



# THE VAMPIRE FROG'S DAUGHTER

An Adventure in Horror

There are some who believe in life after death. Others believe there are those who remain behind after death. Whether this is a twisted form of immortality or that these beings have always been among us, who can say. But they have a plan.

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Rhacophorus vampyrus or the vampire flying frog. Its only recently been discovered. Which means its been around for centuries and no one knew. You might say they were invisible.

Elsie, on the other hand, was far from invisible. A Ukrainian by birth, she'd moved to the US as a small child. In and out of boarding schools, where she spent most of her time far too involved with young men, she eventually ran away from home. She spent some time modeling but considered her actual career to be a serious party goer. There she consorted with statesmen and ambassadors, actors and directors. If some women occasionally appeared on the casting couch, Elsie, by contrast, was practically a resident.

She had the typical appearance which always resulted in smiles from everyone she met. In fact, it was virtually impossible to have any other expression in her presence. She enjoyed allowing men to look her up and down. Elsie had no problem letting their gaze linger where men's eyes were not traditionally supposed to be. She was ushered into the organization late one night, although she has no memory of the man who gave her the actual initiation. She met up with Kateryna, Natalya, and Liliya shortly thereafter.

Assassinations have been a part of political tactics since the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It's not that they are difficult. What is hard is not being seen while you are doing it. These days with cameras that can be made the size of a single wire, being unobserved is truly a talent. The Vampire Frog Group specializes in both being seen and unseen at the same time. The girls have great respect for democratic principles and philosophy... they just have a problem with the ruleset.

Fortunately, due to almost three decades of work in the modeling and fashion industries, the girls have collected more resources than the total clandestine budgets of most countries. They've become determined to use these resources to root out unsavory organizations... resolving their issues in the most straightforward and final way possible. Now you'd think that such organizations, especially those with conservative religious leanings, would be impenetrable to four extraordinarily attractive young women. In which case, you couldn't be more wrong. Have you ever noticed how such organizations are almost exclusively men?

"Where did you come from?" The thug-like man in the hallway grunted.

Natalya stepped out of the shadows. She had no problem showing off what little she was wearing. The man at the door was rather large and husky. He certainly wasn't charming, but he did have a particular air about him. One that Natalya found intriguing. He also had a cute butt. She glanced at his eyes and bulging shoulders. He was looking... well, everywhere but her eyes.

"I seem to have gotten lost." When some language finally develops a specific term meaning extremely and disarmingly charming, they will no doubt use Natalya as a reference example.

"You can't stay here," he grunted in thickly accented English, "This is a private floor."

Natalya was impressed with his apparent reserve, but his roaming eyes were telling another story. She crooked her finger and indicated that he should lean down so she could whisper something in his ear. As he did so, her fangs sank deep into his neck.

The effect was surprisingly immediate. It was as if a hand-dipped dart of Curare had been shot directly into his heart. He found his voluntary muscles unable to perform any function beyond a series of wild, shaky spasms. Natalya drank in the fresh taste of the man. He let out a slight moan as she fed. Most of her victims weren't able to summon the inner strength required for such an expression. She was impressed.

She picked up his dialect of Arabic, along with his accent, and the current security layout for the floor. The thing about exsanguination is that it surpassed any known method of intelligence gathering ever devised. Not to mention the fact it was tasty. Natalya slowly lowered his body to the ground. Then she looked at the security panel.

It was a handprint verifier. Reaching down she grabbed his hand tightly. A red glow appeared where their hands were joined. Natalya's fingers lengthened and thickened until the two hands seemed as if they were one. Placing her hand on the pad, she heard the lock on the door click. "Thanks, you've been a dear." She shook her hand until it returned to its previous, slender form.

