

Outback Vengeance Sample

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Chapter One

ALICE SPRINGS, CENTRAL AUSTRALIA - 1985

Pam Griffiths couldn't concentrate, her friend doing the work for two as the deep-red grandeur of the MacDonnell Range overshadowed their toil. Erecting, equipping and manning a first aid tent for the forthcoming event. Preparing for minor cuts and bruises, hoping there'd be no major injury.

Her mind was on two nights ago, the threatening clouds unnoticed. Clouds an unwelcome change from the sky's normally ever-present blue.

Finally a stable future? Security?

All with a man who'd been part of her life since her arrival in the small town of Alice Springs twelve years ago. Her home in the dry, remote centre of Australia.

She'd overlooked him twice, despite their lives being linked for a generation. Twice he'd rescued her from the greatest of dangers.

Finally, signs of a destiny together.

But does he feel the same?

A destiny certain until two nights ago when her confidence evaporated. Now only confusion. Expectations crumbling. Their romantic dinner shattered by two men that emerged from her past.

The Californian accent caught her attention even before she turned, not believing the one-time Bruins footballer could be here in remote Central Australia. The man with whom she'd shared twelve euphoric days. Bliss indelibly etched into crevice of her memory.

Then a second voice. The unmistakable Hungarian accent of Marton Landor. Another ecstatic island encounter. Another possible future crushed by her irrational accusations.

Incredible times with both. A heart-wrenching ending to both.

So why appear now?

Both forcing her to reassess her relationship with Mike. Forcing her to challenge her new future.

Both reminders of euphoria past. Of dangers past.

A weak shaft of light penetrated the gloom as Marton Landor woke from a restless sleep. He'd twisted and turned, re-analysing every part of his plan. Desperate to convince himself nothing would go wrong.

But the fear remained.

He stared through the peephole. Everything different. Gone the normally cloudless sky, the harsh sun parching the dry, red countryside. Today the sun was just a misty circle, indistinct at its edges as it fought the banks of cloud.

Stomach acid surged at the sight so unlike this hot, dry town.

A sign? But my cause is just.

The scrape of two sets of feet on the metal staircase. “The security door seals are still intact.” The unseen voice was heavily accented.

“All fine here then. Just three more buildings to go.” The second voice Australian.

The tension etched into Marton’s face softened, replaced by a smile of quiet achievement, his presence still a secret.

Despite convincing himself everything was in order, Marton’s heart pounded. Breath quickened.

Not much longer.

Three hours slipped by.

Should have happened by now!

Again, he looked through his peep hole, his brow a deep-set frown. While dark clouds continued to build on the horizon, all seemed calm.

The police should have reacted by now.

His cheek twitched. His arm tingled. His gut in revolt.

They must’ve found out. Years of planning for nothing?

Then a murmur from the vast crowd, a murmur building to a crescendo as the statesman’s vehicle entered the grounds. Lightning and thunder were his welcome.

Marton snapped out of his despair at the man’s arrival, yet uncertain of the thunder’s meaning.

Omen for success? Or foreshadowing failure?

Cheers roared as the official visitor waved from the dais. The roar a frenzy as he raised his hands a second time, another lightning flash becoming an overture for the speech to follow.

As silence finally settled over the crowd, Marton set up his weapon. The corners of his eyes pooling at the memory of his father dying.

But this time, Marton was no longer the hunted.

He was the hunter.

Evil men killed you that day. But today I'll make the world a better place. Destroy a different evil.

The statesman continued his address to the massed audience. At each major statement, while the crowd roared a response, Marton stood in a shroud of adrenaline-charged sweat. T shirt soaked. Armpits awash. Groin clammy. Forcing the tenseness from his body, he adopted the power triangle. Right foot a few inches in front of the left. Arms cradling his weapon. Not too gentle. Not too tight.

He blinked.

Blinked again. Commanded his eyes to dry.

Front sight clear.

Crosshairs centred on his target's head.

Total control.

The orator's voice built to a major proclamation. The crowd roared. Another lightning sheet energised the sky.

Marton squeezed the trigger.

The bullet spat its destiny.

Its sound drowned by the thunder's roar.

Chapter Two

BUDAPEST, HUNGARY - 1950

Thirty-five years earlier, seven-year-old Márton Landor woke with a start.

Sensed danger.

Not unusual. Like all in Communist Hungary, he fought to retain even the smallest possession. But this wasn't a street scuffle.

It was silent. After midnight.

