

ALERIC: MONSTER HUNTER

By
Fred Wiehe

Copyright © 2011 Fred Wiehe

Gauthier Publications, ISBN: 978-0-9833593-1-9

Copyright © 2013 Fred Wiehe

Black Bed Sheet Books, ISBN: 978-0-9886590-8-7

All Rights Reserved.

Chapter 1

The three assassins should have buried Aleric Toma Bimbai deeper.
Much deeper.

They should have dug his grave to the depths of Hell, not stopping until they had broken through to Satan's abyss, unholy heat scorching their faces and torturous flames licking at the toes of their boots. They should have personally delivered him—body and soul—to the Prince of Darkness, thus ensuring his demise and the imprisonment of his soul. They should have known this two hundred year old *Rom*—hunter of monsters, killer of supernatural beasts—would not die so easily. After all, they too were Gypsies. They had heard the legends.

Granted, they had pumped six rounds of hot lead into his back, and he had gone down hard, like a bull elephant slaughtered by big game hunters with big game weapons. He didn't breathe, didn't move. He had no noticeable pulse; no sign of God-given life behind his eyes when they pried open an eyelid and peered through that window into his soul.

Still, they should have known better. They should have realized the need for one more bullet to the back of the head. They should have thought to rip out his heart and burn it to ashes on an iron plate, just like with a *strigoi*, a vampire.

After all, according to the legends, he had died before and somehow came back. Some say that he had lost his soul on the treacherous journey from the blackness of death back into the light of life. Some say that even though he again walked among the living, the light of life no longer shone within him. Instead, he supposedly walked somewhere between life and death, between blackness and light, through a landscape of never-ending shadows, dark and foreboding.

Maybe that's why the assassins saw nothing in his eye when they pried back the lid. The light, if any at all, was too dim to see. And maybe he no longer had a need to breathe to survive. Maybe his pulse no longer needed to beat to sustain his life. Maybe he was more like the supernatural creatures he hunted than he was human.

Maybe he himself was a monster.

These were the pensive thoughts that fed on his brain like vultures tearing at the flesh of a dead beast as he maneuvered a hand to his *tshuri* that he had hidden in a secret pocket of his pants. The inept assassins had missed

the knife as surely as his faint signs of life. King Tene would have their heads for their bumbling failures.

That is, if Aleric didn't get to them first. And he would get to them first. Their chances of surviving a second meeting were nonexistent. Unlike them, he was a proficient and thorough killer.

He used the knife to slice the canvas tarp they had wrapped his supposedly dead body within. With that cut away, dirt and rock poured onto his exposed face. He shut his eyes tight so as to keep tiny grains of the dirt from embedding into his eyeballs. He dared not breathe at all, for only earth and not air would fill his nose, mouth and lungs. He used the knife to blindly cut into the surrounding earth. With his other hand, he clawed his way back up to the surface, fingers bleeding from the effort. Within minutes, he broke through, rising up out of the grave like a drowning man from the ocean, gasping for the sweetness of air, choking not on water but on chunks of bitter soil.

He stood on wobbly, half-dead legs. He spat dirt from his mouth. He wiped it away from his eyes, as well. He shook his head, spraying dirt from his long hair in all directions, as if he were a wet dog trying to dry itself. The gunshot wounds were already healing themselves, blood clotting, holes closing. Soon, except for the corresponding holes in the back of his shirt, no evidence of having been shot would remain.

He wasn't immortal, just very hard to kill. Hitting a major organ such as his heart or brain was a must. He had Jeta to thank for that.

Or was it blame?

She had shared with him her curse. With that came equal shares of

salvation and damnation.

He stepped up out of his grave, onto solid ground, and scanned unfamiliar surroundings. A werewolf's moon hung low in the night sky, casting silver moonbeams across the countryside and creating eerie patchworks of shadow and light. He stood within a small clearing, surrounded by a stand of redwoods. The trees towered overhead, as if they would take you all the way to the moon if climbed. The assassins had driven him out to a desolate area for his burial. Where he now stood, he had no idea.