Entering, she spoke to the man behind the desk in Arabic. He stood up as soon as she entered the room. But then there was the inevitable smile. It was all she needed. There was an exchange of pleasantries, a greeting, an introduction, and a swift draining of blood. Behind the counter, Natalya checked the monitors. She couldn't see the girls in any of them. The slumped guard by the main door was on the first monitor. She checked the monitor for the skylight twice. Leaning forward, she flicked a switch and the skylight opened. Three hooded figures in dark clothes dropped down through the ceiling. Kateryna, Elsie, and Liliya removed their hoods. "How the surveillance tapes?"

Natalya flipped another switch and the picture on the main door monitor reversed. The four watched as the guard appeared to stand back up and resume his position protecting the door. His head snapped to the right as if he was conversing with someone. But only he appeared on the monitor. "It looks good," Natalya replied.

The four approached the inner door. Kateryna tried the door. There was no keypad or slot for a key in the door, but it was locked. "Something's not right."

Liliya glanced around the room. "Shadows?"

"Shadows," Kateryna answered.

On the floor, Kateryna's shadow lengthened and expanded. Even though no one in the room moved. The shadow approached the door... and then, rather than climbing up the door, went under it. On the other side of the door, a shadow slowly crept up the woodwork, gradually approaching the knob. When the two met, the doorknob began to turn.

The four rushed into the room. Although their stance more resembled the spring of a game of panthers than four primates. But the room was empty.

"OK," Elsie threw up her hands, "This is a royal screwup."

Liliya face went red. "Look, I can only do so much with advanced intelligence. I'm much better at on the spot observation."

“You know,” Natalya paced the room. “When I took the guard, I saw the whole layout, but I didn’t see the target.”

Elsie’s face remained painted with frustration. “Now we’re back to square one.”



The man in the black and white checked keffiyeh leaned back on his couch. “You see, right now we are at the mercy of the state.” The room was finely appointed, as a luxury hotel. The air smelled of incense. A fountain bubbled in one corner, catching a waterfall as it cascaded from the wall. Otherwise, the heat in the room would have been oppressive. But, as they say in the desert, it’s a dry heat. Five men reclined on couches, each facing a low table in the center of the room.

“They give and we take,” replied a heavy-set man with a balding head.

“Precisely, we can only use what resources they put at our disposal.” He leaned forward, to give his next point more emphasis. “In fact, it seemed they only give us enough resources to fail.”

“Thus, keeping us within their grasp.”

“And keeping their enemies off balance.”

“They feed us like a dog, stealing scraps from his table.”

“Keeping us hungry, but at the same time, not allowing us to starve.”

“And so it will be for our children, their children, and a thousand generations that will come after them.” The keffiyeh-wearing man’s eyes narrowed. “But if we were to shift our attention to overthrowing our masters, then we would have all their resources at our disposal.”

“Which would allow us finally to succeed.”

Hamad al-Imam adjusted his keffiyeh. He was not only a leader of a terrorist cell, but he was also a man with a vision. His dream didn’t simply involve freeing his people from what he considered to be oppression. No, his vision put himself at the top of a new world order. A place where he alone decided who would be oppressed and by how much. Hamad had a desperate need to escape a world where he was only a player and enter the palace as a true ruler. Only in his mind, the only way to occupy a palace was to kick everyone else out. “So, you see, the regime of the sultan must come to an end. The time has come for us to rise, not against our enemies, but against our friends. Only in this way will we acquire enough resources to finally defeat our enemies.”

The group nodded in silent agreement.

Hamad al-Imam seemed pleased. His eyes beamed with pride. “Ladies, I think my guests are in need of another cup of tea to quench their thirsts.”

It was only by heavens grace this was such a warm environment, otherwise what the girls were wearing would have left them chilled to the bone. The eyes of Hamad’s guests drifted across their delightful forms. They indeed became thirsty.

