

Dead Man's Bride

(. . .) S. 109 – 129

It was a large village, much larger than our village, Taldorf. At first glance I saw perhaps two dozen houses, but there were many more spread out over the gentle slopes. It was striking how varied they were. Many of the houses were very poor indeed, giving the impression of cowering in fear beneath the sky. Roughly built of wood and completely without decorative elements, it seemed as if their inhabitants were ready to flee at a moment's notice. And maybe they were, I thought to myself. Who knew what life was like before peace finally came to this region? Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian armies had been fighting here over the boundaries of their empires for centuries. Other houses seemed newer, as if their owners had more faith in the future of this village. Yet everything looked so prim and proper. Even the fruit trees and herb gardens were tidy and well tended. I straightened my headscarf with nervous fingers and stepped unsteadily, with weak knees, onto a muddy path rutted with the tracks of wagons. Dogs began to bark, and as they do everywhere, the children came running toward me from every direction. "It's the stranger, the foreign woman!" they shrieked, jumping up on me only to pull back shyly a second later. Shutters banged open, and women with folded arms and narrow eyes stepped into the doorways. Their dress was both strange and familiar to me at the same time. They wore white blouses with red ribbons decorating the sleeves. Their skirts, made of coarse fabric, striped with dark red, black, and brown. Aprons, stockings, and embroidered Jelek vests were black, with carefully stitched red or multicolored flowers. Everyone was wearing light brown open leather shoes with pointed toes. Of course, the women already knew who I was and surely had already heard the story of my arrival and marriage. I greeted them in a friendly manner, trying hard to let them see how tense I felt. I walked into the village with a whole crowd of children following in my wake. A few girls, no older than me, were whispering to each other nearby as they eyed my gray dress. The church was tiny, barely larger than a small barn, and much too low for a house of worship, but at least made of stone. There was no bell tower, just a large hand bell dangling from a wooden frame that looked like a gallows outside the building. I approached the door with determination, just as it

swung open. The man who emerged from the church was not the priest who had performed my marriage. This was a mountain of a man, with a round head atop a much too short neck and bushy white eyebrows projecting like a shelf over his stern, coal black eyes. *A deacon?* I thought quickly. *Or maybe some kind of assistant?* Somewhat vexed, I stepped back. No, on second glance I could see that this really was a priest after all. His vestments were stretched across his broad chest as tight as a drum.

“Oh, look who’s here,” he said in a powerful, deep voice. “It’s the *donaselica*.”

The word struck me like an unexpected blow. He was right, of course, I wasn’t from around here, but there were nicer ways of saying it. A *donaselica* was a woman who had not come of her own free will, a woman with no rights. The girls nearby snickered.

“My name is Jasna, your Reverence,” I answered politely. “I am the daughter of Hristivoje Alazović, and the wife of Danilo Vuković,” I continued. “I wanted . . . I wanted to see the priest who consecrated our marriage.”

His bushy brows knit together into a single, angry line.

“Then you’re in the wrong village.”

I couldn’t agree more, I thought grimly.

“Go to the village of Kuklina, or straight to Jagodina!” one of the girls suggested.

“Your priest must be from there. They say that the one in Kuklina would even marry the devil to a Turk!”

Their laughter surrounded me, but the priest remained serious and continued staring at me as if I were a sinner and he were God on Judgment Day. It slowly dawned on me that the woodcutter might well have been right after all. At the moment, I would have been happy to have even him by my side.

“Then a different priest performed the marriage, your Reverence,” I said. “But there is no doubt that this is village. I have come to attend Mass.” I wished that my voice hadn’t been so shaky.

“Oh really?” countered the priest, much more loudly than necessary. “Well I don’t see that happening any time soon. Go home, woman!”

The girls went silent, as if entranced. Even the children were quiet. I could hear sheep bleating in the distance and a dog was barking somewhere. A man with brown hair, his body gnarled like an old root, stepped forward and leaned on his spade. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d suddenly threatened to hit me over the head with it.

“Why should I not enter your church, your Reverence?” I asked calmly. “The House of God is open to all, is it not?”

“To all Orthodox believers, yes!” he responded severely.

“I am an Orthodox believer.”

The priest uttered a short bark of a laugh. “Is that so? And how am I to know that? Do I know your father? Your clan? How am I supposed to know what you really believe? You could be from the Latin Church, or even a Turk. Who knows where Vuković found you?”

“I am not a Turk and am not from the Latin Church!” I retorted indignantly. “I spoke my marriage vows before the holy icons and received a blessing!”

“Not from me!”

