re from the Orphanage. *We’re* from the Orphanage.’

‘But what about before that? We weren’t born there. Where are we *really* from?’

‘What does it matter? We can’t go back. We can only go forward.’

‘It’s easy for you to say that. You’re a dog.’

Except he knew she wasn’t, not really.

But he abandoned the safe, rubbing his filthy hands clean on his shorts. They pressed on into the gloom, Tibor kicking at piles of fruit crates, pulling strands of cobweb off arches, poking at loose stones in the brickwork. But whatever he was trying to find, it would not reveal its hiding place easily. ‘Why is it so hard to answer two simple questions, Roza? One, who were my real parents? Two, where am I from? That’s all I want to know.’

Roza’s attention was suddenly elsewhere. Her ears pricked. ‘Vibrations. Someone is approaching the house . . . a horse, riding through the woods.’

‘The Baron! Back from his hunt!’

Without another word, Tibor turned and ran, as fast as he could, up the cramped spiral stone staircase that had led them here, Roza fast on his heels. They emerged, blinking, out of a low side door into the warm haze of a late summer afternoon and followed the clipped lawn to a line of horse chestnuts at the wood’s edge.

Tibor had spent most of his life in the House of Gold

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as the Baron's ward and, during the holidays, could climb trees as much as he pleased. But the Green Wood was different. Werwolves such as him were not welcome before dark.

Roza leapt, snapping at his hand. 'Slow down! Are you trying to get us both chained to our beds?'

Tibor took out a small pocket watch. The metal case was dented and the glass front cracked, but the wind-up mechanism – made by the finest clockmakers from the Cantons – worked perfectly, along with the musical chimes. Four dials showed the time in the four different provinces of the Claw, a small window showed the date, and – usefully for a werwolf – there was a moon display.

But more important than any of that, it had once belonged to his family. Grandparent, mother, father, he didn't know whose – but it was all he was left with at the Orphanage.

He studied it. 'Four o'clock. Everyone else is having their afternoon rest. And besides, we're only going in a little way.'

Inside the wood, a pale, dusty track wound through the trees. Their vaulted tops filtered the blazing summer sky into gentle, mote-filled shafts of light. Werwolves did not react to sunshine as vampirs did. (Moonlight, however, was another matter.)

An emerald tree frog fell into his palm as he brushed

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past a leaf. It stared, blinking at him with bulging but harmless indignation, before springing away.

There were other less harmless creatures in these woods, though. He heard them at night, their howls, their paws padding quickly through the undergrowth. They called to him.

Would he, standing here in his silk shirt and his velvet britches, ever be ready to join them?

The clop of approaching hooves up the Green Wood Road broke his thoughts.

‘He’s coming!’ barked Roza. Tibor scooped up a fistful of chestnut petals, shoved them in his pocket, and then shot up the trunk. Only two things drew out his wolf senses – a full moon or the threat of immediate danger. And sometimes he found, as he did now, if he closed his eyes and imagined the vast silveriness of the moon, he could sharpen his nails just enough to dig into the soft wood.

Summer was fading. In less than two weeks, his watch told him, there would be a new full moon – after which the days grew shorter and darker.

Once, this annual occurrence had been the harvest festival: a mortal day of festivity and celebration, sharing the fruits of the harvest with offerings, wreaths and dancing.

But now, in the Claw, during the Age of Darkness, it had a new name.

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*Spectre Night.*

Instead, vampires and werewolves would dance around bonfires of green flame, celebrating the arrival of long, dark nights while mortals quaked in their homes.

Faraway, on the slopes of the distant Black Mountain, where the White Prince had tamed the eternal flame to create his legions of immortal monsters, it was said that eyeless night spectres flew through the air and that their singing was louder than the mightiest storm.

But more importantly – to Tibor – the night this year would also mark his thirteenth birthday.

At midnight, under the light of the new autumn moon, he would finally become a full-grown, able to completely transform into a werewolf for the first time.

A mounted bay horse stopped below the branches where Tibor was hiding. He spread himself flat, trying not even to breathe. He could just make out a rider wearing a snow-white cape through the cloud of drifting leaves. There was a black lantern embroidered on the shoulder.

The horse snorted with impatience. He spoke in a brusque, clipped voice. ‘I don’t like to linger on wooded roads without an escort.’

It wasn’t the Baron, after all.