For centuries, mystics and alchemists have searched for the formula which would grant them the everlasting appearance of youth and beauty. Elsie, Kateryna, Natalya, and Liliya had already obtained this and far more. Only Elsie had been born in this century. Natalya had taken Vikings as lovers and walked the marbled hall of the Byzantine emperors. Kateryna had traded spices with Romans in the days of Caesar and had purchased wool from ancient Celts of Britain. Liliya had walked the plains of the Tigris and Euphrates, she had seen the towering spires of Ur and Akkad. Yet each of the girls had a timeless beauty about them. One that drew men like a magnet attracted nails. Assuming the loadstone in question was a 10,000-volt electro-magnet. Hamad had invited them to slake the thirsts of his guests. Only at this moment, their thoughts involved only satisfy their own thirsts.

Hamad, however, was a man driven. While his guests were distracted, not but the loveliness of the room but by its occupants, Hamad glanced down at the coffee table. Its glass surface reflected the fine art on the walls and the smiling faces of his guests, but not the girls. His eyes widened.

“Sons of Allah,” he shouted as he rose.

This was the girl’s queue.

The only problem was that there were five men in the room. Too many to dispatch all at once. There was, however, a silent agreement to leave Hamad for last. There were a few screams as the girls lunged for their chosen victims. The men’s skin turned a ghastly white as they soon found themselves beyond the ability to donate to the Red Cross. In the midst of this pandemonium, Hamad raced for the wall and took down a curved scimitar that had been hanging next to a bronze shield.

The girls found themselves in a face-off. Traditionally the way to dispatch a vampire was with a wooden stake to the heart. Although plunging a pointy object into anyone’s heart would tend to have a deleterious effect, undead or not. But what most people forget is that removing someone’s head from their shoulders had a similar effect. And that those animated after death were not excluded from these groups.

Liliya wiped the blood from her chin. “I think he may have the drop on us.”

Elsie smeared. “What? Afraid to use bullets? What’s the matter? Don’t like the waiting period to buy an Uzi?”

Natalya grinned. “I think we can take him.” The four girls looked at each other and then back at the lone Hamid, sword in hand. “I like our odds.”

“Yea,” Kateryna replied, “I just wanted it to be a bit more painful. She opened her mouth and hissed like a snake, exposing a set of long canines which ended in a slight backward hook. For his part, Hamid used one of his legs to push a chair through a plate-glass window. His glare never left the girls as the broken shards rained on the ground, fifty stories below. The chair tumbled as it fell. Hamid let out a howl and threw himself out the now open window.

“Damn,” Kateryna yelled as they all rushed up to the window. They were just in time to see Hamid’s parachute open and his gentle descent to the ground.

Elsie snorted bitterly as she retracted her fangs. “Who the hell wears a parachute in their own living room?”

“It does seem a bit excessive,” Liliya agreed.

“Can’t you people turn into a bat or something and get down there?” Elsie demanded.

Liliya chortled. “I have no idea how to turn into a bat. Do you Natalya?”

“Never learned.”

Elsie shrugged her shoulders. “I thought all you folks could do that. It’s in every one of the books.”

Kateryna grinned. “Yeah well, you shouldn’t believe everything you read in the tabloids.”

“This is bad,” Elsie muttered.

“Dud, of course, it’s bad,” Natalya replied sarcastically.

“You don’t understand.”

“What don’t I understand?”

“Hamad al-Imam knows what we look like.”



The room they were in seemed like the very definition of a castle basement. Curved walls of rough-cut stone enclosed them with only a single railless staircase leading into the chamber. It was spartanly furnished with a single wooden chair. One half expected to see chains, manacles, and other torture devices hanging from the walls, but they were unadorned. The smell of the water dripping down the stones was palpable. Rushdi al-Dar sat uncomfortably in the lone chair. His palms were sweating, and he couldn’t keep from fidgeting. “You’re going to kill me, aren’t you?”

Natalya smiled seductively, “Yes. I am going to drain you of your blood, and you will die.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me any questions first?”

Natalya was wearing an outfit designed to show off her more extensive assets. It was exceeding everyone’s expectations. “You mean like where is Hamad al-Imam?”