But it didn't matter. Somehow, he'd find his way. He always did. Then, there'd be retribution, payment for his funeral. Not revenge but punishment for the three inept assassins, for he knew them by name—Igor Antip, Bruno Duka, and Nicolae Gheorghe. All three were followers of that pompous ass that had proclaimed himself King of the Gypsies, Carranza Tene. When he finished with them, the king too would chip in a payment.

Before beginning his journey, he looked skyward and found Polaris, the North Star. He headed in that direction, plunging into the forest with the determination and confidence of a man who knew where he was going. Maybe if he could fool himself then he could fool the universe and will it to be true. He weaved his way through the towering trees and didn't stop until a ghastly howl crushed the night.

“*Ruvanush*,” he whispered, remembering the sight of the full moon.

He retrieved his knife from its secret pocket, grasping it tightly. The knife's blade was constructed of silver. Although silver would only slow down a vampire, it could kill a wolf man, a *ruvanush*.

Another wolfish howl blasted through the forest.

Closer.

He now moved with the grace and stealth of a wild beast on the prowl rather than a wounded man. And he didn't hurry away from the approaching monster but instead toward it. He much preferred to be the hunter rather than the hunted. He crouched low, moving from tree to tree, remaining in the cover of shadows as much as possible.

At the sound of crunching twigs, he turned to stone, as surely as if he had stared into Medusa's eyes. He didn't breathe, didn't twitch, didn't blink.

The monster moved steadily toward him, following its nose, sniffing out fresh meat. But it didn't show itself, and suddenly the night went deathly still. Not a crunching twig or a rustling leaf could be heard, not even a cricket. It was as quiet as a Pharaoh's tomb, devoid of life and forgotten for centuries.

"Damn," he hissed through clenched teeth.

Somehow the creature had turned the tables on him. He was again the hunted and not the hunter. He could feel the *ruvanush* stalking him, like the icy breath of damned souls on the back of his neck. His instincts told him an attack was imminent but failed to clue him in on which direction it would come. He shivered with the anticipation of impending doom. He grasped the hilt of the knife as if it was the only lifeline left to the land of the living—and maybe it was. Slowly, he spun in an attempt to see everywhere at once.

But the attack came sudden and swift, and from a direction he hadn't anticipated at all—from above.

The wolf man dropped from the trees like a large, hairy bird of prey.

Its claws slashed across his arm as it landed in a heavy thud. Both he and the beast crashed to the earth. They rolled across the ground in one massive ball of flailing arms and legs, the wolf man growling, he snarling right back, the silver blade of his knife continuously slashing at the creature, sinking deep into flesh several times but unable to inflict a mortal wound. When they collided with a redwood, they split apart as if one large being broke into two smaller halves. They both came up on their feet—or paws—facing each other.

The *ruvanush* stood like a man, on two legs. It reached seven feet tall, crouched over into a Greco-Roman, wrestling-type stance. How tall would it be if it straightened to full height? He didn't really want to find out or even think about how outmatched he was in size and weight.

They faced each other, circling, readying themselves to grapple again. The beast's massive jaws snapped at him menacingly, canines clashing together in search of flesh to rip and rend. Panted, torrid breaths of air blew out from those jaws, beating against his face like blasts of desert wind blowing across the hot sands of Hell. The pupils of its yellow eyes turned crimson as its cold, hypnotic stare bore into him. Massive, hairy hands swiped at him, only succeeding in slicing the air but large, hooked claws coming too close to his face for comfort. Gouts of black blood ran from knife wounds along its arms and chest, but it paid them no mind, as if they were nothing more than bee stings.

Aleric too bled profusely from the claw slash across his arm. It saturated the sleeve of his shirt and dripped in semi-clotted droplets to the ground; wounds inflicted by the supernatural always took longer to heal than

those by human hands or manmade weapons. Thankfully, the wounded arm was his left and not the one gripping the knife. He slashed the knife at the wolf man's face and chest, but he too hit only air.

The two warriors continued to circle, facing each other down, like two heavyweight boxers measuring each others' skills in an early round of a fight. But he couldn't afford to let the beast strike first. One slice of a claw in the right spot could be fatal. He needed to strike first. Still, a failed attempt could be fatal, as well. But at least he'd die on the offensive rather than getting it from fearful indecision. He could live—or die—with that.