“That’s not my fault. Were it left to me, we would have come here to the village.”

The voice of the priest resounded like thunder. “And I would have driven you both out of the church! The saints will rise from their graves before I give my blessing to a Vuković!” He waved his hand dismissively as if to shoo me out of his way, but I stood my ground. My face was flushed and the stares of the villagers burned on my skin. I knew that if I backed away like a beaten dog, I would never again be anything other than precisely that.

I hoped that no one noticed how my hand shook as I turned toward the church and made the sign of the cross. I did it the right way, not like a Latin, from forehead to belly, first right shoulder, then left, and again to the belly. “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us, Amen!” I prayed in the Orthodox manner, loud

enough for everyone to hear. Then I took a candle out of the basket. "If you will not allow me to pay my respects to the icon myself, please your Reverence, I ask you from my heart, take this candle."

The priest's already angry red face took on a violet-purple cast. "What do you have there?" he bellowed, tearing the basket out of my hands. To my horror he crumbled the tulips roughly in his hands as if they were a bundle of straw. The stems bent, and petals floated to the ground. "Turkish weeds, eh? For years I have kept the Turks away from my church, and now you want to carry *this* into my house of worship?"

"They are only flowers," I said tersely. "I wanted to lay them on Marja Vuković's grave." For a few seconds there was tense silence, like the calm before a storm, as everyone hushed in amazement. Then a gasp of disbelief rippled through the crowd. For some reason, I had to fight the urge to laugh. The priest snorted and, throwing down the tulips in the dirt, stomped them with his foot. It hurt me deeply to have to see such rude behavior. "You will not find her grave here," he shouted. "Take your devil's weeds to hell, woman, because that's where you'll find Jovan Vuković's wife."

"But . . . she must be somewhere here in the cemetery!" I stammered.

"Not in ours," he said, and spat on the ground. "We don't bury witches among Christians."

A witch? I thought aghast. *Is he talking about Marja?*

"The devil came for her," a woman called from the back of the crowd of onlookers, "and she got what she deserved."

The priest shoved the basket back in my arms with such force that I stumbled. I stood there dumbstruck while he went to the wooden gallows and roughly rang the bell as if calling men to battle instead of Mass. The people avoided me like a leper, streaming into the church around me in two sweeping arcs. The word witch continued to resound in my head.

Suddenly I heard someone behind me mumble, "Hey, girl!" I wheeled around and found myself face to face with a panting, plump peasant woman. Her face was

browned by the sun and when she smiled, I could see that she had hardly a tooth left in her mouth. "Give me a candle, c'mon now!" she said in a patronizing manner.

"Stana!" hissed an old man passing by, but she waved him away.

"Hold your hypocrite's tongue, Jože! This is a Christian woman – even the blind could see that. It's not her fault she had to marry the son of the *bludnica*."

"*Bludnica*?" I blurted out, outraged. "What on earth did she do to be called not only a witch, but a whore as well?"

"Better ask someone else," the woman said, hastily making the sign of the cross, as if she had already said too much.

"What didn't she do!" said the old man. "Best not to ask where your husband was conceived! It was in the grave, girl! In the cold grave!" He would have kept talking, but two men grabbed him by the coat and dragged him away.

"Now give me the candle," the peasant woman said. "I'll light it in front of the icon for you."

I wasn't even capable of saying thank you. The woman took the candle from my hand and ran into the church, the last one in. The door closed and I found myself alone outside, with the barking dogs and bleating goats grazing nearby. The scent of the plum tree flowers was intoxicating as the sun beat down on my face. *What did you do, Marja?* I thought. *What happened on the estate?*

A sneering voice startled me out of my reverie. "You can't say that I didn't warn you!"

It was the woodcutter, leaning against a plum tree in the middle of the church square. He still looked a little rough around the edges, but had washed the worst of the dirt off his face and combed his wet hair off his forehead with his fingers. For the first time I noticed the heavy, crudely carved wooden crucifix hanging on a leather cord around his neck. As he stepped toward me into the sun, his tread as quiet as a lynx. I realized that he wasn't more than seventeen or eighteen years old. He had most certainly been fighting over a girl, because his split lip and scratches here and there did not diminish

the wild beauty of his face. Singers like him could turn the head of any village maiden, and the local lads would not be happy to see him.

“Is that a cake?” he asked, reaching his hand out to my basket.

“Not for you!” I responded unkindly, pressing the basket against me. “It’s for the priest.”

His guffaws mixed with the liturgical singing I could hear droning inside the closed door of the church.