Tibor’s hand, clutching the petals inside his jacket, ready for dropping a shower of flowers as a practical joke, went limp. He tried to twist around to see where Roza had got

to, but he was trapped, plastered to a branch, a mere foot or two above a rider's head.

A rider who wore a lantern on her cape.

'Now. There's a little spell I need to prepare before we arrive,' said the rider as she dismounted.

A spell? Was this visitor a wizard? Tibor had never met one of those before.

'Are you plotting?' said the horse.

'Always, Orlov, always.'

The rider's face was hidden beneath a hunting hat, sporting a pheasant feather. Her accent was not local.

Tibor didn't even dare whisper to Roza in case the visitors overheard. His skin prickled, and a bead of sweat rolled down his nose onto the branch. What were they plotting?

His guardian was one of the most influential vampirs in the country. Tibor knew that. But everyone loved him. He never fed on mortals, only cattle, and was generous with his money. If the Baron hadn't founded the Orphanage in the Town of Terrible Children, he would never have met or adopted Tibor.

He told himself that no one would ever conspire against such a good person.

A couple of leaves fluttered off the branch onto the stranger's hat. She didn't notice, being more preoccupied with whatever she had extracted from the bag, and was now fiddling with on the saddle. The woman muttered a

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few words Tibor couldn't understand, then leapt back onto Orlov, who trotted smartly onwards.

'Hurry,' said the stranger, 'we don't want to be late.'

Then, as the horse rounded a bend up ahead, lost in the penumbral shade of the woods beyond, Tibor lost his grip. His wolf sense ensured he landed on all fours instead of his back, but it still hurt.

'If I could applaud very slowly,' said Roza, padding out from a bush.

Tibor scowled, rubbing the dirt off his knees. 'We have to warn the Baron. They were plotting something. I think he might be in danger.'

But they were not the only watchers in that wood. In the shadows of the chestnut trees on the other side of the dusty road, three children observed the horse and his rider, the boy and the dog.

They had been standing on one another's shoulders, concealed by low branches of leaves and flowers. And listening to everything. They had not missed a word.

The top child, who was the smallest and known as Smaller, jumped off her brother's shoulders, landing in a perfect crouch position. She looked one way, then the other, and signed at her brother to jump down, too.

He was slightly bigger than Smaller and slightly smaller

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than their older sister – and therefore known as Slightly. He leapt down beside her. Their older sister was bigger and stronger than her younger siblings but was also very unassuming and known as Oldest.

Once upon a time, these children's ancestors possessed more typical first names until they met terrible, unspeakable fates. Consequently, all their descendants sought vengeance – and until they had it, these were the kind of names they used.

Smaller, Slightly and Oldest had been trained by the very best. Nobody who ever met these children ever forgot them – *if* they lived to tell the tale.

They did not utter a single word, but they slipped away deeper into the woods on a secret sign. They had been trained to leave no trace. Smaller used a brush to smooth away Oldest's footprints in the ground beneath the tree; then, a comb to straighten each leaf and twig behind them as they stole towards the safety of their wagon, hidden under fallen branches.

And a very, *very* large water buffalo.

# THE DARK LANTERN SOCIETY

THE BARON'S STUDY was on the ground floor of the East Wing, with tall windows facing onto the shadiest corner of the garden. But the shutters were permanently closed on the outside, and the faded plum curtains were always drawn inside. There were no mirrors on the walls. Tibor understood this was because vampires had no reflection – so what would be the point?

The narrow door was shut when Tibor and Roza arrived, breathless, tripping over a tree bear skin spread across the stone floor of the corridor. A closed study door meant the Baron was on no account to be disturbed. At the other end of the house, a bell clanged. There was a distant bustle of activity as servants opened the front door.

In minutes, Maier, the long-faced butler, would trudge along this corridor to ask the Baron if he formally wanted

to invite the guest over the threshold. Despite their phenomenal power, vampires still had to be invited into places, and they made no exception for their guests.

(The Baron's friends were mainly vampires like him: members of his hunting party, such as Count Janos or Madame Magda, who drew up at night in their black touring cars with the window blinds down. But they rarely came into the house. They were much more keen to unfold their wings and flap off into the Green Wood, swooping down on any unfortunate deer or bears that crossed their path.)