Just as he readied himself to lunge at the beast with what he hoped would be a fatal blow, a gigantic, vampiric bat dive-bombed the wolf man's head. The beast whirled on it, flailing enormous, muscled-bound arms but hitting nothing but air. The bat sank fangs into the wolf man's throat, flapping membranous wings in a flurry of feeding frenzy.

The beast howled in agony and frustration, but it now had the bat in its claws, pinning the wings down and squeezing with all of its might. It pulled the bat away from its throat, freeing itself from the deadly bite and throwing the winged creature out into the night.

The bat shrieked and took flight.

That's when Aleric struck. He leaped onto the back of the beast, wounded arm choking the thing's throat, legs scissoring its muscled torso. He plunged the knife from over its head and deep into its chest. It howled and sputtered in agony, spinning and bucking. He rode the thing like a cowboy on a wild bull born of Hell, holding on for dear life, all the while slashing down with the knife and continuously planting the silver blade into

hairy flesh.

When the knife struck the wolf man's heart three times, it stopped bucking and went down hard onto its knees. He quickly climbed off, leaving the blade planted in its blackened heart, hilt sticking out of its chest. The beast made a gurgling sound in its throat, like a death rattle, before it fell to the ground with a heavy thud. A thick pool of blood grew underneath its broken body, spreading out like a black plague. Within seconds, the beast was no more. In its place was a man. The man was very much dead, with the silver point of the knife sticking out of his back.

Aleric kicked his slain foe over with the toe of his boot. The hilt almost completely disappeared into the guy's chest, but he managed to grab on and pull it free, leaving a gaping hole behind. He held the knife up and sniffed the scent of fresh blood. Then, he licked the blade clean.

Waste not, want not.

The taste of supernatural blood brought a surge of power back into his aching, tired muscles. The wound on his arm began to close. Now he could finish his journey back to the land of the living. His only regret was that the wolf man had no bounty on its head, at least that he knew of. Pity. He hated to kill monsters without profit.

He shrugged. His own life would have to be enough of a return on his talents this time. That and the opportunity to exact payment for debts owed. After all, three men owed him their lives. And he was determined to collect.

Then he would pay his disrespects to the king.

Chapter 2

The San Francisco night wore the dense fog like a funeral shroud. The damp air could make a corpse shiver. Aleric wore a black, Western duster over a black, turtle-neck sweater to protect him from the deathly chill. Black jeans and black combat boots completed the outfit. He wore his long and curly, dark hair loose to his shoulders to cover his ears. He looked like Death itself come to call as he strode through the Tenderloin District.

And maybe he was Death. After all, he carried a Mossberg 590A1 compact, pump-action shotgun with pistol grip hidden within a pocket on the inside of the duster, a classic, Dirty Harry .357 Magnum in his shoulder holster, a Glock semiautomatic pistol tucked into his belt, a survival boot knife in a quick-release sheath clipped to his right boot, and the knife that saved his life twice in one night back within the hidden pocket of his pants. The blades of both knives were constructed of silver and both handguns were loaded with silver bullets.

A bounty hunter of supernatural creatures could never be too careful.

This night, however, he wasn't in search of a monster, not of the supernatural kind anyway. He was on the prowl for the human kind, one of the three assassins. The Gypsy network informed him that he could find Bruno Duka at a stretch of sidewalk in the Tenderloin known as the *meat rack*. It was there that *chickens*—runaway waifs—sold themselves to

pedophile hawks. According to the same Gypsy network, Duka frequented the meat rack often, bringing shame upon himself and all Gypsies everywhere. His perverse pleasures were only tolerated within the Gypsy community because he was one of Tene's henchmen. Fear of reprisal kept Duka from being punished or killed for his actions.

He strode along the walkway in search of Duka but only saw the blank, white faces of the young boys that leaned against shop windows and loitered in doorways. They eyed him with curious expectation. One or two spoke up and offered him their services for, "*only twenty dollars.*" He kept walking down the block, only stopping when he saw the dark face of a Gypsy boy.