“Our self-righteous and severe Father Milutin would rather starve than accept anything from you,” he snorted. “But if visiting the icon is so important too you, I’ll gladly loan you my axe. That door won’t put up too much resistance.”

“I will enter through an open door like everyone else,” I shot back.

“Stubborn to the bitter end, eh?” He tried to end with a whistle, but he apparently had forgotten his split lip, and finished with a grimace instead.

“And who exactly are you, anyway?” I snarled back. “You’re one of those travelers, a gypsy, aren’t you?”

“Well observed, *ljubica*.”

“I am not your darling, you lout!”

“Excuse me then, my dear Countess Vuković!” the boy said with a sarcastic bow, all the while eyeing me in a way that gave lie to his half-joking words. I thought to myself, this man is not nearly as harmless as he makes himself out to be.

“Dušan, the woodcutter,” he said after a pause, introducing himself. “At the moment I’m staying in a hut on a raft in the river just a little south of here. Come and visit me the next time the Pope sends you packing.”

He grinned as he turned to go. The horse waiting for him in the church courtyard with its back leg hobbled pricked up its ears and snorted eagerly at his owner. Perhaps it was the horse’s trusting behavior that made call after him.

“Hey!”

Dušan turned around as if he had expected me to stop him and folded his arms.

“Anything else, countess?” he asked.

I swallowed my irritation and forced myself to speak in a friendly tone of voice.

“You’ve lived around here for a while, haven’t you?”

“Not all that much longer than you, but long enough to know who it’s better not to challenge.”

“Have you heard what people around here say about the estate?”

“Of course. But what do I get in return for telling you?”

I tugged the cloth off the basket and pulled off a piece of the braided cake. Dušan walked back over and took it from my hand. I noticed that his eyes were green with flecks of pale gold in the May sun. It embarrassed me that his eyes scrutinizing my face in the same way.

“So?” I asked.

Instead of answering, he took the piece of cake and held it under his nose, breathing in its scent with relish. I also noticed the sweet aroma of raisins and butter, and suddenly realized how hungry I was. I was surprised when Dušan, rather than eating the cake at once, shoved it inside his much too large jacket.

“They say that evil spirits wander around the estate,” he explained. “And they say that the estate owner’s wife cast a spell on him. She wasn’t very popular in the village. You know how it is with witches. They bring strife, make the milk go sour, make the animals sick. They pull the moon down from the sky and milk it like a cow . . .”

“I know,” I said, interrupting him impatiently. “But what does that have to do with Jovan and the estate?”

Dušan laughed and continued, lowering his voice. “When a witch wants a man, she makes her move at night, while he sleeps, striking him on the left breast with a branch. His chest splits open, and the witch tears out his heart and devours it. The victim survives for as long as the witch wants him to. And Jovan, well, in the village they say that he is a man without a heart. They say” – he winked at me as if his

horrible story were some kind of joke – “that all Vuković men are under an evil spell.”

“And . . . what do they say about me?”

Dušan's gaze moved to my basket. I understood, broke off a second piece of cake, and passed him the payment, which he took at once.

“I'll tell you when we see each other again,” he said, turning on his heels and walking over to his horse.

“Stop, you thief! That wasn't the deal!” I wanted to storm after him, but managed to get control of myself just in time. The man with spade returned at exactly that moment, walking around the church with a shuffling gait. He pretended that not to notice me, but I knew better. A stranger, a woman, running after a traveler and pleading with him – that would start a few rumors! There was nothing to do but walk over to the wooden bench under the tree and sit down. I fumbled about with my basket, of course all the while furtively observing how Dušan gently patted his horse on the neck. Oddly, something about the gesture touched me. It was an island of friendliness in the midst of the coldness that surrounded me. And then the woodcutter did something inconceivable: looking over at me with challenge in his eyes, he took both pieces of cake out of his jacket and fed the precious delicacies to his horse!

*

I could see I wasn't going to accomplish much more with the priest that day, but I also knew there were at least two powerful people in every village. I left the cake on an embroidered cloth resting on the bench where the priest was certain to find it before setting off on my search.

“Hey, little girl!” I called to a girl carrying a jug of milk into a house. “Where does the wise woman live?”

The little girl's eyes opened wide. She didn't answer me, but like all children, she gave away what she didn't want to say in another manner. Before running mutely into the house, she quickly glanced at a tiny house nestled into the hills a little ways apart from the rest of the village.

When I got there a few minutes later, it was clear that no one was home. Two wary dogs were guarding the house, so I sat down in the grass at a safe distance to wait. I soon heard the bells marking the end of the Mass, and saw a woman panting her way up the hillside. She wore a black headscarf and was at least as strong and well nourished as the peasant woman Stana. But this woman's mouth was hard, with a determined expression. Two frown lines increased the severity of her rounded moon face.

