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ALEX FOULKES

RULES for VAMPIRES

ILLUSTRATED BY
SARA OGILVIE

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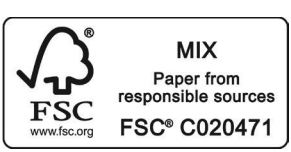
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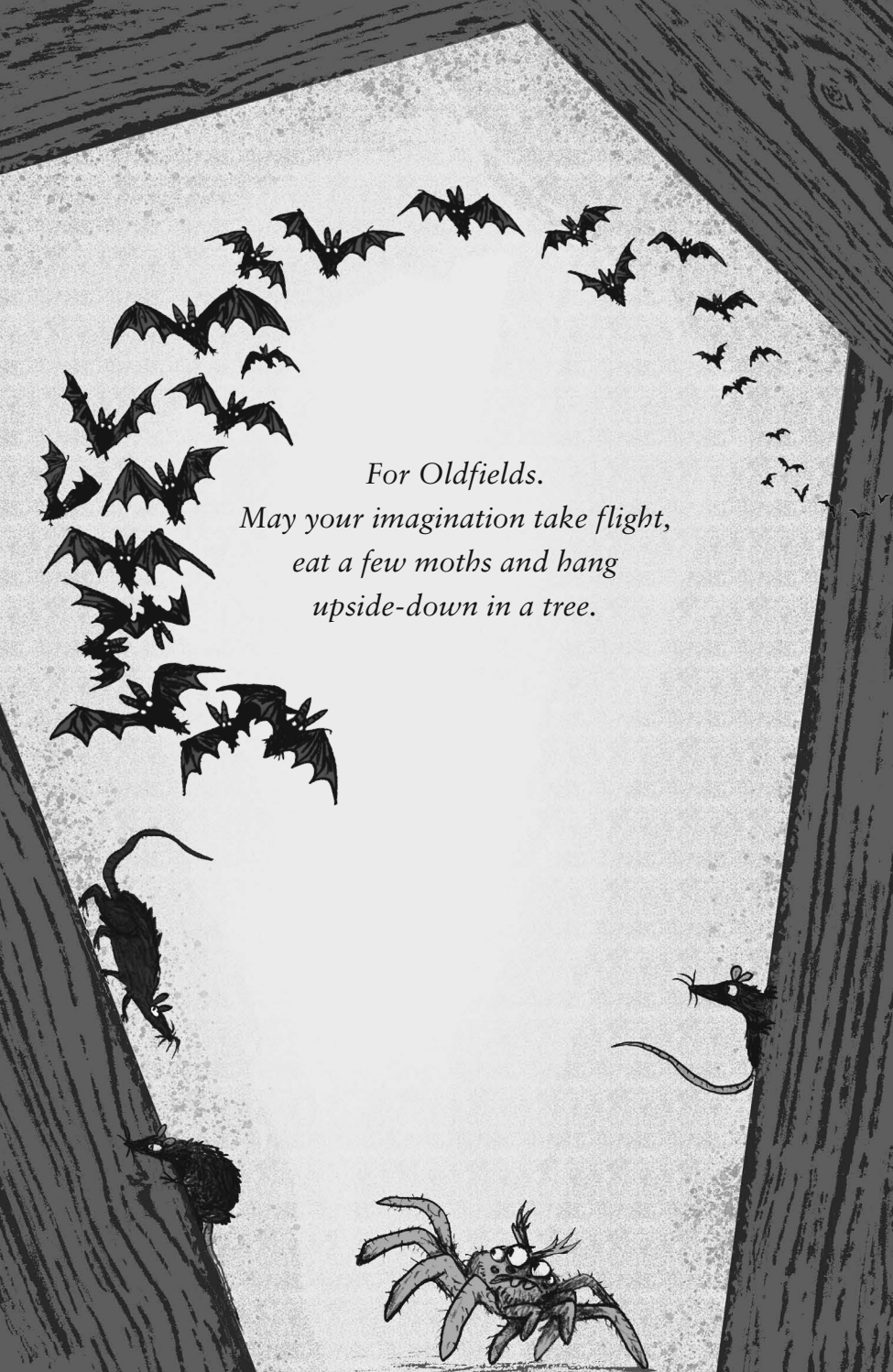
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For Oldfields.
May your imagination take flight,
eat a few moths and hang
upside-down in a tree.

Human, come closer,
and listen well:

This tale may give you a fright.
For while you are tucked up
safe in your bed,
There are creatures who lurk
in the night . . .




VON MOTTEBERG





ONE

ONE HUNDRED AND ELEVEN

There are two ways to kill a vampire.

These methods promise CERTAIN DEATH to the bloodsucking beast, according to *The Novice Hunter's Murder Manual*. It is a mysterious and little-known book that is nevertheless found in every library worldwide, if you know who to ask. Choose the crinkliest librarian and give them the secret signal (close one eye, tap the end of your nose and hoot twice like an owl). They will direct you to the back of the room, perhaps through a suspicious revolving bookcase.