Mind racing, he lay rigid on the floor, determined not to disturb his parents who shared the wafer-thin, horse hair mattress. Another family of four slept in the opposite corner.

His rigidity fueled by tentacles of fear, penetrating ever deeper. Outside, the frigid mantle of fog penetrated Pest's every crevice; that flat part of the country's capital east of the River Danube. A fog that blocked the smattering of lights from the heights of Buda.

Eyes straining, he saw nothing through the small, grime-covered window.

Something's coming.

The all-enveloping silence shattered as a truck screeched to a halt. Bodies jumped onto a frost-covered roadway. Scores of nearby families woke at the sound, praying they wouldn't be tonight's target.

Jackboots pounded up the stairwell. Rifle butts destroyed Márton's door and six AVH secret police stormed the two-room apartment. Its twelve residents trembled as they shuffled into the slightly larger room, Márton gripping his mother's legs as she seized her husband's waist.

"Landor family! Landor family!" The man in charge: short, portly, arrogant.

Three families shuffled backwards, cringing to the farthest corner, relief sweeping their faces.

Márton and his parents Péter and Isabella remained in the centre of the room.

"I'm Péter Landor." Márton's father took a defiant step forward, attempting to disguise a gut in turmoil. "Why this intrusion in the middle of the night?"

Márton forced himself even tighter between Isabella's legs, eyes hiding from the intruders' malicious leers.

"All come! Now!"

"Why?" Despite his fear, Péter attempted to appear unruffled.

"No". Isabella's eyes pleaded but Péter stood firm.

"I ask again. Why?"

"Declared an Enemy of the People." The sergeant sneered. "Each get a coat. Nothing else!"

"Don't be absurd. We've done nothing wrong!"

Márton saw a secret policeman lift his rifle, ready to strike. He fought his mother's grasp, frantic to protect his father, but there was no escape from his mother's hold.

The rifle butt cracked against Péter's jaw. Collapsing on the floor, he curled into a foetal ball as steel capped boots kicked at his ribs, at his head.

“A reward for your obstinacy.”

Márton screamed, and finally pulling free, dived onto his father. Scrawny limbs thrashing, he attempted to provide protection.

“Leave him alone.” Márton screamed defiance. “He's my father!”

Contemptuous of the boy's efforts, one soldier reversed his rifle, about to club the young annoyance.

Despite kicks raining over his body, Péter grabbed Márton and rolled over, his back protecting his only son.

The soldier swore at his target's disappearance.

“Roll him back. Need to get a full swipe at the little bastard.”

“Stop!” The sergeant ordered, glaring down his troops. Although as savage as his subordinates, he also was a father, horrified that a child the same age as his own was about to be beaten to a pulp. “They're to be arrested. Not killed!”

Frustration flushed across his subordinate's face, thwarted in his blood lust.

“Coats! Then down to the truck!” The sergeant still had his orders.

In their night attire and each with just a single coat, they were prodded, kicked and herded down the stairs. Two AVH agents remained, sharing the little of value left behind.

“Onto the truck!”

Márton and Isabella climbed up, leant over, and each grabbed one of Péter's blood-covered hands. Straining, they hauled their battered patriarch onto the vehicle and were herded into the front corner, the AVH men sitting between the prisoners and escape. As the lorry drove through the city wasteland, Márton gripped his mother and father,

desperate for their comforting embrace. Péter pulled the boy further into his shoulder. “Stay strong, son.”

“But I’m not afraid.” Desperate to keep the swelling tears from cascading down his cheeks, Márton forced his mind to repeat the well-drilled mantra. *Show courage against your enemies.* “Why are they doing this?”

Péter gently stroked Márton’s head. “Not sure. But we’ve no option but obey. Things will change one day.”

“People aren’t always like this?”

“Life was wonderful before the Nazis and the Communists. Some day we’ll be free again. But we must bide our time.”

They swept by jagged rubble just visible through the gloom, passing bombed-out street after bombed-out street, eighty percent of Budapest’s pre-war magnificence still in ruins. The Soviets had defeated the Nazis and their Hungarian partners, and seized control. With assassination, torture, intimidation, propaganda and terror their weapons; the country once more lived in fear. Hitler’s Gestapo was now replaced by the Communist’s equally callous AVH, the ‘Fists of the Party’. A shadow of informers watched over every family, every house, every street, every factory, every office, every school, every shop, every university, every church, every theatre and every sporting activity.

Every move noted.

Every move reported.