"Oh, it's the bride from the foreign land," she said in greeting. "And what is your name, my child?"

"It's Jasna, grandmother."

She nodded, wiping the sweat from her brow with her sleeve.

"How nice," she said, neither friendly nor unfriendly. "And what worries have brought you to my door?"

"I really only wanted to ask where I could find a good farm dog," I answered evasively. "I can see that you have good watchdogs. And I also need chickens and goats for the property."

The woman laughed. It was a throaty laugh, confident, self-assured, and as loud as a man's. "You don't have to put on a show for me, girl. You're trying to be brave, but what you really feel is shunned and alone."

I turned red and swallowed hard, but said not a word.

"Now then, come inside at least," she said, somewhat more gently. "Branka doesn't chase anyone away, and we'll find some remedy for you."

It felt good to finally be welcomed somewhere again. Branka's parlor was a little bit like the attic chamber that I'd shared with Bela. It was small, with a low ceiling, and smelled of the dried herbs that hung in bunches and bushels from the roof beams.

"And what do you have there?" she asked, pointing at the jug in my basket.

"Water from St. Helen's Well," I answered softly.

She nodded and took the jug without so much as a thank you. “Good that you didn’t give this to the priest. He would have poured it over your head. But for me, it’s just the thing to keep the wolves at bay. But the magic you wish from me requires entirely different ingredients.”

“What kind of magic do you mean, grandmother?”

Of course, I knew exactly what she meant. Even back in Taldorf, hardly any of the girls fell in love and got married without some kind of magic and spells.

Branka, who had been smiling all the while, suddenly became serious. “Well then, something for your husband, I think. You want him to love you, don’t you? Take the earth from one of his footprints and plant a marigold in it. For as long as the flower stays in bloom, his love for you will grow. If you’re in a hurry, though – and if I’m not mistaken, you have no time to lose – kill a black cat during the new moon, bake its heart in a cake, and give it to Danilo to eat.”

“I don’t need magic!”

“Are you so certain?” The old lady gave a short laugh, as if she knew better, coolly passing me a cup of milk. “Are you telling me that your husband readily crawls into your bed at night?” she inquired with a sly look. “Because your servants tell quite a different story.”

Like all old women, she was skilled at getting information out of someone. A thousand indignant responses danced on the tip of my tongue, but I didn’t answer. Branka seemed to be reading my face, then threw back her head and laughed once again. A lock of gray hair fell out of her headscarf, but she made no move to push it back in.

“You are not at all stupid,” she acknowledged with a note of approval in her voice. “Now then, let’s start over again. Tell me what you really want to know from me! We’ll have plenty of time to talk about chickens and goats later.”

I avoided her eyes by staring at the cup of milk, and continued to dance around the subject. “The . . . church. The village church is so very small, with no bell tower.”

“I agree completely!” Branka said, leaning back with her arms crossed. “When the Turks still ruled here, our churches were not allowed to be larger or more beautiful than the mosques. In those days, even church bells were forbidden. Father Milutin used to call us to Mass by banging two boards together. In memory of the strong faith of his village in those times, the priest still won’t allow us to build a bell tower. This is a good, pious man, with tremendous faith, mind you. When we groaned under the high head tax imposed by the Turks, it was Father Milutin who held the community together by strengthening our faith in God. In any case, you’ll be amazed when you see how magnificent the church is inside!”

She made it sound like it was just a matter of time before I saw it with my own eyes, giving me the courage to ask my next question.

“The priest says that my . . . mother-in-law was a witch. And is it true that the men from the estate are cursed?”

Branka worriedly clicked her tongue. Her wrinkled, dark brown eyes looked at me with compassion.

Vuković didn’t bother to tell you, eh? Well, why should he then? It doesn’t change anything.” She sighed and settled herself, then began. “My dear girl, what you have heard is unfortunately true. No honorable maiden from around here would marry your devil of a husband for all the gold of the Turks or Viennese! He is the son of someone who did not want to stay in the grave.”

“But Danilo is Jovan’s son!”

Branka shook her head decisively. “No. His father’s name was Goran. Danilo’s mother married him at his open grave. I know; I was there. Don’t look at me like that, girl. I can’t do anything about all the misery that has come about as a result!”

“You mean she married a dead man? But there’s nothing so terrible about that! There must be something else behind it all, right? Please, please tell me. You must have known Marja well.”