There, you will find the *Manual* – in one of its many editions and translations. This book contains all a first-time hunter needs to know about dwellers of the night and how to slay them. There is advice on every monster from banshees to zombies, imps to werewolves, fey folk to flesh-eating mermaids. On hunting vampires, it helpfully

suggests the following:

1. ***Sunlight. Unfortunately, in newer editions of the* Manual*, the exact details of what happens to a vampire in the sun were deemed too horrible to include. In older versions, the pages have been torn out, lest they give young hunters nightmares.***

2. ***A stake. That is, a stake. S-T-A-K-E. Not S-T-E-A-K.***

A S-T-*E-A-K steak* is a delicious dinner that might clog your arteries if you eat it too often, but it won't leap up and stab you in the back.

An S-T-*A-K-E stake* is a horrifying wooden spike traditionally hung on one's belt and wielded like a dagger. It is a vital piece of equipment for any budding hunter who does not wish to become lunch. Simply plunge deep into the vampire's heart before their snapping teeth can reach your face. Twisting is optional.

The first *Manual* was written in a time that has been swept away by history, before even your oldest teacher was born. But many years before the *Manual* even existed, before it was ink on paper, there was a girl who already knew these vampire-killing methods very well indeed.

After all, her survival depended on them.



Slow as creeping moss, stealthy as a stalking cat, the girl slunk closer to the door. Set in a severe, stony archway, its brass doorknob reflected the light of the girl's candle, sending shadows skittering back down the passage behind her. For a moment, she longed to follow and flee back to safety . . .

The girl did not blink. Nor did she breathe. A tremor shook her, making her teeth rattle and her bare toes curl. She had come too far to lose her nerve now.

This was the sort of door that was bound to open with a foreboding creak – and, sure enough, its rusty hinges gave a bitten-off squeal when the girl inched it open. She hesitated for a moment, listening intently.

Inside, nothing stirred.

Willing her frantic heart to slow, the girl slipped into the murky space beyond.

The circular room was a welcome change from the suffocatingly tight and twisty passageways that ran deep beneath the castle. Cobwebs stirred about the domed ceiling. The girl held her candle aloft, eyeing the ancient portraits that hung on the walls in gilded frames. All the faces were obscured by dust. The furniture was covered

in white sheets and had been pushed to the far corners of the room.

The coffin took up a lot of space.

It was enormous, cut from rough stone that winked with half-hidden geodes. A thick vein of amber ran through its centre, dotted with the furry bodies of fossilised moths trapped within. Great iron chains bound the coffin to the ceiling and floor, crisscrossing off in every direction. Old runes had been carved into the heavy lid, concealing the horror that lay beneath.

Bending stiffly down, the girl placed the candlestick on the floor. She couldn't draw her gaze from the coffin: the resting place of a creature so foul, so vile and so unspeakably cruel, even the fiercest warriors would not face it on the battlefield.

The floor was damp underfoot as the girl picked her way carefully through the maze of chains. She placed both hands gently, reverently on the stone box. It was strangely beautiful, she thought; the way it glimmered in the candlelight was mysteriously inviting. A trick, perhaps – a devil's trap. But the girl wouldn't be deterred.

The coffin came all the way up to her chest – she had to lean her whole body forward to budge the heavy lid even an inch. Her thin arms strained beneath her cloak—

There was a grinding sound as the stone slid further

aside, revealing the slumbering monster within. A skeletal face was framed by a pillow of lush green velvet, its bulging eyes covered by lids too thin to obscure their dark pupils. The cheekbones and jaw stood out in high relief, as did the tendons in its long neck, leading down to a silk nightgown. The body beneath was wasted away, nothing but skin stretched over frail bones.

A VAMPIRE – more than a millennium old and in possession of a primeval power.

She wanted to look away. She wanted to run. Her body seized up in instinctive horror, yet the girl knew what she had to do. Reaching into the pocket of her cloak, her fist moulded tightly around the object concealed there.

A vampire hunter's weapon of choice had to be the stake. The crucifix and the garlic and the silver were nice – they were useful for weakening a vampiric foe – but the pointed spike, whittled sharp, was essential.

Yet the girl was not holding a stake at all. In her hand was a small bell.

It chimed out, ringing clearly through the silence. The girl stayed very still. Electricity crackled up and down her spine, zapping her toes and the tips of her ears.

Inside the coffin, the vampire's bulbous eyes cracked open. A low hiss escaped from its sunken throat. With a malevolent glare, it looked straight at the intruder.



And rumbled a bleary groan.

'Oh. It's *you*.'

