

The Caves of Buda

By

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Guide to name pronunciations

Name	Pronunciation
Laci	LAH-tsee
Bélusz	BAY-lus
Csoda szarvas	CHOH-dah SAR-vash
Zita	ZEE-tah
Judit	YU-deet
Ephraim	eh-FRY-eem
Ferenc	FAIR-ents
Margit	MAR-geet
János	YAH-nosh
Turul	TOO-rul
Lewy	LU-ee
Erzsébet	AIR-zjay-bet

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

There is no Szarvas-hegy in Budapest. If it did exist, it would be near Látó-hegy, between Kecske-hegy and Nyéki-hegy.

While archaeologists have found Roman curse tablets in Óbuda, they have not found curse tablets in the Labyrinth.

To Maria, Janka, and Luca--
for showing me the true heart of the city.

Part I

Top Level, High Ground

Laci struggled to get away, but the thing holding him only squeezed his shoulder tighter. The creature brought up its other hand--mainly composed of yellowing bone--and clamped down on Laci's other shoulder. It shoved the boy against the wall of the cave, bruising his back, pinning him with unbreakable strength. He froze as the creature brought its head toward him. The scent of moldering cloth and spoiled earth, a graveyard smell, washed over him.

The small corner of Laci's mind still able to think noted that the thing in front of him used to be a man. The flesh of its face had rotted off. What skin persisted across its cheeks and forehead flapped loosely as it moved. Its nose had been eaten away, as had its lips. A decaying purple velvet cap covered its ears. Only its eyes remained alive, burning with a

blue fanatical light, studying Laci with hunger.

"I used to be like you, once," it hissed through broken teeth.

Laci bit his tongue to hold back his scream. Screaming would only bring the Nazi soldiers, soldiers who would kill the Jewish families he'd stumbled across hiding down here in the caves. Or it might bring János--his best friend, also lost--who he fervently hoped had found his way out of the caves by now. Instead, Laci swung his head wildly from side to side, seeking a way to escape. The light from his dropped kerosene lantern only illuminated his feet. To his left lay sinister blackness. A firelike light spilled into the darkness to his right, flickering and reddish. Something waited for him there, sitting in that familiar light. He could feel its draw, like a relentless undercurrent. He pushed away from it, whatever that unknown was, pushing himself farther into the grasp of the thing holding him.

Surprisingly, the hand holding his left shoulder released its grip. Laci looked up. The thing was slowly reaching for him, hand outstretched. The boy hit his head on the rock, straining to get away. He flinched when gentle, cool fingers stroked his cheek. Fear of this unexpected kindness froze him in place.

"Magician."

The word buzzed through Laci's bones, branding him. Fervent

denials ran through his head. He only played at being a magician, pretending with his friend János. It wasn't real.

Magic wasn't real.

The existence of the creature holding him proclaimed that it might be.

"Let me go," Laci whispered. If only he could get away. He would stop pretending to have power. He would never do another ritual, no matter how much János pleaded with him. He would forget all of Grandma Zita's stories. He would . . .

Flaring blue eyes caught Laci's attention. The creature grew unnaturally still. Laci wondered what the thing struggled against.

"I cannot." The light from the creature's eyes died down and it shook its head slowly. It brushed the back of its hand down Laci's arm to his wrist, which it then caught in a crushing grip. It forced the boy's arm up behind his back and pushed him down the passage, toward the unsteady light. The skeletal magician was stronger than the mere bones Laci saw. The cold of its hands ate into Laci's shoulder and arm.

Stumbling words accompanied their halting progress.

"Must take you to see . . . Bélusz."

Laci remembered stories from Grandmother Zita about a five-eyed demon by that name, whose gaze turned people to stone. The boy struggled to get away, kicking up and rocking from side to

side. The thing yanked on Laci's arm, pulling it higher, as if to break it. It pushed him forward, as relentless as fate.

The passage on Laci's right opened up to a large chamber. Three huge bonfires lit the space, as well as candles held up by their own wax on leveled-off stalagmites. Half whispers mingled with the crackling sounds, as if water surged nearby. The intense heat caused sweat to trickle down Laci's face. Green, not black, smoke rose to the ceiling and dissipated. Broken pieces of stone statues--heads, legs, torsos--lay scattered across the floor. Above the cavern was a long open space--a dry gallery. A large eagle with ill-kept feathers roosted there.