“No better or worse than anyone else around here,” Branka said, shrugging her shoulders. She came from somewhere else, and Jovan hadn’t been here for many

years. He only returned shortly before the death of his father. He brought Marja with him, but not as a wife, no, not that, but as a maiden he hoped to marry!”

Without noticing, I had grasped my cup of milk so tightly that my hands began to ache. *She came from somewhere else!* I thought. *Just like me!*

“Most people say she came from somewhere around Svilajnac. She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen,” Branka continued. “She was more than twenty years old, but with lips and eyes as alluring as sin! Her skin was as white as camellia petals, so white that people passing her for the first time stared at her as if she were a ghost. No question, most people in the village, including old man Vuković, would have liked to drive her out of the village, and needless to say our priest refused to marry Jovan to a complete stranger. Well then, soon after she arrived one of the young shepherds fell ill and died. He was a good-for-nothing drunkard, but he belonged to the community and he had died without a wife.”

I nodded, because I knew well that no young man could be buried without having been married.

“Father Milutin chose Marja as the dead man’s bride,” Branka continued, “and she had no choice but to take Goran as her husband at his graveside.”

I had no idea how they did things in Medveđa, but in Taldorf the custom was that a dead man’s bride had to wear mourning clothes and live with the family of the deceased for forty days, after which she could return to her own family and marry again. I could only imagine how mortified Jovan must have been when his fiancé – the future bride of a rich estate owner – was forced by this custom to become the wife of a simple shepherd, and move into a squalid hut at the edge of the meadow. Marja had paid a high price indeed to be taken into this community. I felt a surge of pity and tenderness toward this stranger I was getting to know so well.

“And then what happened?” I pressed Branka further, wanting to hear more.

Branka sighed and made the sign of the cross. “What indeed? She swore in front of the icon that she was still a virgin, and was married at the grave. After the wedding, she put away her bridal clothes and put on a widow’s dress before following Goran’s mother home. Thirteen days later, the mother was dead.”

“Did she . . . die of sorrow?”

“Goran’s sheep would have been more likely to mourn him to the point of breathing their last,” Branka answered disdainfully. “No, she was haunted by her dead son. First the mother died, then the cattle, then the sheep of a farmer Goran had quarreled with shortly before his death. Finally, the farmer himself died spitting blood, his throat swollen and covered with black-and-blue marks. On his death bed, he swore that Goran was visiting him at night to strangle him.”

I crossed myself involuntarily. “You mean Goran was an *upir*?” I asked bewildered.

“Upir, strigun, grobnik, vukodlak, vampire – call him what you will! Yes! He was one of those creatures who return to drag the living down into the grave. He also killed the farmer’s wife. Many villagers saw Goran during that time. He weakened and strangled them, and several people were ill. Even Marja felt miserable. She was standing there when, after a month, we re-opened Goran’s grave. But she didn’t so much as bat an eyelash when she saw her husband lying there before her, bloated and fattened, fatter than he had ever been when he was alive. There were no signs of decay at all – he wasn’t the least bit putrid! Father Milutin had him cremated and his ashes thrown in the river.”

Branka’s hut suddenly didn’t seem so cozy anymore, but oppressively small and dangerous. I had never before been so close to evil. I thought again of the dead that my father had buried, and automatically began to pray that none of them would rise from their graves to harm me or my sisters.

“And . . . what happened to Marja?” I asked, my heart hammering against my ribs as I spoke her name.

“She waited out the last two weeks of the mourning period, and then went back to Jovan. Soon everyone found out why she had been feeling so ill. She was carrying a child! Although she would never admit it, Goran had been visiting her at night as well.”

I had heard that there was such a thing as mixed-blood children born to vampires and humans. It was often said that these “dhampiren” could do wondrous things, like detecting ghosts, or the presence of the undead. But Danilo? I considered his vague

resemblance to Jovan – his forehead, his mouth – and heard the words of my sister, Jelka: *She wouldn't be the first woman to swear a false oath about her virginity.*

Branka leaned forward, lowering her voice. “Because they had not waited until the mourning period was over, Father Milutin refused to marry Jovan and Marja. Jovan's father, the old Petar Vuković, also refused to give his permission and threatened to disinherit his son. Despite all of this, Jovan was intent on going through with the marriage. That woman had him completely under her spell! Against the will of his father, he paid a priest from another village to consecrate his union with Marja. Strangely enough, the old Vuković died just two weeks after this disastrous marriage. His entire estate went to Jovan, the son he had made clear he never wanted to see or hear of again. Father Milutin stood in the square in front of the church and damned the marriage. God would reveal whether Marja was responsible for the death of Petar Vuković, he said. And God . . .” – Branka crossed herself again – “. . . God exposed her guilt in short order. Girl, you should have seen her! Not two years after Danilo's birth, Marja began to change. Her skin became even paler than it already was, her eyes turned red, and her teeth darkened until they were black. Then God took daylight away from her and drove her into darkness. She broke out in festering sores whenever the sun hit her skin.”