Tibor's hand hovered over the ornate golden door handle. A mounted stag's head above the carved and gaily painted wooden lintel glowered at the pair as if it blamed them for everything.

'Are you sure about this?' said Roza.

'They said they were plotting! That rider had a little metal statue. Brightware, I think. Looked expensive.'

'A gift, perhaps. Or just a joke. Why are you always so suspicious?'

'How many jokes do you know involving spells? You are the most annoying person transformed against her will into a dog that I ever met,' said Tibor, bursting through the door.

Roza followed, her claws skittering on the polished parquet. A jewelled clock on a mantelpiece struck five o'clock with delicate, mannered chimes.

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‘Tibor!’ Baron Ambrus replaced the lid of his brightware fountain pen, and laid it down with a sigh. ‘You know I dislike being disturbed in the afternoon. We rest or study during the day, especially in the summer. We go out in the evening. And that includes you.’

‘I know,’ said Tibor. ‘But Roza and I were exploring the cellar when we realised a horse was approaching, and we thought it was you. So we went to the Green Wood, and I hid in a tree with flowers . . . I was going to drop them on your head for a trick.’

The Baron wrinkled his nose to suggest what he thought of his ward playing tricks with flowers. ‘I returned from a hunting trip early in the morning and have just risen.’

‘Then you didn’t see her, but we did. A stranger in our wood, plotting against you with her horse.’

‘Oh, Roza,’ said the Baron, frowning at her. ‘I have to say I’m disappointed. I had you transformed into a dog to supervise the boy, not to lead him astray.’

‘Yes, master,’ said Roza. She growled at the back of her throat. ‘You don’t need to remind me.’

The Baron wagged a plump finger at her. ‘As I have told you many times, the cellar is out of bounds.’

‘Only because you don’t want us to discover what’s in your safe!’ said Tibor.

Maier, the butler, rapped on the door. He poked his long,

*The Dark Lantern Society*

mournful face around the door edge so that Tibor could just see his whiskery mutton chops.

‘Guest,’ he said. Maier spoke in short words or not at all. He was so grey and stolid that Tibor suspected that his ancestors may have been actual rocks.

‘And I am expecting her! Thank you, Maier; I’ll come and invite her in now.’ Baron Ambrus strode towards the open door. Tibor thought he glimpsed his great wings, ruffling and rearranging under his hunting jacket, but it might have been a trick of the light.

Just before the Baron left, he turned on his heel, pointing at them. ‘As for you two, stay right here. Not another word of this nonsense! Don’t touch a thing, and treat our guest with the respect she deserves, or I’ll rip your throats out for breakfast. Understood?’

He slammed the door so hard that the pictures on the wall shook. On the desk, a small carving of a golden bat toppled over onto a pile of papers, which fluttered to the floor.

Tibor crouched down and gathered the papers, righting the ornament on the desk. His eye caught something curious scribbled on a sheet of notepaper. It was the name of a place that sounded familiar, but he could not think why.

*The Village of the Sun*

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Tibor frowned but tucked the name away for later. Like a pilfered caraway biscuit stashed under his pillow, in case he got hungry during the night.

Roza nudged herself against Tibor's thigh.

Tibor nudged back.

Putting on a deep voice like the Baron's, Tibor said, '*I had you transformed to supervise the boy, not lead him astray.*'

'If I had a penny for every time,' said Roza.

'You'd be a very rich dog,' said Tibor, laughing. They were such old friends. He couldn't imagine ever knowing anyone else as well as he and Roza knew each other, or what he would do without her. 'Do you think he'll ever get you turned back into a vampir?'

'Maybe one day. Maybe once you're full-grown and a werwolf, able to look after yourself.'

'But we'll stay friends, won't we?'

Roza harrumphed in the way only a dog can. 'I seem to be bound to you by some invisible thread, whether I like it or not.'

'Come on – a vampir and a werwolf, best friends! We'd be the first, surely? Maybe even make the news.'

Tibor moved restlessly around the room, rifling through the latest gazettes folded in a spread on a circular table.

The small kingdom of Princeland formed the heart of the Dragon's Claw, known to all as the Claw. The immortal White Prince had ruled it for over five hundred years from

the City of Castles – once known to those who came before as Melnor. As Tibor had learned, they had been five hundred years of growth, prosperity and blessed darkness.

Roza's ears pricked. 'They're coming!'

Tibor hurriedly put the gazette back and was trying to straighten it when the doors flew open.