No one safe.

Márton, Péter and Isabella were victims of one of the thousands of informers.

Prodded out of the truck at the Nyugati railway station, dread bored deep into the eighty pairs of eyes assembled by the open cattle wagons. All human cargo. Mainly male but with six families. All had

fallen foul of the dreaded secret police, a casualty of petty jealousy like Péter, or as revenge for real or imagined past or present scores.

War had not only destroyed the city, it had also destroyed Péter's pre-war wine business. With a wife and son to support, he duplicated the origins of his old partner's hospitality empire, setting up a street stall outside the gates of the main Soviet barracks and selling traditional pork-filled cabbage rolls in sauerkraut. Despite the Soviet troops having little money, business was brisk as Péter's delicacies were a relief from the Red Army's scarce and monotonous rations.

Péter's 'crime' was that he operated his own food stall and any private business activity was considered a 'Crime against the People'. Even the smallest business made him a 'Bourgeois Traitor to the Working Class'.

Prodded at rifle point, they were crammed into the cattle wagons.
Destination unknown.

Chapter Three

EASTERN HUNGARY

Cloud, cramped and fearful, despair enveloped the prisoners like a poisonous mist. They headed east as the train journeyed through Miskolc towards the Soviet border.

“God! Not Siberia!” Péter gripped his family. All had a similar fear, aware that untold thousands of Hungarians had disappeared to the Soviet Union gulags. Despair intensified as they passed through Kisváda, but stopping on the town’s outskirts, a sigh of relief rattled down the cattle cars.

“Hopefully no further,” Péter whispered to Isabella, fear buried deep in his eyes.

“Out!” The order spat.

Forced onto open lorries, despondency returned as they continued east, passing the village of Benk, the Tisa River flowing through its centre.

“No!” screamed a prisoner. A signpost showed three kilometres to the border with Ukraine, the first of the Soviet republics.

But the trucks stopped at an abandoned farm on a flat river plain, just short of the boundary. A sight made even more depressing by a weak dawn struggling to make its presence felt through the all-compassing fog. Droplets of dew covered the prisoners' shoulders and hair, coats soaked from the icy damp.

De-bussed at rifle point, guards prodded the motley group into the shape of a U. Terrified, Márton stood between his parents, their arms interlocked behind his back, their touch his only protection.

Grossly fat, an officer stood at the head, snarling dogs at the rear and armed men on either side.

“Welcome to Benk East Work Camp.” The overseer sneered. “I am Comrade Repka, officer in charge. Here you will work hard. Do as ordered. Whenever ordered. Disobedience or idleness will be treated as treason. Punishment: Siberia or death.”

“Why are we here?” demanded Márton’s father. “No one’s been charged.”

Repka gave a guttural laugh. “You’ve all not only been charged, you’ve all been convicted.”

“But there’s been no trial!” Marton’s father refused to accept such an outrage. *‘Fight injustice’*, the family code, rose from deep within. “We’ve given no defence.”

The other prisoners shrank at Péter’s defiance.

“The People’s Court convicted you in your absence. It doesn’t waste time with reactionary traitors.” Repka strode down the line, and after a contemptuous glare at Márton, stared into his father’s face, nose millimetres away.

“Name!”

Péter responded curtly, wincing at the stench of rotting teeth.

“Trade?”

“Wine merchant.”

“Wine merchant, eh! Fine wines for the rich parasites now brought down to earth by the People! Have you ever done a real day’s work in your life?”

“Of course. You only succeed in business through hard work.”

“Sitting at a desk’s not work. Ever got your hands dirty? Amongst the vines?”

“No. But no one working in the vineyards would have been paid with out merchants like me.”

Repka had no interest in or understanding of business.

“You and the remainder of your bloodsucking friends will soon know about farming. About hard work! You’ll work till you drop. But I’ll make sure you work hardest of all, Landor. I’ll hold you personally responsible for the farm’s output!”

Grinning at his scapegoat decision for the farm’s tedious management arrangements, Repka continued waddling down the row of prisoners. He stopped in front of the Catholic priest. “A priest, eh! A boot-licker of the rich, bloated Church! Taking money from the poor, pretending it will buy a place in heaven. The new People’s Hungary has no place for your freeloading Church and its pantomime of false hopes. Religion was an opiate for the masses, but now the masses are in control.”

“Only those who serve the Lord will live an eternal life,” Father Benedict stammered, eyes avoiding the officer’s fanatical stare.