“Exactly.”

Her voice sounded even more menacing than it had been signaling him before. “Oh, why should we get so vulgar? Everything anyone needs to know is in the blood. And blood doesn’t lie. People lie. They wickedly cover what they don’t want others to know with deception. But blood knows nothing but the truth. It weaves its way through the body without trickery or concealment. Everything one needs to know is in the blood.”

“Than why are we here?”

“You’re probably thinking all this seems very strange and frightening.” Natalya found him attractive, in a rugged, outdoorsman kind of way. His eyes were like lakes. He was clean-shaven, but she thought he would look extra handsome with a little stubble on his chin.

“Yes, you could say that.”

Natalya leaned down and whispered in his ear, "I agree."

"You've certainly demonstrated to me that everything I've heard about the physical strength of your kind is true. Do you mind if I ask *you* some questions, then?"

"That seems fair." She leaned into him close, breathing in the fragrance of his skin. "After all, you'll soon be telling me everything I want to know. So, be my guest."

"Are your kind affected by silver?"

"Oh yes," Natalya used a very haunting tone. "Silver, gold, platinum. I love all these things. They call to me. But then so does a nice gemstone. Diamonds, for example." She pulled her long dark hair aside to display an earring. "You see these." He nodded. "They were a gift from a prince in 1457. Solid silver. Handmade. The beads are only glass, but they hold certain memories for me."

"What about sunlight?"

"Absolutely critical," Natalya responded in a delightfully lyrical voice. "Can't maintain my fabulous tan without it. I don't like the way those artificial tanning machines make my skin look. So unnatural, don't you think?"

"And Holy symbols? You can't touch a holy symbol?"

Natalya smiled. "Oh, I love the feel of a good holy symbol. I love the way they feel on your skin." She rubbed her fingers over her chest. "Silver, gold... although I'm not too fond of the wooden ones though." She looked deeply into his eyes. "They tend to splinter from time to time. I hate getting splinters, don't you?"

"And if I were to nail down pages of the koran onto the floor in a circle, you couldn't cross such a line?"

"Well, I'm not fond of tearing out the pages of a book. It seems pointlessly destructive." She grinned. Natalya seemed to ponder for a moment. "If you ask me it would have to be a really great book. You know, one of those page-turners with exceptionally good characters. The ones where you get all involved with the characters and you don't want them to die at the end. But I suspect it would only work until I finished reading the pages. Frankly," she whispered erotically, "I've already read the koran. And I already know how it turns out. So, no, I wouldn't think that plan would work out well for you."

He swallowed hard. "So, if you can get all the information you need from drinking my blood. Why are we still here? Why are we talking? Why don't you kill me now and get it over with?"

Natalya released an avalanche of charm. "We're social animals, are we not? I love to talk, to converse. Communication is so important, don't you think? The tête-à-tête of a simple chat between two people. It's exhilarating, don't you agree?"

"Then why kill people?"

"Why do you pick flowers?"

"Good point." He seemed to struggle, although no visible binding kept him in his seat. "So, what am I doing here?"

“I thought we could have a little fun.”

His forehead wrinkled. “Fun?”

“Take off your pants.”

Rushdi al-Dar’s face was a picture of resistance, even as his hands were busy unbuckling his belt. It was a classic case of the left side of the mind not knowing what the right hand was doing.

“I see you are going commando, I like that.” Natalya grabbed him between his legs and Rushdi straightened up in the chair. Teasing the side of her low-cut neckline, she immediately grabbed his attention. They both started breathing heavily, despite neither of them doing anything apparently energetic. She reached behind her neck and released a clasp. The silk dress fell to the ground. Rushdi found that despite his mental resistance, he was unable to avoid responding. She sat down on him. “If you’re lucky, I’ll let you finish before I kill you.”

He grunted as she lowered herself down on him. “Humm, this is going to be fun.”



