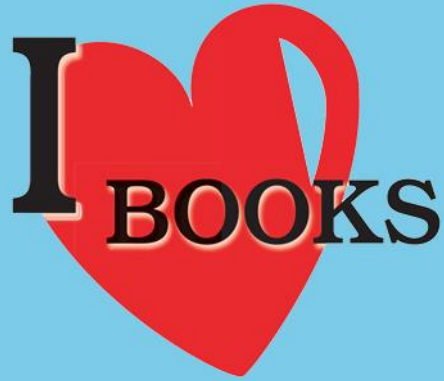




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And I Darken

Written by
Kirsten White

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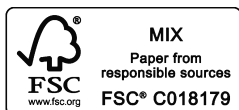
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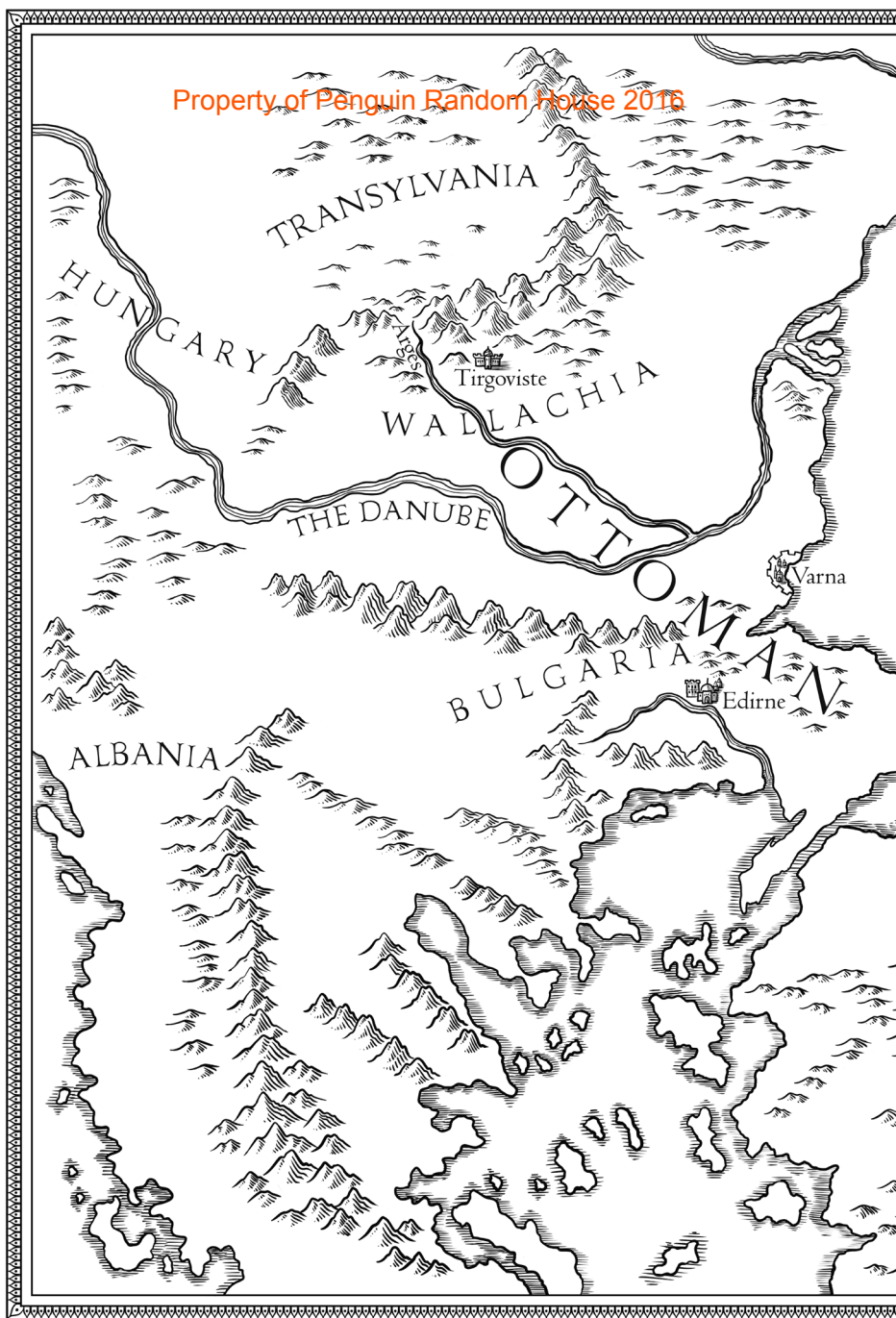
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Amasya