Deeply religious himself, Péter could see fear in the old priest’s face, his heart going out to the holy man. *Protect the weak and unfortunate.* He flared in anger and took a deep breath, about to launch in the priest’s defence. But reality struck. Prepared to personally suffer the guard’s retaliation, he realised confrontation would only worsen the cleric’s predicament. Seething within, Péter bit his tongue.

“You say only those who serve the Lord will live an eternal life, eh?” laughed Repka. “Heed my words, old man. In this this place, I’m the closest thing to God and you can all forget about any future life. It’s me who’ll determine your suffering here on earth. But while the Party rejects your Church, it does respect its clergy. You’re lucky! You’re the only man excused from endless slaving in the fields for the rest of your life.”

Repka moved to the head of the prisoners.

“That large cattle shed is your sleeping shelter,” contemptuously waving his finger in the direction of the ramshackle structure. “In the corner, you’ll each find a blanket and single set of clothes. But first you must remove the century-old layer of cow dung cemented to its floor.”

Chapter Four

SLEEPING SHELTER, BENK WORK CAMP

Many hours later Repka inspected the work, and with manure removed down to the bare earth, all were in a filthy state.

“March to the river. You will wash yourselves and your clothes once each month.”

Naked and blue with cold, Márton lined up with the other prisoners by the near-freezing river.

Repka searched their bodies and clothing.

Gloating, he forced off Isabella’s wedding ring. “The People will have a far better use for this than you.” Fortunately, her engagement ring with its enormous diamond had been secretly stored before the end of the war.

After the Soviet invasion, to be from a noble family meant death, so Count Bargossy Péter and Countess Bargossy Isabella had changed their names to simply Péter and Isabella Landor. Their son Bargossy

Márton was now Márton Landor. With the abolition of all private ownership, their imposing, butter-coloured villa with its curved roof, Baroque-inspired facade and generous grounds was seized by peasant troops of a Soviet horse transport unit. Pigs and chickens shared the villa's ornate rooms while horses destroyed the once manicured grounds. Knowing they'd never live in their home again, Péter had searched for accommodation in the devastated city. Fábián Dobrosi, his old wine business foreman, had offered shelter in his undamaged, one bedroom apartment. It was there they'd been seized by the AHV.

Continuing his theft, Repka turned to Márton's father, his eyes lighting at the sight of the heavy gold crucifix hanging from Péter's neck. A family heirloom, the family crest was etched into the thick, solid gold.

“Another treasure bought from the sweat of your peasants?” Repka ripped the cross from Péter's neck and put it into his pocket, pleased it would bring a good price.

“That's been passed down through the family for centuries,” objected Péter.

“Not anymore!” Repka and Péter's eyes locked, fury deep within those of the guard. “I think I'm going to enjoy having you here, Landor,” he fumed. “Forget about any help from your God. I'm going to make your life here Hell!”

Repka ordered Péter aside when they returned to the camp.

“You're the only one with farming experience.”

“No, I haven't.”

“You said you know about vineyards.”

“I said I've visited many vineyards with the vignerons. But I've never actually worked with the vines.”

“The commissars demand a high output from this farm and I’m holding you personally responsible for its output. If production falls below Budapest’s targets, you’ll regret every moment of your failure.”

Chapter Five

PIG ENCLOSURE, BENK WORK CAMP

Nine months later, Márton Landor herded the pigs down the timber-railed race, forcing his way through ankle-deep excrement. Threadbare trousers were caked to his skin.

“Look, young Count,” mocked Comrade Repka, aware of the boy’s aristocratic origins. “Look how your subjects grovel on all fours before your regal presence.”

The tips of his ears purple with cold, the camp’s overseer positioned himself by the timber fence, level with the emaciated seven-year-old. Aiming his heavy club between the top and bottom rail, and with the full power of his solid, bull-necked body, he swung it against the back of the Márton’s knees.

The boy’s legs crumpled, his face sinking into a putrid mix of mud and pig shit.

“That’s it! Return your subjects’ bow.”

Márton froze. *Show courage against your enemies.* Prone in the putrid muck, he forced himself to control his anger. To react would worsen his treatment.

“What’s up, my noble friend? Too arrogant to stand?”

Márton remained motionless, his gut on fire. With his chest and chin buried, only his lips were clear of the filth. He loathed Repka. Freedom his obsession, he loathed the work camp. He loathed the torment heaped on his mother and father. He loathed that there could be such evil in the world..