Movement drew Laci's gaze. There were--things--in the chamber. Only his special sight, the one Grandmother Zita had taught him to use, allowed him see them. More corrupted men, like the one that kept him moving forward, blended into the shadows, pressing against jutting rock walls. Others, gliding in and out of the flickering light, seemed to be combinations of men, beast, and plant; the beak of a raven implanted on a mottled green face, a frog man with a dripping tongue and webbed fingers, bilious sap dripping out of a treelike knot mouth. Rank body odor mingled with the scent of wet fur and sweet rotting vegetation.

Laci took shallow breaths, fighting to keep his fear from choking him. One of the creatures sidled up to them, a wolf with

a man's body. Laci found himself instinctively pushing back against the thing that held him, as if it would protect him. Bared fangs drew closer. A snarl from the lupine face made the hairs on the back of Laci's neck stand up. The thing kept pace with them for a few steps, licking its elongated lips, gray feral eyes riveted on Laci's neck. Then it abruptly stalked off, melting into the darkness between the lights. Laci forced his eyes away, keeping himself from searching for it. Death could come from any of the half-seen creatures in the chamber.

With a shudder, he told himself that he would not die here. Grandmother Zita would be ashamed of him if they met in heaven because he'd died in this place. He closed his eyes in denial, then opened them again.

His breath caught at the huge stone carving of a stag now before him. Its beauty made Laci falter. The statue caused Laci to forget his situation, and for a moment, it gave him hope. Its neck curved with more grace than a hawk's flight. The twists of its antlers caught and held on to the light. Sightless eyes adorned its elongated head, and nostrils flared for unneeded breath far above Laci's head. Powerful hind muscles outlined in cool stone bulged, making it seem as if it were about to leap. Delicate front hooves stood amid the broken statuary and garbage of the cave floor, as if disdainful to touch the filth.

Laci continued to stare at the stag until he realized

they'd stopped. Only then did Laci look up.

Corrupt, stained, and pitted stone made up the creature-- Bélusz, Laci assumed. It was the antithesis of the unblemished stag. Bulges, like horns, poked out between the three craters spaced across the demon's forehead. Its eyes sat below this cliff, like dark pools of marsh water with slimy tops and hidden snakes. Its nose had been broken off, so just a concave impression was left. Craters pocked its cheeks. It smelled of guano, sulfur, and things long buried. The arms of the rock throne that held the demon had grooves in them, worn smooth by the creature running its fingers along them. The demon's feet and legs looked like they'd grown from the earth.

"Another?" Bélusz asked in a voice that rolled effortlessly through the chamber, velvet soft and compelling. It leaned forward toward Laci, the mobile stone of its lips twisted in a sneer.

Laci's mouth dried with fright. The pit of his stomach dropped. Had this demon captured János as well?

"My great bringer," Bélusz said, its voice like silk caressing stone. "You broke the first of the five Roman plaques holding me. Then you brought me the miraculous stag, the guardian angel of your nation, just so I could turn it to stone. The bird followed, but it couldn't resist my powers either."

A shiver ran down Laci's spine. The statue. It must be the

csoda szarvas, the mythical stag who'd led the seven tribes into Hungary. His country's protector. And the eagle in the dry gallery above the cavern must be Turul.

"You've brought me two of the remaining plaques. Now you've brought me this sweet boy who stinks so strongly of magic." It shook its head, as if in denial. "Two magicians. In one night. My freedom must be near! Ah, to feel the sun and be truly warm again!" Bélusz held up its arms as if receiving blessings from heaven. Laci winced as the other creatures in the chamber howled together. He looked around the room fearfully, searching for his friend János. All he saw were demons and gathering shadows disrupted by the bright bonfires.

Bélusz was staring at Laci when he brought his gaze back. The kindness the boy saw on the demon's face froze his soul. Threats and anger suited that face. Benevolence somehow made it more ugly, unnatural, and frightening.

"Now you will be my servant. You have the sight. You will find the last two plaques that bind me. You will be greatly rewarded."

Laci knew the only reward he'd receive at Bélusz' hands would be death. "No," he said, surprised he could speak at all through his choking fear.

"You see what happens to those who disobey me," Bélusz said, indicating the floor of the cave, the broken statuary.