I suddenly felt chilled to the bone, and my thoughts swirled around in my head until I was so dizzy that I had to shut my eyes. All I could see was the horrific image of a woman with black teeth, pale cheeks, and eyes like bruises on her face.

“We never saw her again during the day,” Branka continued. “But a man walking past the estate at night once saw Marja standing there at the gate, with a knife in one hand and a hen she had stabbed in the other. She was drinking blood directly out of the wounds! Well, finally the heavens themselves rained fire upon her. The tower was struck by lightning. She was burned to ashes in the fire, and . . .”

“Stop!” The scream rose out of my throat before I could stop it. The image of the tower was before my eyes, dark and stormy, as forbidding as a hideous gravestone. Marja had burned to death in the tower!

“Calm down, darling, calm down!” Branka cried. She jumped up, sat down next me, and put her arm around my shoulder. “Oh, you're trembling so! I didn't mean to

frighten you!” The old woman’s words were warm and caring, but somewhere deep inside me, I thought she sounded a little pleased at the same time.

“I know this is hard for you,” she murmured in a concerned tone. “Such a young thing, left all alone on an estate where evil haunts the tower. Marja’s body must have been burned to ashes, completely consumed by the fire, but the devil apparently still keeps her alive. She is stalking you in the form of a *mora*, isn’t she? An evil spirit that comes at night to take your breath away? Take care that she doesn’t suck your blood while you’re asleep! Oh, how she must hate you!”

It was odd: I liked Branka and would have liked nothing better than to rush into her arms and let her comfort me, but somehow I felt I couldn’t trust her completely.

“No one is haunting me,” I murmured. “I really only came here because I wanted to make your acquaintance, and ask you where in the village I might buy a dog.” I carefully withdrew from Branka’s embrace, bending down to pick up my basket. I took out the bottle of brandy. “Will this do as payment?”

The old woman looked at me for a long time, as if trying to read my thoughts. It took all my self-control not to lower my eyes from her gaze. Then, after what seemed like an eternity, she took the bottle from my hand and nodded. “I’ll see what I can do,” she said, sealing an unspoken pact between us. If Branka were willing to accept me, maybe the rest of the villagers would eventually make me welcome as well – not today, and not tomorrow, but someday.

Branka smiled and stood up. “Come by and visit me whenever you are in the village, Jasna! For now, let me give you some advice along the way. For safety, take a belt and lay it lengthwise along your bed before going to sleep. If Marja takes the form of a *mora*, coming at night to drink your blood or devour your heart, she will see the belt first and think that another of her own kind has already been there, laying itself over you like a band as it takes its refreshment. Then she’ll go away and leave you in peace.”

(. . .)

S. 257 - 265

Would I have fled if I had known that everything certain in my well-ordered world would be irreversibly shattered within a few short hours? I don't know. My fear had long since given way to an angry defiance. Although it was dark, I had gone to Jovan's grave and strewn poppy seeds among the stones. Whatever might happen, he would not be able to leave his grave until he had counted every individual seed, which would surely take him all night and part of the next day. In the morning I would go into the village to speak with Father Milutin and Branka. Today, however, my task was to find out a few things for sure, and prevent worse things from happening. I wanted so badly to be with Dušan, but was on my own. I had to keep a cool head and protect myself as well as I could. I still could not make head or tails of why Simeon and Danilo should have looked on impassively as the village was destroyed. Were hate and revenge so deeply ingrained within them?

They came back late, with tired horses trailing along at a walking pace with their heads hanging low. Danilo glanced up at my tower, but I had put out the lights earlier and hid myself in the safety of the shutters' shadow.

Simeon brought a lamp and set it atop the wall, as he did every evening. In its glow, his expression looked tired and sad, and I wondered what he was thinking about. With slumped shoulders, he went into the stalls and closed the door.

I knew that Nema was home, and probably every bit as tense as me. I hastily pocketed the rest of the poppy seeds, the garlic, and Dušan's knife. I had cleaned it, washing away the bat blood. I jumped out the back window so that no one would see me leave. The clouds had cleared, and a pale moon hung like a grimacing face in the sky. I would have been glad to have Bela by my side, but she was nowhere to be seen. I didn't hear so much as a whisper.