He called to the boy, "*Na daren Romoro i ame san Rom tshatsha.*"

The boy looked scared shitless at the sound of his native tongue. He licked dried, cracked lips as he looked up and down the block, in search for help that he knew wouldn't come.

Aleric repeated in English, "Do not fear, little man, for I too am Gypsy."

The boy stepped from the shadows of the doorway, out into the jaundiced glow of the street light. He looked malnourished, not much more than a skeleton in rags, shivering against the cold, teeth chattering. His large, brown eyes, however, still had a spark of life and signs of Gypsy pride. He ran a skeleton hand through thick, black curly hair that sat high atop his head.

"I do not fear you, and I am not a *romoro*," the boy said. "I am not a little man. I have taken a wife."

“You?” Aleric exclaimed.

The boy shrugged. “I am seventeen, old enough to be a man.”

He gave the boy an icy stare, one that could shrivel even Satan’s balls. “Then why do you play chicken?” he asked.

The boy shrugged. “I must feed my wife. She is with child.”

“Stealing would be better,” Aleric said. “Has no one taught you how to run a simple con game? A pregnant wife makes a great shill.”

The boy squared his bony shoulders in pride. “I’ve been on my own since I was fourteen,” he said. “There was no one to teach me. I make due.”

“Not very well,” Aleric said, eyeing the skeleton of a boy from malnourished head to malnourished toe. “I hope your wife fairs better.”

“She gets most the food.” He shivered. “And most the clothes,” he added.

Aleric nodded approval. “Then you are not a little man, as I had suspected. You are *Rom*.”

The boy raised his chin, his eyes now brimming with pride.

“What is your name?” Aleric asked.

“Pulika.”

“My name is Aleric Bimbai.” He moved closer, looming over the boy.

A shadow of fear crept into Pulika’s eyes. He licked dried, cracked lips. But to his credit, he did not back away.

“I see you’ve heard of me,” Aleric said.

The boy nodded. “I didn’t believe you really existed.”

Aleric laughed. “I wonder sometimes myself,” he said. He pulled a hundred dollar bill from his pocket. “Do you know a Gypsy named Bruno

Duka?”

Pulika eyed the bill—a prayer answered. He reached out to touch it but stopped cold. Now he eyed Aleric with suspicion. He asked, “What do I have to do?”

“Do you know him?”

Pulika nodded. “He is a ... regular,” he said, shame-faced.

“All you have to do is bring him to me. You get this hundred now and another on delivery.”

The boy licked his dried lips. Greed played across his face. “What will you do to him?” he asked, but his eyes lingered on the hundred dollar bill.

“Do you care?” Aleric asked.

Pulika shrugged bony shoulders. “Duka is scum of the earth,” he said. “Still, he is *Rom*.”

“*Chapite*; it is true,” Aleric agreed. Then he shrugged. “*Yekka buliasa nasti beshes pe done grastende*,” he said.

Pulika laughed at that. It was true; with one behind you cannot sit on two horses.

Aleric finished in English, “You must choose the horse.” He waved the hundred dollar bill at the boy.

Pulika grabbed the bill. “I choose the winning horse,” he said and stuffed the bill deep inside a pocket. “To hell with losers like Duka.”

Aleric laughed. “That’s where I plan on sending him; to Hell.”

Chapter 3

Fifteen covered wagons spread out in a half circle, a deterrent and protective barrier against both non-gypsies—*gadje*—and wild animals. Skittish horses tethered to a long chain at the far end of camp stomped heavy hooves, snorting and neighing protestations and warnings. Black, ominous cloud cover blanketed the sky, and a blistering wind whistled eerie tunes through the surrounding trees.

A raging storm perched itself on the edge of the world like a waiting vulture. When the time was right it would take flight and attack the Gypsy encampment, a torrid downpour feasting on everything in its wake. Despite the threat of this storm, two tribes gathered together on this day to celebrate a wedded union between young Aleric Bimbai of the *Lowara* and the ravishing Jeta Glaser of the *Kalderash*.

