

MARIJA JURIĆ ZAGORKA'S *THE WITCH OF GRIČ*: TRANSLATION AND CRITICAL

INTRODUCTION

by

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(Under the Direction of Ronald Bogue)

ABSTRACT

Marija Jurić Zagorka was the first female political journalist in Central Europe and a pivotal figure in Croatian culture and literature. Her iconic book series *Grička Vještica* served as a political weapon to encourage the Croatian sovereignty by promoting Croatian language and identity, but it also championed women's rights. The translation of *Kontesa Nera* and the critical examination of its significance in the context of early twentieth century Croatia serve to introduce Zagorka's work to the English-speaking world in hopes of promoting a better understanding of Croatian history and culture as well as literature's role in nation-building.

INDEX WORDS: Marija Jurić Zagorka, Grička Vještica, Witch of Grič, Kontesa Nera, Literary translation, Croatian literature, Journalism, Politics, Religion, Feminism

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2017



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December 2017

## DEDICATION

To my daughter Ada, with all my love.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation was a long project and I am grateful for the support I received. Firstly, my sincere gratitude to Dr. Bogue, whose mentorship and counsel were instrumental to my progress, and whose dedication to pedagogy and excellent scholarship continue to be a source of inspiration. I feel lucky to have had you for a major professor, and I appreciate the opportunity to learn from you over the years.

I would like to thank Dr. Langston for sharing his invaluable linguistic expertise and for his thoughtful and thorough editorial suggestions, without which this translation's literary value would have been greatly diminished. Many thanks to Dr. O'Neill for his academic support, encouragement and assistance; I truly appreciate your input and involvement. I would like to thank Dr. Figueira, whose uncompromising academic standards helped improve this study, and Dr. Jerzak for her enthusiasm and guidance. Many thanks to Jill Talmage for all the administrative help and kind support.

I would like to thank my father for always being there for me, my mother for selflessly providing practical support, and my brother for the encouragement. I am thankful for the memory of my grandmother and her faith in my abilities. Last but not least, I would like to thank my husband for his constant patience, love and support over the years.

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## MARIJA JURIĆ ZAGORKA: CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### The Significance of Translating *Grička Vještica*

*Grička Vještica* by Marija Jurić Zagorka is an iconic book series that fundamentally influenced generations of Croatian readers from its publication in 1912. It has been translated into several European languages, and the fact that no English translation exists is a grievous omission on the part of the scholars and translators of Balkan literature. This translation seeks to correct that oversight, and promote, in Schulte's words, the "cross-cultural communication and understanding" between the English-speaking world and the Balkans (1).

In *On the Art of Translation*, Hugo Friedrich writes that translation concerns "the cultural interaction of an entire nation with another" (11), and he quotes Nietzsche's assertion that this type of interaction is akin to an act of war in that its purpose is to 'conquer.' We can think of this figurative violence as being both inflicted on the original text as translators rip into it to try and transform it into another language and another cultural consciousness, and as transformative of the host culture in turn. In this sense, the journey of a text is similar to the migrations of the people who, while adjusting to the social norms of their adoptive countries, alter its cultural make-up with the customs, beliefs and traditions they continue to engage in. In an increasingly globalized world, translations are therefore uniquely positioned to promote cross-cultural understanding and tolerance.

Zagorka started her literary career in order to defend Croatian culture against the influx of literature in other languages, which she saw as threats to Croatia's sovereignty and Croatian

cultural heritage. This attitude toward translation and foreign literature is consistent with Venuti's stance that "a culture with a low self-image will welcome translation (and other forms of rewriting) from a culture or cultures it considers superior to itself" (Schulte 95). Croatia had accepted German novels as the most avidly consumed form of 'domestic' literature, so it was a great success on Zagorka's part to curb<sup>1</sup> their popularity among the Croatian reading public by convincing them of the value of their own language and culture. The significance of her work surpasses her original goal, as her novels continue to be translated into various world languages over the last one hundred years. In this way, Zagorka's work is engaged in conquest by educating the world about Croatian and Balkan history and culture, and thus dispelling prejudice and xenophobia and fostering respect for the Other.