"They spilled dust like blood, their cracking bones the only screams they could make. Can make."

Laci shivered at the implication. Had all the ruined figures been men, turned to stone, and smashed? Were they still alive? He shook his head.

"You will help me," Béluusz continued. "You will free me from the dark, help me destroy the land that has held me prisoner, pound the mountains into sand, turn the rivers red."

Laci tried to swallow past the sudden lump in his throat. The war--the Great War, as the Americans called it, or the Great Catastrophe, as he personally knew it--had been raging for the last four years, a lifetime for a fourteen-year-old boy. He'd seen bodies in the streets, torn apart by shrapnel, buildings crumbling from the bombs. He knew the hunger of not enough food, no place to play, no room for dreams. The horror of greater destruction than what he'd already experienced made him nauseous.

"I'll kill myself first," Laci heard himself say. And he'd spoken the truth. He had so little to live for. The war had destroyed or ruined everything he'd known. His father had been killed in the first weeks of battle; his carefree mother had disappeared under the worry and strain of moving in with their relatives; his books, toys, clothes--even his favorite foods--all unavailable, either sold or stolen by his uncle, or denied

them because of their poverty.

Something in Laci's tone must have convinced the demon that the boy didn't spin tales. Its animation gave way to stillness. Laci could almost believe it was a statue.

Bélusz nodded its head after a moment and said, "A sightless magician still has its uses." It beckoned for the creature holding Laci to bring him closer.

Laci struggled to break free. The ancient magician behind him had too tight a grip on his arms. When Laci dug in his heels, the thing merely picked him up and presented him, legs dangling, to the demon.

Bélusz put its finger on its lips. Its tongue rasped across its finger as it licked it. Then, with the very tip, it touched the center of Laci's forehead.

The acid spittle burned Laci's skin and sent waves of pain through his head, worse than anything he'd ever felt. Laci screamed and shut his eyes. The thing holding him dumped him on the floor. Laci slumped, crying. He brought his hands up to cover his wound, as if hiding it might ease the ache.

Bélusz waited until Laci only whimpered, then spoke the words of its intended curse. "Your death belongs to me."

Laci didn't pass out, though the agony impaled him, causing the world to spin around him. He opened his eyes only when he believed the throbbing wouldn't push them out of their sockets.

Gloom filled the cavern.

The demon had burned out Laci's special sight. He could no longer see the other creatures in the cave clearly. Only dancing silhouettes remained, suggestions of shapes, things that tugged at the corners of Laci's eyes.

That wasn't the worst of it though. Just as darkness threw its cloak around everything Laci looked at, it had reached inside him as well. Shadows lurked and bloomed there now. His soul felt heavier, as if Bélusz had wrapped it, too, with a layer of rock.

Bélusz had tied Laci to itself. Only it could kill him. And it would--it would turn him to stone and shatter him--even if he obeyed the demon's every wish.

Bélusz laughed. A spark of anger shot through Laci's consuming fear and he struggled to his feet. He wanted to hurt the demon, but could he, without his special sight? Bélusz didn't seem to think so. It sneered at Laci, then raised its arms, like a conductor, encouraging the creatures around it to convolutions and undulations. Even the thing that had caught him joined in the frenetic dance.

Grandmother Zita's spirit guided Laci then, almost as if he heard her words directing him what to do. He put his finger in his mouth, like a two-year old with a tough decision, touched his forehead where the skin still burned, then ran it under his

eye, mixing his spit with blood and tears, a holy trinity.

Laci crept closer to the throne. The demon had turned its head away from the boy. Balancing on his toes, Laci reached up a steady hand and touched Bélusz in the center of its forehead, in the same place where the demon had marked him. Then Laci used the same words. "Your death belongs to me."

All the things in the cave roared. The howling and cacophony rang in Laci's ears, louder than any bombing.

It's difficult to tell when the frightful are frightened, but Laci saw it. The demon's eyes widened and its head pulled back, like a dog that had caught an unfamiliar, threatening scent. When Bélusz' eyes grew hard and glittery, Laci ran.

Laci thought perhaps that the ancient magician, the former man that had caught him earlier, helped Laci escape by blocking the others after the boy slid into a small tunnel just past where he'd been caught. Maybe it saw that its eternal mistake was ending.

Laci didn't know for sure. He just ran.