Within the camp, half-wild mutts and barefoot, ragtag children romped playfully, their high-pitched yelps and squeals muffled only slightly by gusting wind and snorting horses. Several campfires blazed underneath large cauldrons filled with pungent stew. The women hurried about in a cooking frenzy, swirling tornadoes of colorful ankle-length skirts, low-cut bodices, and dangling jewelry. The men stood in clusters throughout the camp, nattily dressed in jackets and hats for the festivities, drinking and smoking. They talked in loud, boisterous voices and laughed heartily at the *satura* being told.

Aleric stood in a cluster of six men, only half-listening to the rambling story being told by his soon-to-be-father-in-law Kore, nervously awaiting his bride for the beginning of their wedding ceremony.

Kore had the bearing of an aristocrat, an imposing man with a strong face, challenging eyes, and an impressive drooping mustache. He told his *swato* with not only words but also with waving powerful hands that emphasized each statement and point, even while holding a tin mug full of ale in one and a corncob pipe in the other. Massive gold rings glimmered on his fingers.

Kore said, “I tell you, my friends, there was once two merchants who were good friends themselves. One was smart, and one was silly.”

He gulped a bit of ale and took a healthy pull on his pipe. When he blew out the smoke, it formed three perfect blue-gray rings.

“The smart one was clean shaven, like a young boy,” he continued. “The other had a long, thick beard. Take my word for it; it was a very handsome beard.” He gulped more ale and blew more smoke rings. “One day they were talking about this and that when the one with no beard said, ‘Little brother, would you like to sell me your beard?’ The one with the beard answered, ‘Why not, if you pay me a good price.’ ‘I’ll give you whatever you ask for that fine beard of yours,’ said his smart friend. ‘I’ll let you name the price, good friend. I know you’ll be fair,’ said the one with the beard.”

Kore stopped and puffed on his pipe. The cluster of men took that opportunity to refill their tin mugs with more ale.

Aleric stared off into the distance, consumed by nervous thoughts of

his wedding night.

Kore continued, “The smart merchant said, ‘Fine, I’ll give you a good sum, but on one condition. I want the beard to keep growing on your face, but I’ll take care of it. I’ll decide how it is to grow, how it is to be combed, what perfume is to be put on it, and how it should be cut. Everything will have to be done as I like it. You won’t have the right to say anything about it. That beard will be all mine.’

“The man with the beard had no objection. ‘Sure friend,’ he said. ‘You can keep looking after my beard—I mean your beard. It will be cheaper for me!’ So they wrote out a contract, and the merchant who was clean-shaven paid a good sum to the other.”

Kore stopped again for a long gulp of ale. His pipe had gone out, so he repacked it with tobacco and struck a match. But he had great difficulty lighting it in the increasing wind. After three matches, he finally succeeded.

“It sounds like a good deal to me,” a fellow Gypsy said between drinks of ale.

“Which fella was the smart one and which fella was the silly one?” another asked.

All the men laughed.

The wind howled.

Kore shook his head in amusement. He continued, his booming voice beating back the wind. “We’ll see,” he said. “From that day on, the clean-shaven man was very particular about taking care of the beard he had bought on his friend’s face, and he stopped at nothing to show it. Whenever he felt like it or thought of it, which was many times a day, he came to tend to the

beard. It made no difference whether his friend had company or whether he was asleep. And at times he was not too gentle about his tending either. He'd pull at it and tug it. Sometimes he'd cut it to a point, sometimes in squares or zigzag. One day he'd pour sweet-scented oil over it, and the next he'd pour heaven knows what. If the poor sufferer complained, it was like talking into this wind. His crying and wailing fell flat, on deaf ears. 'Look friend; listen, you there,' he'd cry. 'You're acting like a madman. Leave my beard alone.' 'Well, here is something,' the clean-shaven man said. 'Grumbling and kicking! Maybe you'd like to break your contract. If so, you'll be in trouble. The law is on my side. That beard belongs to me and I have a right to do with it as I wish.' And then he went at the beard hammer and nails. He tugged it and pulled it until the poor merchant screamed to heaven."

Everyone laughed. Even Aleric had to force back a smile and snicker.