The street was quiet, oddly so as Hong Kong nightlife was well publicized for this area. Liliya watched as the occasional person entered or left the building. They had been careful to pick a structure without any windows, so it was impossible to tell how many people were inside and how well-armed they were.

Elsie, Kateryna, Natalya, and Liliya wore an array of tight-fitting leather outfits. Catsuits, with long zippers all the way down the front. Pulled up over their tightly wrapped legs where tall black leather, and very fashionable, boots. Elsie’s ended with a flap covering her knee. Strapped to their backs they wore Chinese Han Jian swords, bright red tassels hanging from the hilts. “There seems to be no other entrances or exits. Just the one door.” Kateryna noted.

“Shall we do a little recon? Have ourselves a look-see?” Liliya purred. As the oldest, she had learned a few extra skills the others had not yet mastered.

Elsie cringed. “This is going to bug me isn’t it?”

“Then don’t look.” Liliya bent at her knees, crouching. Extending a single finger, she touched the pavement. When her skin met the rough ground, it glowed a soft red. The glow vanished as soon as she raised her finger. But in its place, all types of crawling insects appeared, as if right out of the pavement itself. There were no cracks to be seen, but they seemed to grow as if spawned out of the asphalt. Forming like an artist working and molding a clot of black clay, various spiders scurried forth. Beetles, centipedes, and a host of other creatures only an entomologist would recognize. They ran over the street and quietly disappeared under the door.

Liliya opened a dark, leather case hanging by a strap and removed a pair of binoculars. But rather than scan the door, she aimed the lens at the ground. “Lots of stairs,” she remarked. “He’s down several floors.”

Natalya put a hand on her shoulder. “How many inside?”

“I’d say about thirty.”

“Any good-looking Latin types?”

Liliya shook Natalya’s hand from her shoulder. “Lots of guns.”

“Any other way in?” Elsie asked.

“Just the one door.” Liliya lowered her binoculars. “I guess there is nothing for it...”

Elsie’s eyes gleamed like a cat. “...we’ll have to go in through the main door. Frontal assault as it were.” She smiled.

Kateryna led the group across the street. In appearance, the group resembled a game of black panthers slinking across the veldt in the dead of night. Despite the heavy appearance of the door, it was no barrier. Kateryna opened her palm flat and waved it before the door. It flew off its hinges and landed with a loud crash some distance down the street. It seems vampires don’t have to be invited.

The radiance from the fluorescent lights filled the room with a strange glow. Half the lights had been replaced with UV tubes, forcing the occupants to wear sunglasses. The room was otherwise bare beyond the door on the far side. Elsie briefly thought it would have looked better with a velvet painting of Elvis hanging on the wall, what with all the black lights.

The five men inside were taken aback by how easily their defenses could be breached and delayed drawing their weapons. Natalya had time to drain one before his weapon could be lifted from his holster. The others opened fire with a rain of bullets from compact machine pistols. What remained of the girls were dark flashes which spread around the room like oily smoke. For a brief moment, Liliya could be seen on the roof, supporting herself on stretched arms and legs between the walls. But as soon as one of the guards raised his weapon toward the ceiling she was gone.

White chalk-like dust exploded from the walls as bullets ripped pointlessly into their surface. The thudding of the rounds into the cement sounded like the ringing of a drunken church bell. Ejected shells littered the floor like a brass waterfall. The din finally lessened to be replaced by the dull click of empty magazines.

Natalya appeared, unharmed, in the center of the room holding a paper fan covered with painted Chinese characters. A husky guard with a swarthy look drew a .357-Magnum from beneath his underarm and fired six rounds. They went through the fan and thudded into Natalya’s chest.

Dropping the remains of the shattered fan, she gazed at the man. Six bloodless holes appeared in her suit. “Now the fan I can replace,” she spat angrily, “but this suit cost good money.”