The interesting thing about these novels is that the cultural attitudes concerning religion, gender, women's rights, and class systems, which are often so different from those of the target culture, in this case do not require copious explanations because Zagorka's vision was so progressive that her 'historic' novel written a hundred years ago closely resembles the Western world's modern ideology. Not only is the hope of this translation to serve as an introduction to a great female author and to Croatian cultural heritage, but it is also to continue Zagorka's effort to affect how readers relate to the social issues of their time by providing characters that are easy to identify with, and blueprints for facing challenges that are all but universal. Nossack writes that in reading works in translation "we recognize that things are no different elsewhere, which relieves us momentarily of our sense of isolation as human individuals" (Schulte 235), and this specific work concerns the universal striving for a renewal of culture and an enlightened resistance to the tyrannies of history in favor of a brighter future. In *Translation, Rewriting and Manipulation* Lefevere writes that cultures undertake a type of refashioning of their history to

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<sup>1</sup> See below, "Zagorka's Assessment of her Life and Work," p. 56.



suit the needs of the present and that “there appears to be some kind of ‘historical moment’ when the ideology and poetics of a time will shift far enough in a direction that will allow them to admit again those it cast out before” (129). Mentioning the case of the once popular and well-known seventeenth century Dutch author Willem Godschalk van Focquenbroch, whose work was strategically eliminated from the histories of Dutch literature until very recently, Lefevere writes that the critics “had interiorized the discourse on literature dominant in their day and Focquenbroch did not fit, or, in their opinion, could not be made to fit that discourse” (118). The same fate was reserved for Zagorka’s novels, which are only now being re-examined as valuable literary creations. Zagorka’s contemporaries from literary circles denounced her and her work as both inappropriate and sub-par, but her readers kept her relevant over the decades and she is now finally being acknowledged as an important Croatian cultural figure.

The resurgence of interest in Zagorka’s work is due in part to the cultural shift in favor of feminism and feminist literature. As Venuti writes, the translator is moved not only by her own interest but by the zeitgeist to bring specific works to a larger audience: “no writing can be mere self-expression because it is derived from a cultural tradition at a specific historical moment” (*The Translator’s Invisibility*, 274). In 2009, scholars from the Centar za Ženske Studije (Center for Women’s Studies) and the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Zagreb established the *Dani Marije Jurić Zagorke* (*Days of Marija Jurić Zagorka*) conference and series of annual events. In conjunction with the conference, they founded a museum dedicated to her life and work at her old apartment, a library collection of related works, and they began issuing an annual scholarly journal. “Jadran Film” is currently producing a television series based on *Grička Vještica*, finally realizing plans for this production that have been in the works since 1923. The translation into English will add to the current conversation about feminism and

science in the West and specifically in modern US culture, where various minority groups are engaged in attempts to achieve political representation. The way forward is to question the established norms that are biased against a marginalized segment of society whether it be against 'witches' or women, blacks, Muslims, LGBTQ and others.

## II. ISSUES OF TRANSLATION

### The Role of the Translator

I feel uniquely qualified to translate this specific novel not only because Croatian is my mother tongue and English is the language in which I completed higher education degrees, but because my personal ideology was influenced by Marija Jurić Zagorka and her work. As a girl growing up in Croatia, I was a member of Zagorka's target audience and I grew up reading *Grička Vještica*. Due to the relative dearth of outspoken feminist role models in my youth I have engaged with these texts in the process of forming attitudes toward literature, religion, nationalism and, above all, women's rights. Having experienced it myself, I am aware of the effect that the novels should have on the translator's target audience in the present day. Whatever manipulation of the text I may have subconsciously effected in the process of translation was therefore ultimately in a very similar spirit to the original author's. Furthermore, the timing of the translation is germane to current issues regarding women's representation in the public domain as well as the relevance of fact and science<sup>2</sup> in both the global context and target language culture that mirrors the issues of witch hunts explored in the novel.

In "Translating and Being Translated" Nossack writes that he translates certain books "not as a translator but as someone who loved them" (Schulte 228), and he claims that original authors "greatly depend upon this emotional, human element of translation" because it allows for a more intimate communication of their intentions for the texts. I have loved Zagorka's novels since I first encountered them as a child, and I approached the process of translation with the intent of

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<sup>2</sup> The very fact that the United States is currently divided on the topic of climate change, which is backed by scientific research, and on the topic of evolution itself, is evidence of the relevance of this issue today.

both studying the “locus of difference” (Venuti, *Rethinking Translation*) as well as finding a way to bridge those differences.

### Archaisms and Word Choice

In *Experiences in Translation* Eco writes that it is important to understand the way a text functions as a whole and to attempt to produce similar reactions in the reader of its translated version. As a translator, I am twice removed from Zagorka’s novel as she wrote a historic eighteenth century romance, attempting to use words that were archaisms in early twentieth century Croatia, while her own everyday lexicon has become archaic from a twenty-first century vantage point. *Grička vještica* is particularly interesting because Zagorka meant to use the past to communicate ‘modern’ ideas to her readers. In that respect, the actual time and space of the plot are very much imagined. By using Victorian English, which in American modern culture often signals not only a time past but also an oft-used literary vehicle for romantic escapism, I believe that I have created a similar effect on contemporary readers of the translated text.