The girl hastily pocketed the bell, stumbling backwards over a thick link of chain. Inside the coffin, the vampire began to rise up, levitating, its arms folded over knobbly collarbones, gaunt face set in an irritated scowl.

Before the girl's awed gaze, the frail body was filling out. It became slender where it had been feeble, angular where it had been hollow. A cascade of silver hair sprouted from the vampire's bare scalp, spilling down its shoulders. Dead eyes now glimmered like black ice, flinty and shrewd.

Sieglinde von Motteberg – the Great and Terrible Sieglinde – came down to hover comfortably above her coffin.

'Well, Leo?' she demanded. Her low voice rolled from her like the tide, sucking its unlucky victim out

to sea. 'Why, pray, would you ever think to wake me at such an hour?'

The girl (*Leo,* for that was her name) flinched. She realised too late that she had been staring; she looked instead to the ceiling, as if seeing through the complex maze of tunnels and chambers right to the surface. Though not a shred of light could reach them, she knew the sun was up.

'I . . .' Leo's voice cracked. She cleared her throat and tried again. 'I just wanted to make sure you didn't forget about tomorrow. That's all.'

'Tomorrow?'

'It's— it's my . . . I'm one hundred and eleven. Tomorrow.'

Humming, Sieglinde idly inspected her knife-like claws. 'Ah. Your birthnight.'

'It is,' Leo confirmed hopefully. A tiny, horrible thrill shot up her spine when the vampire looked down at her.

'Then, you will be undertaking the Hunt.'

It wasn't a question. Sieglinde spoke with complete certainty, just like the night sky was black or that winter followed autumn.

'I will,' Leo croaked. 'I'm going to Otto's End. Will you— will you be here when I get back? Dad said you're going away?'

Sieglinde flicked a speck of fluff from her clawtip. 'I leave at first dark. The COUNCIL has requested my presence,' she purred. 'Lord Ayman has had a most unfortunate accident – torn apart by a wolf ambush during his last diplomatic outing. Simply tragic. We are in need of a new Head . . . since they have yet to find his.' Her lip curled in a satisfied sneer. 'I will likely be away for some time; there will be much ceremony, I'm sure. There is a rumour that the leadership will fall to me. The *correct* choice.'

Leo couldn't disagree. There was no one stronger or more ruthless and cunning.

Despite her sympathy for Lord Ayman – or what was left of him – Leo couldn't help but feel sorry for herself, too. Was Sieglinde really going to miss Leo's special night?

'The Hunt of the Waxing Moon is an important rite of passage for every young vampire entering adulthood,' Sieglinde continued. 'I will inform the Council of your success, just like your older sister before you.'

As always, Sieglinde never failed to mention Emmeline's accomplishments. It was tough for Leo, being the younger sibling. She wondered whether Sieglinde might talk about *her* with such pride, one night in the future.

There was just one problem.

'But,' Leo started to protest, 'I haven't yet—'

'You *will,*' Sieglinde interjected. A vein began to bulge in her forehead. Her black gaze ensnared Leo's own, trapping her with her stare. 'A failed Hunt would be an embarrassment. All the noble families are watching. Generations of aristocratic vampires, ALL OF WHICH completed their Hunt on their first try.' Her voice conjured up the image of vampire daughters and sons out for their first kill, growing up to become powerful – and rich, and *influential* – in their own right.

Turning her face away, Leo fixed her gaze on the dancing flame of the candle. Her chest felt tight.

'You *do* want to make me proud, don't you?' Sieglinde intoned, looming above her. Her nostrils flared. There was a staticky *pop* that made Leo's hair stand on end, bringing to mind a memory of a hundred frantically flapping wings. It was a warning.

'I do!' Leo said quickly. 'I will!'

'Good. The future of our family name depends on us all. My standing will never recover if you fail to complete your Waxing Moon.' Sieglinde's thin ribs heaved. Her eyes rolled in their sockets, envisioning Leo's failure and the resulting shame. 'No child of mine will ruin the Hunt! *Every* Von Motteberg passes, no second chances. It's practically tradition.'

Leo's eyes felt hot. The electric charge in the air

dissipated, as did the phantom sound of wings. Left behind was a heavy feeling in the pit of her stomach.

'Yes, Mum,' she said.

Regaining her composure, Sieglinde relaxed down into the coffin. Her fangs shrank back past her lips, her expression smoothed and she laid her head against the velvety lining.

'Then we are done here.'

With the wave of a bony hand, the candlelight died, spluttering a faint thread of smoke.

'Do not let me down, Leo,' Sieglinde cautioned as the crystal-encrusted lid scraped back over her. 'You are to be one hundred and eleven. The Hunt is your birthright – and your duty.'

Cloaked in darkness, the girl called Leo didn't dare move. Sieglinde's voice echoed from within the coffin, sounding everywhere and nowhere all at once.

'I will see you when I return . . .'