The look of shock on the man’s face was palpable. “I don’t understand, we’re using silver bullets.”

“They could have been gold and blessed by the Pope, honey, it wouldn’t have made any difference.”

All the girls now made an appearance. In a flash, it was all fangs and necks. Then four bodies slumped to the floor to join the first fellow. The bodies appeared cold, white and terrified.

Kateryna wiped her lips. “Only twenty-five more to go.”

Elsie gleamed. “Here’s hoping some of them are tastier.”

The far door led to a long, metal stairway. It wound around the square cinderblock walls like a spiral staircase; the steps bolted to the cement. The bottom was cloaked in darkness. There was an empty space in the center you could have dropped a Mac truck through. Cut into narrow passageways in the wall were massive water pipes and pumps, part of Hong Kong's water supply. Tiny droplets of moldy water clung to the sides of the pipes, condensed out of the still air. The girls proceeded down the steps cautiously, half expecting one of the steps to give way, plunging them into the darkness. The stairs creaked like an unoiled door hinge.

The room exploded into light and another rain of bullets from below, but the girls were gone. Bullets slammed into the wall where they had just been. Misty dark shapes seemed to move down the stairs like a flock of maddened birds. Hickcock would have been proud. The shapes descended the staircase with the speed and fluidity of a hurricane, curling down toward the light. When they reached the bottom, the light went out as if a wick of a candle had been snuffed. Now there was only the flash of gunfire. Between the racket of the firing came the screams. There was the clatter of arms, the distinctive sound of a bolt being thrown back. Now the sounds changed to a clattering. The dance of metal as it is dropped on the floor. But it did not end in silence, but rather a slurping sound, as if a straw had found the bottom of an empty cup.

The next room was filled with a soft light. It had the smell of a crypt. Inside were ten men all armed with curved shamshir swords. Dressed in black, they might have been mistaken for ninja, except for their lack of oriental features. The large Roman noses tended to be a big give away as well.

"Oh, goodie," Elsie called out as the girls drew their swords, "a challenge."

Swords crossed as the men yelled, cracking the air with their voices. The room soon echoed with the ring and clang of sword blades. Natalya struggled with one man, their blades crossed with determined speed. There were sparks in the air... some of them even from the swords. With a flourish, Natalya spun her sword in an arc and disarmed the man facing her. He took a step back, empty arms in the air, expecting any moment to feel the slice of cold steel in his gut. Instead, he felt Natalya's hand on his throat, lifting him into the air. "What?" She gave the astonished man a look. "Did you think I was going to spill all your nice, juicy blood on this dirty floor?"

More swords clashed and fang-filled mouths growled. The room was a blaze of action. It would have taken ten steel drums and as many xylophones to even imitate the sounds. Liliya found herself facing several attackers... and she was enjoying every minute of it. It was swing and cut. Cut and parry. It was, for lack of a better term, a dance of death. At one point Elsie found herself disarmed. It came as much of a surprise to her assailant as it did to her. Only she recovered first. She pulled her zipper slowly down to below her bellybutton. As the man gasped at the sight, she sank her fangs deep into his quivering neck.

In the end, there lingered four blood-drenched girls and the ghostly white bodies of ten men, their faces contorted in agony. Elsie's expression was a grin a mile long. "It's nice to get a chance to gorge yourself while eating for a change." She was close to feeling full. It was a unique experience. She'd been used to the feeling of hunger. As a model, the feeling followed her like a shadow. She went to sleep with it and awoke with the same feeling gnawing at her belly. She had no idea the feeling could become worse. But once she turned, the mere feeling of hunger became a long distant memory, Now, she was constantly ravenous.

“You see,” Natalya proclaimed, “I told you we need to go out more.”

Kateryna grinned. “After this let’s find some *rich* food.”

“Something to sink our teeth into,” Elsie joked.

Now all that remained was a final door. Inside were five more men, including Hamad al-Imam. The other four had great big swords already draw, but Hamad stood holding only an ornate bottle.