How can we ever be free? Be in control of our lives?

No matter how oppressive his family’s position, he could only see more of the same. For now, silence was his only defence, unaware that freedom awaited half a world away. In the centre of the vast Australian continent.

Repka finally lost interest and shuffled off, his gross torso swaying side to side.

Márton slowly rose when the coast was finally clear, drawing as little attention to himself as possible.

Father Benedict had observed the boy’s humiliation and walked over to provide solace. “Never fear, my son.” The old man’s hand possessively held the boy’s shoulder.

“How can God let there be evil like this?” Marton’s face contorted. He tried to control his revulsion at the old priest’s recurring and uninvited signs of affection.

“Repka will pay for his sins in the after life. It’s God the Father who ultimately metes out justice.”

Márton extracted himself from the priest’s ramblings. Having completed his morning chores, he made his way to the corner of the old hay store, now the inmates’ eating mess and kitchen. Mother Isabella and another woman were hard at work.

“There’s a small ration of decaying potatoes, onions and parsnips,” said a matronly prisoner. Six pig thigh bones joined the rotting vegetables in the large, cast iron cauldron that simmered over an open fire. “Bones have a hint of flesh and we’ve picked some wild herbs to give the soup some flavour.”

Breakfast and lunch comprised a small quantity of mouldy bread.

Chapter Six

BENK WORK CAMP

Exhausted after securing the pigs for the night, Márton walked to the sleeping quarters, horrified that the pigs ate far better than he and his fellow inmates.

Sickness, starvation, beatings and overwork reduced the camp to 52 survivors in the first year. All city folk, with their combined skills they could have efficiently run a small town but none had experience in cultivating corn, barley and potatoes. With no expertise, no suitable clothing, no water proof footwear, primitive and inadequate tools, minimal rations and the guards' ongoing brutality, it was impossible to meet the inflated quotas set by commissars in faraway Budapest.

“Makes my heart bleed.” Péter’s eyes watered one night as he told Isabella of being ordered to rip out hectares of prime vineyards and replace them with rice, a crop unsuitable for the cold, local conditions. “Some of those vines have been tended for centuries. It’s sickening.”

To everyone’s surprise, an ancient, tank-like bulldozer appeared. Despite its unreliability, leveling the land and building irrigation banks

was no longer purely back-breaking labour. All took turns driving the machine when it worked, a break from the gruelling workload. With no formal spare parts, the mechanic achieved wonders in keeping the decrepit vehicle operating.

As Marton's father predicted, the first year's output was well below the Commissars' farcical quotas and Repka's revenge was a 're-education cell', a deep hole in the ground slightly wider than Márton's father's shoulders.

"Production's well below target, the fault of your capitalist laziness. You're their leader. After four weeks in your new 'bedroom', I'm sure you'll improve things next year." Budapest was putting pressure on Repka. "And only half the rations you complain about."

"We're not the problem." Péter stood his ground. "The problem's your so-called management, your out-of-touch government sending peasant farm workers to run factories and city folk to run farms. Political dogma doesn't produce food. You need realistic targets, proper tools, proper food, proper seed and proper management by capable people."

"Don't try to shift the blame to me. Four weeks in this cell will bring you to your senses."

"Torture me all you like but it won't make a difference."

"You'll be crying for mercy," Repka snarled, his face crimson, hands quivering. "You can't lie down; there'll be no light, and food only every second day. After four weeks in this hell hole, just try to say you can't do better."

Márton and Isabella stood helplessly as Péter was lowered into the hole.

He stood upright as long as possible, pushing tightly into one corner to help support his body. When weariness finally engulfed, his legs collapsed, body slipping lower and lower. Howling inwardly, a dribbling mess in the lonely dark, he sank cramped into the ice-cold mud.

Show no weakness. Show courage against your enemies.

He was determined Repka would never know how unbearable the pain. Twisted awkwardly for hour after hour he was unable to move. Head throbbing, excruciating spasms radiated from his shoulder. Totally numb, his lower arm was locked under his body, his hip twisted to fit the space. His legs convulsed at their contorted angle, feet paralysed by further distortion, every muscle in revolt.

The bastard mustn't know how close he's come to breaking me.

In an attempt to remain sane, each night he forced his mind to happier times, the first night going back ten years. To the approaching war. Before their forced change of name. To their time as Count Bargossy Péter and wife, Countess Bargossy Isabella. To the baroque splendour of Buda castle and the Citadel looking down from the rugged heights of the Danube's opposite bank. To the gilded drawing room of Villa Bargossy on the outskirts of Pest. As if it was yesterday.