Kore puffed some more smoke rings, but they quickly scattered on a strong gust of wind. He continued, "So time went by while the one who had bought the beard kept tearing and teasing the beard of the one who had it on his chin. In the end the poor sufferer couldn't stand it any longer. 'Little brother, good friend, I want to buy back my beard,' he cried. 'God let me have my beard again. You are making my life worse than if I lived with the Devil.' The clean-shaven one said, 'Don't talk foolishly. I am very happy with my beard on your face. It's a nice beard, glossy and thick.' He pulled on it. 'I want to keep it,' he proclaimed. And so he kept on taking care of the beard in his own way. In the end it was too much for the bearded merchant. He cried, 'I want to buy my beard back! You are driving me crazy. Give it back to me, and I'll pay you any price!' The clean-shaven man thought for a

moment. ‘How much do you offer?’ he asked. ‘I’ll give you twice as much as you paid me.’ The smart one said, ‘Twice as much for this fine, thick, glossy beard! You’ll have to go higher, brother.’ He tugged on the beard. ‘Ouch! Let go!’ the bearded man yelled. ‘Name any price! I’ll give you whatever you ask!’ ‘That’s talking!’ the smart man said. ‘Give me four times as much as I gave you, and you’ll pay just right for your beard—and your foolishness!’ So the bearded merchant paid the other, and then he quickly went to the barber and had his beard shaved off.”

All the men laughed heartily at Kore’s *swato*.

“I guess we’ve seen who the smart one was, after all,” one Gypsy yelled and slapped Kore on the back.

All the men laughed again.

But Aleric could only manage a half-hearted smile. After all, wedding jitters bombarded his thoughts, and an aching heart longed for the company of his bride. Just when he thought he could wait no longer, he caught sight of her.

Jeta emerged from the back of a wagon. She waved a red silk scarf in one hand, signifying her new status as a seventeen-year-old married woman. A white, lacy veil covered her lovely face and bold, brown eyes. A diamond-encrusted tiara adorned her jet, black hair and gold earrings dangled from her perfect earlobes. A white wedding gown clung to her girlish shape and the ankle-length skirt whipped in the wind, revealing dainty, bare feet.

The sight of her took Aleric’s breath away.

A young friend standing next to him loudly said, “*Shuk tski khalpe la royasa.*”

Everyone nearby laughed heartily.

An old Gypsy proclaimed, “He’s right, young Aleric; ‘beauty cannot be eaten with a spoon.’ What do you have to say to that?”

Aleric didn’t take his eyes from his bride but answered, “*Sako peskero charo dikhel.*”

The men roared with good cheer.

The old Gypsy answered, “He’s right too; ‘everybody sees only his own dish.’ What do you have to say to that, young friend?”

The young friend called out, “*Te xav ka to biav.*”

Aleric smiled and answered, “Yes, you may eat at my wedding ... we all will ... but this particular dish is meant only for me.”

Hearty laughter roared again.

Jeta stepped down and crossed the camp toward him. With her, came the first splattering of a cold rain, and a threat from the wind to steal away the veil and tiara.

But nothing could dampen Jeta and Aleric’s spirits on this day. The heat generated between them was hotter than a broiling August sun.

Jeta began a flirtatious dance. Accompanied by a screeching fiddle, she danced circles around her new husband, stepping and twirling with the grace of a ballerina. When she offered him the scarf, he took it readily and willingly, joining her in the marriage dance. Each held an end, their eyes locked, silently vowing undying love as they stepped to the fiddle’s lively music.

But before the dance ended and their marriage could officially begin, a bolt of lightning ripped open the black sky. Thunder roared like a

monstrous beast. A drenching rain pounded the camp.

And someone somewhere screamed, “*Strigoi!*”

Everyone stopped and looked skyward.

Vampires followed the rain’s advance attack, as if the lightning had unlocked the gates of Hell and the thunder had been a call to arms. Six hideous specters swooped into camp, gliding on the wind currents with large bat-like wings. Their faces were grotesque, deformed into masks of evil. They bared monstrous fangs and shrieked like crazed banshees.

The Gypsies screamed in terror, adding to the cacophony that echoed through the camp. They scattered like a pile of fallen leaves in the strong wind, each praying to God that they would not be the one caught and taken.

But God could not or would not answer everyone’s prayers on that day.