“Hamad,” Elsie giggled, “you should know we don’t drink *wine*.” The other three girls joined her in a rousing chuckle.

“Ladies,” Hamid declared, “I want you to meet my associate, Abdul Malik al-Parsa.” He removed the overelaborate cork from the bottle with a flamboyant pop.

Black smoke poured from the bottle as if it was coming off an oil rig fire. It condensed between them into a giant of a man, seven feet tall and more muscled than six boxers. His skin was flaming crimson red, smoke even rose in curls from its surface. He wore two large, golden earrings under a pair of extraordinarily pointed ears. A set of antlers, similar to a water buffalo sprouted from the sides of his bald head. In his right hand, he held a sword as tall as himself. It seemed to have come straight from the blacksmith’s forge, the metal red hot and molten looking. Bits of flame and smoke appeared on the sword’s surface and drifted lazily around the room.

Hamid gave them a malevolent glare. “I hope you don’t think the West was a monopoly on the mystic forces of darkness.” Hamid’s eyes gleamed with the impending victory. “My friend, in the name of all the sacred hells, you may kill them now.”

The creature laughed a good throaty cackle. “You will serve me well in Gehenna. I shall enjoy making use of you.” He swung the blade and the girls were just able to scatter in time. But instead of bending, like soft metal, it sundered the floor into a giant crack. He removed it without any effort.

“Sorry buddy,” Elsie taunted the creature, “but I never consort with anyone with that kind of a sunburn.”

She ducked and weaved beneath his blows. “I think you need some serious skin cream.”

The flash of his sword matched the speed of their blades. The iron strength of his sinews where more than a match for their unnatural power. Even four to one, he forced them back through the door. In the next room, Natalya and Liliya kept his colossal sword at bay. The others tossed the empty bodies of the dead at him. Each time he easily cleaved the remains in two, smoke and flame erupting from the divided halves.

The girls backed their way up the stairs, fighting as they withdrew. The efreeti followed, smashing everything out of the way with his mighty weapon. A flight or more up the stairs, the girls reverted to smoke. They flit around the room like a cloud of gnats, buzzing about the creature annoyingly. They could sense the frustration in the creature’s demeanor. He was no longer arrogant and self-assured. It was clear his anger provided fuel to his passion with the blade. His sword swings increased to a violent blur of red steel and dusky smoke.

Growling, he flung his sword into the wall. “I will not play your games.” His steel crashed into the bricks, sending chips of cement flying across the room. Kateryna screamed and she fell to the floor with a thud. The efreeti continued to advance growing ever more vicious as Kateryna lay on the floor... unmoving. The walls cracked and the staircase shook from the pressure of his assaults. It was as if the chamber was in the midst of a bombing attack. Peals of Hamid’s laughter could be heard far below.

Exhausted, Elsie appeared high above the creature on the stairs. He swung his sword as if it were a great axe, intent on cleaving her in two. At the very last instant, she jumped out of the way. the sword crashed into one of the water pipes, sending broken parts of the metal casing flying like it was a smashed vase. Water exploded into the room, like the flooding of the Titanic after the iceberg. The chamber was filled with the roar of steam.

Somewhere in another room, a great valve snapped into place. Water was diverted from one series of pipes to another. On the floor, the water seemed to have revived Kateryna. She stood amidst the other girls, ankle-deep in what remained of the fluid.

Halfway up the stairs stood what appeared to be the statue of an oversized man. It was dark and craggy as if the statue was carved out of basalt or charcoal. In his hands, he held the shattered parts of an enormous sword.

The four men dropped their swords and ran screaming up the stairs, while Hamad al-Imam tried to escape into the final chamber.

The girls followed. They had to pull him down as he desperately attempted to climb up the far wall to escape. Four sets of fangs emerged and then found purchase in soft flesh. Liliya practically howled, “... now that’s what I call tasty.”