One of so many enjoyable nights.

Isabella, Péter's slim, elegant countess, sat on an ornate chaise lounge. Of similar height but with a more generous body, her sister sat opposite, their golden hair sparkling from the glow of the opulent chandelier,

With a swarthy face, prominent nose and determined jaw, brother-in-law Rosinger turned, dark pupils penetrating Péter's steel blue eyes.

"I must admit when I married your sister, I thought you conceited and irresponsible."

Péter had squirmed at the remark, certain his fencing scar had darkened, no longer merging into his then blond, aristocratic moustache. Rosinger had grinned. A rare occurrence given Péter's brother-in-law and business partner's normally serious demeanour. "I believed your financial misfortune was a result of extravagance, idleness and bad management, completely overlooking wars, political upheaval and revolution. Fortunately, my opinion's changed."

His grin had blossomed to an engaging smile as he embraced his sister-in-law. "You chose well after all, Isabella, our two family's inseparable. Our lives locked as one. A toast!"

The two blond yet dissimilar sisters and we, their distinctly different husbands, raised our champagne coups.

"Yes. Two families as one!"

At the memory, a brief warmth permeated Péter's every tormented cell, briefly masking the endless pain.

Chapter Seven

7. RE- EDUCATION CELL, BENK WORK CAMP

By morning, only by clenching his teeth could Péter hold back the screams.

Steel yourself! Don't show weakness! Only his time-honoured, aristocratic code gave him the strength to continue. It was a battle of wills. But it was only he who suffered the physical torture.

When fellow prisoners dragged Péter out of his hell hole each morning, his body was close to shut down. They would arrive just in time.

Comatose, his body prostrate, he was unable to move. He clamped his jaw, imprisoning the cries so desperate to escape.

“An enjoyable night, Count?” Repka gloated. “Hope you’re looking forward to even more fun tonight.”

“I look forward to it.” Péter forced a reply.

“I’ll break you if it’s the last thing I do.” The guard’s snarl preceded a smirk of expected victory.

Strengthened by the guard’s remarks and with each arm over the shoulder of a fellow prisoner, Péter staggered forward. He forced his back straight, despite the muscles wanting to return to the curve of hours past, struggling to raise his head against tendons that pulled ever downwards.

Márton and Isabella always rushed forward, hugging Péter for dear life. The guards viciously pulled them away.

Forcing one jelly foot in front of the other, his fellow prisoners nursed Péter to yet another day of hard physical labour.

Péter again fought the second night’s torment. Forced a smile in spite of the pain, in spite of the blackness.

Two weddings. Two blond sisters. His own marriage to his beloved Isabella, Theresa marrying hard-working Rosinger. The four becoming inseparable, racial origins ignored.

The Bálints’ opulent apartment above their Empire Restaurant, Budapest’s finest eatery. Shared Jewish or Catholic celebrations; Easter and Christmas from the Count’s side, Passover and Hanukah from Rosinger’s. Not so much as religious rites, but shared family traditions.

Rosinger lighting the last of the Menorah lamp’s nine flames.

Memories of their wine business, of Rosinger’s invitation to partner a new wine wholesale operation, the next venture in his growing hospitality

empire. Péter's elegant wife, his noble Bargossy family name, his title and family crest had opened doors everywhere, their business blossoming with substantial cellar holdings of Europe's finest vintages.

War loomed. "With our country linked to the Nazis, our business is at risk." Rosinger's defiant nose added gravity to his words. "We need to protect the most valuable of our wine stocks and all that our families hold dear."

All nodded.

"But valuables and wine aren't the only thing that could disappear in the uncertainty ahead." Rosinger's face became even more earnest as he detailed his proposal.

While Péter and Isabella were startled by its nature, they willingly agreed. There were complications and the four family members deliberated well into the night. Their plan only emerging at dawn.

Péter's smile shattered as he tried to shuffle his body to reduce the torment.

So it went, agonising night after agonising night for two full weeks. Márton and Isabella's tearful faces were the last thing he'd see each night. Relief on their faces each morning.

Stay strong, he would command throughout the ordeal, determined not to let the fiend defeat him.

He fought the torture. Painful second by painful second. Tormented minute by tormented minute. Agonising hour by agonising hour. The two hours before daybreak were the worst, his mind descending to the same level of depravity as the demonic Repka.

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