Each vampire snatched a screaming woman or a crying child within their clawed grasps and stole them away, back into the blackened sky from which they had come, as if Hell now resided where heaven had once existed.

Aleric held Jeta’s hand tightly and pulled her with him toward the cover and safety of the surrounding trees. But in the middle of their escape she slipped in the mud. She went down hard to her knees. Her wet hand slithered from within his grasp.

He slid to a stop and reversed his field as quickly as possible, but a shrieking specter plowed into him. It sent him sprawling backward to the wet ground. He watched in horror from where he sat in a sloppy concoction of water, mud, and blood. The hideous creature of the night clasped its claws into Jeta’s glossy, black hair and—like a monstrous bird of prey—stole her

away.

The sight of her kicking legs, outstretched arms, and horror-stricken face as the cursed thing carried her off would haunt Aleric's waking thoughts and sleeping nightmares for the next two hundred years. The sound of her child-like voice screeching his name, pleading for him to save her, would echo through every fiber of his being for eternity.

She screamed, "Aleric!"

Movement from the other side of the closed door mercifully shook Aleric from the morose memories that plagued his mind's eye like a recurring horror movie. He waited in the dark hotel room for Pulika to deliver the scum Duka to him. He sat in a rickety, wooden chair, long coat open and hanging to the floor. The compact shotgun lay across his lap. His hand tightened around the pistol grip.

The door creaked in protest as it slowly opened. A slither of light entered the room from the hallway's naked light bulb. It amputated one side of the room from the other with the precision of a surgeon's scalpel.

A blanket of darkness still covered the far-left corner of the room where he waited like a coiled rattler. However, unlike that snake, he would give no warning before his deadly, venomous strike.

"We can be alone here," Pulika said from the hallway, a promise he knew he wouldn't and couldn't keep.

"I'm not paying for a room when my car will do," Duka said. "You can give me head anywhere, boy."

Pulika appeared in the doorway. He stood sideways and motioned for

his companion to enter. “The room is paid up for another hour,” he promised, “by an earlier ... customer.”

Duka pushed past the boy and through the doorway. He stopped, fully exposed within the backlight from the hall.

Aleric remained coiled yet silent, ready to strike.

Pulika reached in and flipped the light switch. He slammed the door shut with him on the other side and ran down the hallway, away from the violence, trusting Aleric to pay him when the job was completed.

“Hey,” Duka yelled, confused by the fleeing boy. He stood awash in a flood of harsh, bright light, squinting, a large, hairy hand shielding his eyes.

Aleric raised the barrel of the shotgun and aimed it at the squat and heavysset, balding Gypsy that stood before him like a lamb led to slaughter. He had already pumped a round into the chamber. But he didn't shoot. Instead, he waited for Duka's confusion to wane and eyes to adjust. He waited to be recognized and acknowledged.

He didn't have long to wait.

Like a growing storm, a look of confounded horror quickly darkened Duka's ugly face. “Bimbai!” he yelled. “Shit! Fuck!” He reached a clumsy hand inside his jacket for the gun he carried in a shoulder holster.

The storm suddenly broke. A shotgun blast boomed like thunder inside the small hotel room.

The round slammed into Duka's kneecap. He cried bloody murder and crashed to the floor. He struggled back up onto his good knee, grimacing and grunting like a stuffed pig, and again went for the gun in his shoulder holster.

Swift and graceful, Aleric drew the survival boot knife from its quick-release sheath. He threw it with deft expertise from across the room.

The silver blade planted itself squarely into Duka's shoulder. The ugly Gypsy yelled in painful protest and dropped his gun. He slumped back onto the floor, back and head banging on the closed door behind him.

Aleric rose from the chair and crossed the room with vampire-like quickness. He pulled the knife from the man's shoulder and neatly sliced his prey's throat.

As if playing his own death dirge, Duka gurgled and gasped as he slowly bled to death from the gaping wound that traveled from one ear to the other.

"That's one," Aleric whispered as he carved the number one into his victim's forehead: A message to the other two and their king.

Continued in *Aleric: Monster Hunter*

Copyright © 2011 Fred Wiehe
All Rights Reserved.

Visit Fred at <http://www.fredwiehe.com>