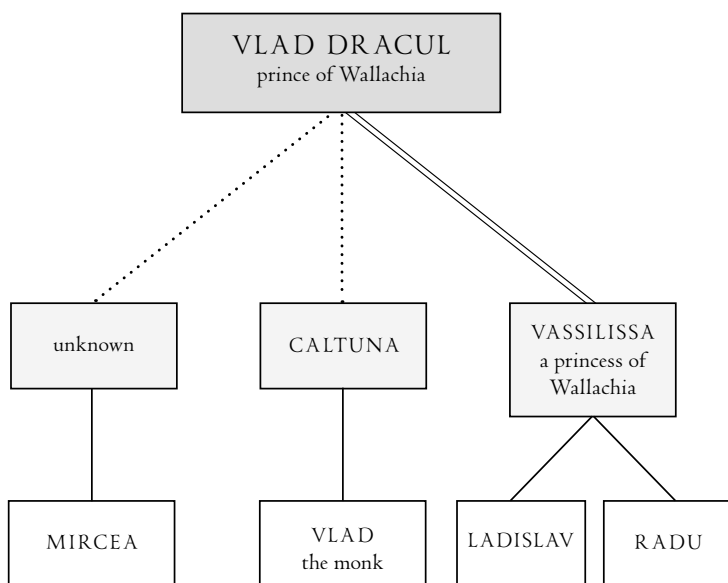
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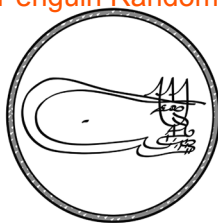
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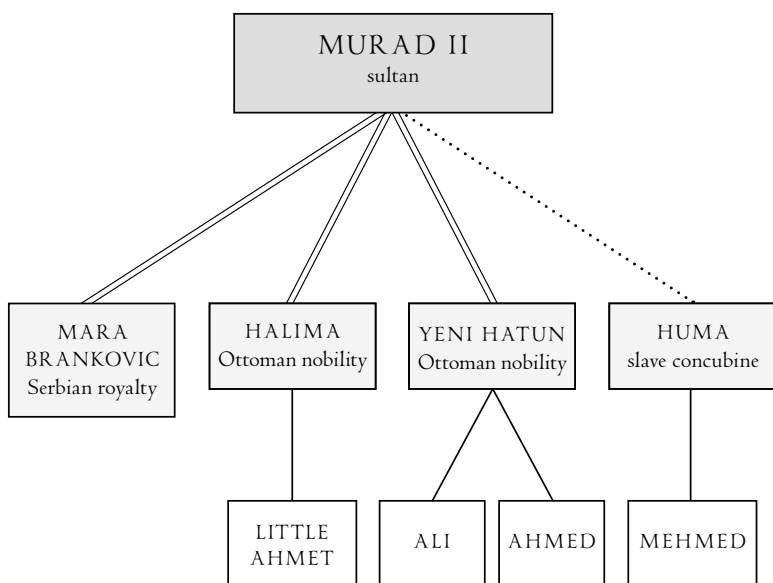
— WALLACHIA —



..... mistress
===== spouse
——— descendant



→ OTTOMAN EMPIRE ←



..... concubine
===== spouse
——— descendant

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1435: Sighisoara, Transylvania

V LAD DRACUL'S HEAVY BROW descended like a storm when the doctor informed him that his wife had given birth to a girl. His other children—one from his first wife, now nearly full grown, and even a bastard child from his mistress, born last year—had been boys. He had not thought his seed weak enough to produce a girl.

He pushed through the door, into the close, heavy air of the tiny bedroom. It stank of blood and fear and filled him with disgust.

Their home in the fortified hill city of Sighisoara was a far cry from what he deserved. It sat next to the main gate, in the suffocating press of the square, beside an alley that reeked of human waste. His retainer of ten men was merely ceremonial, rendering him a glorified placeholder. He might have been the military governor of Transylvania, but he was supposed to be the ruler of all Wallachia.

Perhaps that was why he had been cursed with a girl. Another insult to his honor. He was in the Order of the Dragon,

sanctioned by the pope himself. He should be the vavode, the warlord prince, but his brother sat on the throne, while he was governor of Saxons squatting on his own country's land.

Soon he would show them his honor on the end of a sword.

Vasilissa lay on the bed, soaked in sweat and moaning in pain. Certainly the weakness that took root in her womb had been her own. His stomach turned at the sight of her, princess now in neither demeanor nor appearance.

The nurse held up a squalling, red-faced little monster. He had no names for a girl. Vasilissa would doubtless want something that honored her family, but Vlad hated the Moldavian royals she came from for failing to bring him any political advantage. He had already named his bastard Vlad, after himself. He would name his daughter the same.

"Ladislav," he declared. It was a feminine form of Vlad. Diminutive. Diminished. If Vasilissa wanted a strong name, she would have to bear him a son. "Let us pray she is beautiful so we can get some use out of her," he said. The infant screamed louder.



Vasilissa's royal breasts were far too important to suckle from. The wet nurse waited until Vlad left, then held the babe to her common teats. She was still full of milk from her own child, a boy. As the baby latched on with surprising fierceness, the nurse offered her own prayer. *Let her be strong. Let her be sly.* She looked over at the princess, fifteen, lovely and delicate as the first spring blossoms. Wilted and broken on the bed.

And let her be ugly.