Ducking low, I crept around the outside of my tower in a wide arc, and then along the rear wall of the main building. The shutters to Nema's room were closed, as they always were, the candlelight shining through the slats the only sign that she was still awake. I pulled out the garlic, cut it open, and rubbed it in the form of a cross on the shutters. Then I scattered the poppy seeds along the windowsill. No vampire would be

able to leave the house on this side now. Then I went around the building and crouched down out of sight by the stairs next to the door to wait.

It took a long time, but finally I heard a key turn in the lock, followed by careful, cautious steps. Nema scurried past me, freezing for a moment to look up at my tower before ducking down lower and continuing. In the weak glow of the lamp, it was not at all clear what she was up to, but she didn't go toward the gate to leave the estate. She was headed to the stalls. I heard a door open and the sound of Simeon's voice, after which it was quiet for a long time. I scattered more poppy seeds, laid garlic on the threshold, and pushed a clove into the keyhole to prevent Nema from getting back into the house. Then I crept over to the stalls as well, pressing my body against the wall. With trembling fingers, I cut open the rest of the garlic and rubbed it onto my neck and hands for my own protection.

It felt like an eternity before the door swung open again. Nema darted out, bent over low – and headed straight for my tower! With a few steps, I caught up with her and grabbed her by the arm.

“And what are you bringing me this time?” I hissed at her. “A new witches' spell?”

A gasp of terror escaped her throat. The whites of her eyes had a bluish shimmer in the moonlight, and her gaping mouth was a black slash in her face. Something heavy fell to the ground, scraping my knee. I heard a sound like the breaking of a clay pot, and a warm, sticky liquid soaked my open leather shoes. A metallic smell filled the air. Horse blood! The old woman swung around, as agile as a snake. I was too startled to get out of her way, and her bony fist hit my temple with full force. A bold of pain erupted behind my eyelids. I staggered, then stepped on a shard of the broken pot and lost my balance. Nema took advantage of the moment to break free of my grip and flee.

Before I knew what was happening, she was halfway across the courtyard. I stumbled after her, but she slithered away from me and slipped inside the house. But this time, she didn't have time to lock me out. My feet stomped on the floorboards as I chased the old woman to her chamber. Just as she reached the threshold, I grabbed the hem of her skirt and pulled her down. She slid down the wall, and with a groan of pain landed hard on the floor. The flame of a candle standing on a chest flickered.

“We can do this the easy way or the hard way,” I breathed. “I don’t want to thrash you, but swear I will do it if you don’t answer my questions, do you understand?”

Nema pressed her lips together and looked at me as if I was a rabid dog that should not be provoked. Her scarred hands were balled into fists, but she made no move to stand up.

“Are you . . . are you the vampire, Nema?” Are you the one bringing so much misery to the village?”

The old woman hissed through her twisted mouth as she cursed me with her eyes. In the same moment I realized that something was not right. Despite the garlic and poppy seeds, Nema had entered the house with no difficulty whatsoever.

Lightening fast she grabbed a bucket standing next to the chamber door and hurled it at me. I raised my arm to fend it off, collapsing in agony as the heavy wooden object crashed into my elbow. The next thing I knew, the door was slammed in my face and latched from the inside. I heard floorboards creak, and the shutters open. I pulled myself up and raced through the hallway back to the courtyard. I grabbed the lamp off the wall and ran around to the other side of the house as fast as I could. The shutters were open. Here as well it was clear that the spells had had no effect, which meant that Nema could not be a vampire. Looking around, I saw a fleeing shadow running toward the hillside. I lost sight of her for an instant, but by then could well imagine where she was headed. That was a plan I intended to thwart!

Thistles stuck to my skirt, and my lungs burned with exertion. Only when the juniper bushes appeared in the moonlight did I slow my steps until I came to a halt, breathing heavily. The light inside the lamp flickered and then went out. There was no danger. The light-colored stones on Jovan’s grave reflected the moonlight. They were neither scattered about nor disturbed in any way, and the stone cross was still standing.

Everything was exactly as I had left it. In the darkness, I could only see the outline of Nema’s shadow falling on the grave. She either couldn’t hear me, or had simply given up. At any rate, she did not turn around to face me. She kneeled on the grave, partially turned away from me and hunched over as if collapsed into herself. Her upper body rocked back and forth, back and forth, as if she had gone completely mad. It unnerved me more than a little to see her this way.