The rider accompanied the Baron into the room in a bubble of conversation. They were followed by Maier bearing a tray of steaming tea in a silver pot, with plum cake, honey biscuits, lemonade for Tibor and slices of ham for Roza.

'Please, Professor, take a seat,' said the Baron, pointing to an empty chair embroidered with grinning demons. He took a matching one opposite while Maier placed the tray on a table between them and poured.

'Now, Kira,' continued the Baron, taking his first sip of smoking hot tea, 'I don't believe you've met my ward, Tibor Farkas.' The Baron summoned his young charge to stand by his chair. 'Tibor, we have a most honoured guest. This is Professor Kira Halim, one of the Claw's most celebrated scientists.'

The woman in the chair extended a hand. Tibor got a proper look at the rider from the wood for the first time. She had brown skin, and her dark hair shone in the glow of the fire. But it was her smile which transfixed him. It was one of deep, ravenous hunger.

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‘The famous Tibor Farkas, at last!’ said Professor Halim. ‘I know so much about you. I can hardly believe we haven’t already met.’

Was that Tibor’s imagination, or did the Professor raise a single plucked eyebrow as she said this?

‘The Professor and I met . . . on a trip abroad, a long time ago,’ said the Baron. ‘We had our differences at first, but our friendship has endured, hasn’t it, Kira?’

The Professor gave another hungry smile.

Then she glanced at the closed door.

‘Don’t worry, my dear,’ said the Baron. ‘We will be left in peace. It might surprise you to learn what noises have been made here that no one ever noticed.’

He dabbed a crumb of plum cake away from his lips with a folded napkin. A smidge of crushed fruit left a violent, purple-reddish stain at the corner of his mouth. It didn’t look out of place.

‘Then we can speak freely.’ The Professor leaned forward, dazzling Tibor with her gaze once more. ‘Tell me, Tibor. Have you ever heard of The Dark Lantern Society?’

‘The Dark Lantern Society?’ Tibor wondered if he was being tested. ‘I . . . don’t think so.’

‘That is the right answer!’ When the Professor laughed, Tibor understood it mattered. ‘We wouldn’t be a very good secret society if you had, would we?’

A secret society? Tibor glanced at the Baron, who was

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grinning, his cheeks flushed from tea and plum cake. He spoke with his mouth full. 'Secret only to mere mortals and lower-downs, you understand. Some of our most illustrious immortals are members.' The Baron winked.

'You're a member too?'

The floor seemed to lurch under Tibor's feet. Were they in a secret society together? Then why was she plotting?

The wolf inside stalked into his thoughts, and the boy on the outside stared down at his olive-skinned hands.

They trembled.

Suddenly, the study felt hot and suffocating. Everywhere he looked, vampires grinned at him from heavy picture frames.

The wolf inside him snarled with fear. He had heard this visitor talking of plots as clearly as he saw the blazing flames in the stove. She was lying. The Baron wasn't listening.

And his inner wild beast wanted to keep him safe. But he wasn't ready. Not here, not yet.

'Watch it,' said Roza, nipping his wrist. A dog could always tell when the wolf inside was rising.

'Are you all right, dear boy?' said the Baron. He stood up, offering his demon-embroidered chair. 'Here, take a seat.'

'I'm all right,' said Tibor, loosening his collar. 'Stuffy in here, that's all.'

'Why don't I open a window?' Carefully, the Baron

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stretched his hand through the curtains. He opened the shutters and unhooked a window from the catch. A soft, summery breeze drifted in, along with a shaft of sun that the Baron stepped around as he pulled up a small stool alongside Tibor. 'Better?'

Tibor nodded, gulping down the late afternoon air. But he wasn't.



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Piers Torday began his career in theatre and then television as a producer and writer. His first book for children, *The Last Wild*, was shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book Award and nominated for the CILIP Carnegie Medal. His second book, *The Dark Wild*, won the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize. *There May Be a Castle*, published in 2016, was a Children's Book of the Year for *The Times* and has been adapted for the stage. *The Lost Magician*, published in 2018, was a Book of the Year in six national newspapers. Piers has also completed an unfinished novel by his late father Paul Torday (author of *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*), *The Death of an Owl*, and adapted *The Box of Delights*, *A Christmas Carol* and *The Wind in the Willows* for the stage.