Silently, I set the lamp down next to a bush. I stepped forward and took a deep breath, ready to speak to her, when I heard something that turned my heart into a block of ice. It was a high, thin wail, a horrible sound, like that of a wounded animal that suffers but can't comprehend its pain. *So Nema is not mute after all!* I thought, as I moved forward as if in a dream. I crouched down to get a better view. The clouds parted and a moonbeam illuminated long limbs. That wasn't Nema! An icy wave of horror rushed over me as I recognized Jovan's dark hair, with its white strands gleaming in the moonlight. "Run!" screamed a voice in my head, but my legs refused to obey. The whole world seemed to rock, as if it couldn't bear to support me anymore. I sank to my knees and dug my hands into the earth.

The time in the grave had sapped Jovan's strength, making him thin and shrunken. He still had his arms wrapped around his body, rocking himself as if mourning his own death. I stared at his hand, which was just a pale claw now, and watched his shock of white hair swing back and forth over his forehead. Completely on their own, my fingers found a stone on the ground and grasped it tightly. But it would have been madness to defend myself by throwing stones at a vampire that no spell could hold in its grave. *You have to get out of here!* I ordered myself. *Run to safety before he sees you!*

With infinite caution, I finally managed to stand up. I could no longer feel my legs. A breeze rustled the branches of the elderberry bushes, and my skirt wrapped around my shins. Jovan suddenly jerked up his head and took a sharp breath. He had noticed the garlic!

He looked over his shoulder until he was staring directly at me.

It was as though time, along with my heart, suddenly stood still. I was gazing into the icy face of the dead man, the visage that haunted my dreams. I recognized the gaping mouth and wide-open, dead eyes. Claws slashed through the air as the vampire sprang up and whirled around like an uncanny, lurching shadow. He gave the impression of not being in control of his limbs. Or as if he had been lying still for so long that it would take him a while to get used to walking upright again.

There was a ticklish feeling in my throat, but I didn't hear myself scream. All I could hear was the shrill cry of the dead man, which then broke off abruptly. My arm

muscles ached as if I had wrenched them, and all at once my hand was empty. Without thinking, I had thrown the rock at the vampire, and seemed to have hit him as well. The monster stumbled backward holding his arm, writhing in pain, and letting loose a howl that was more horrific than the wailing. I thought he would come after me, but instead he stared at me wide eyed and sank down moaning on his knees. I saw now that he was much, much thinner than Jovan. His face was noticeably narrower, and the nose oddly short, as if it had been mutilated. "The witch!" sobbed the creature, making the sign of the cross. "Mary, Mother of God, help me! The witch! Mary, Help me!"

Vampires don't weep, I thought to myself, confused. *They don't have any feelings. And they don't pray.* The figure repeated the words over and over again, a breathless, frantic incantation, until it finally dawned on me that this creature was actually terrified.

"Who is the witch?" I managed to say with some effort.

With a fearful cry, the man crept back a few steps and cried, "You are! You want to devour my heart! Dear Mary, Mother of God, protect me!"

The blood continued to rush in my ears, and my legs still wanted to simply run away, but my mind ordered me to stay. *It's not Marja. It has never been Marja.* The monster's voice sounded human, young, and scared to death. His speech was labored and unclear, perhaps because his lips had been mutilated just like his nose.

"I am not a witch!" I replied as carefully as if I was speaking to a frightened animal. "Who told you that?"

I heard his rapid, labored breathing. "Nema," he whispered, with a wheezing cough. "She told me to stay away from you, that I should stay out of sight, but you've been following me for such a long time! You . . . carry garlic, and left me a bewitched mirror. You want to destroy me! You want to kill us all!"

Although it was quite dark, so much became clear to me all at once. The mirror, the hideous face at the window, the figure that threw a stone against my window . . . how much this man must fear me if he had gone so far as to resort to protective magic against witches: the dead pigeon, the hawthorn – and the dead bat. He must have

taken the knife from the grave. Nema must have been trying to erase the marks before I found out. The man coughed again, gasping for air.

“I’m not going to do anything to you,” I said reassuringly. The wind rustled through the branches again, brushing my skin, and blowing my hair against my cheeks. The man threw both hands up in front of his face in terror, and was stumbling backward with a painful retching sound. It must be the smell of the garlic. A horrible suspicion rose in my throat, strangling me. Nema had not lied that day in the stalls when she told me that a man with white streaks in his hair drank the blood. *White streaks in his hair.*

“Are you . . . Jovan’s son?” I asked softly. “What is your name?”

The man swayed back and forth as if he was so weak that he could barely stay on his feet.

“Vampire,” he whispered, in a voice choked with fear. With that his eyes rolled back in his head, and he collapsed in a faint by the grave.