A good translation provides an engrossing experience for the reader of the translated text, which necessitates a form of ‘fluency’ as it reads in the target language, but it also retains a sense of the Other: “the foreignness of the text should be maintained as completely as possible in the transferal from the original language into the translated language” (Schulte 4). I have approached this translation with a consciously varied use of what Venuti describes as ‘domestication’ and ‘foreignization’. I foreignized by including source language names of characters and places as well as the novel’s use of expressions in Latin, and by using target language archaisms. I accomplished this by preserving original given names of characters and locations without Anglicizing them, as well as the original words that have no equivalent in English with footnote translations and explanations, such as the word “baba.” For example, when considering names of

characters and places that have their equivalent on English, such as “John” for “Ivan” or “St. Mark” for “Sv. Marko,” I retained the Croatian forms. I also did not facilitate the foreign readers’ understanding of the plot by choosing one familiar way to refer to a character in order to retain the rich nuance of tone and use determined by occasion; for example, Barica Cindek is also referred to as Bare, Cindekovka and so on. The Latin phrases in the original text were transcribed as such, with an understanding that the characters at the time would have been familiar with those stock phrases. I did this in order to induce an “alien reading experience” for the readers of the English translation in an attempt to promote a broader inter-cultural understanding of the issues addressed in the original text. In “Problems of Translation” Nabokov writes that “one of the main troubles with would-be translators is their ignorance” (Venuti, *Translation Studies* 127) of the customary use of language, and I avoid that pitfall by creating a target language text that reads inherently differently than it would have had it been translated by a native English speaker, thus preserving Nabokov’s ideal of the original text’s foreignness by bringing the reader to the author as opposed to the other way around.

On the other hand, I domesticated the text by attempting to produce an otherwise fluent and easily readable style for the target reader to facilitate the reader’s immersion in the text. The footnotes provide explanations and background information about culturally specific items and terms. In this way it is clear that we are speaking of a different cultural heritage but that communication does not need to be cumbersome, and the path to understanding need not be enshrined in mystery. I felt that it was necessary to educate the reader by expanding on the information provided by the text in order to support the original author’s intent of instructing and inspiring the reader to action. Both approaches are ultimately manipulative since, as Eco stated in

*Dire quasi la stessa cosa*, “translation is the art of failure”—the end result is necessarily an artistic revision of the original.

### Literal Vs. Paraphrased Translation

Scholars disagree on the ‘right’ approach to translating literary works; while some claim that a literal, word-for-word translation is the only appropriate method since it honors the original language and the author’s vision, others find that a paraphrase is better able to capture the holistic meaning of the original text. Nabokov writes that the “clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times more useful than the prettiest paraphrase” (Venuti, *Translation Studies* 127) but I believe that this depends on the type of text that is translated. Zagorka’s novels are originally motivated by the promise of a connection with the readers, so in this particular case I think that the established practice of reproducing “the totality of the original source-language text in the translated language,” form as well as meaning, is more appropriate (Schulte 6). There were times when I attempted to evoke a mood as opposed to provide a literal translation, in keeping with the rhythmic intent of the original and adapting Croatian sentence structure to the English language so as to not interfere with the flow of thought and plot.

In *The Task of the Translator* Benjamin writes that the “task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original” (Venuti, *Translation Studies* 77). Instead of reproducing the original, Benjamin advocates that the translator create an accompanying work of art based on the original, influenced by the original, and inspired by the original’s message: “all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines” (82). In “Variations sur les Bucoliques” Paul Valéry makes a similar point, advocating that the translation be “done with regard for a

certain approximation of form” but as a reinterpretation of the original intent rather than a copy: “not to fashion one text upon the other” (Venuti, *Rethinking Translation* 120-1).

Ultimately, I agree with Dryden and others who claim that it is best to tread the line between literal translation and paraphrase. Venuti writes that translators need to be “critically self-conscious writers who develop an acute awareness of the cultural and social conditions of their work” (Venuti, *Rethinking Translation* 1), and in Zagorka’s case I believe that a focus on conveying the meaning of her work is more pertinent and respectful of the original text than a purely literal translation. In the words of Valéry, “a work dies by being completed” (Venuti, *Rethinking Translation* 122), and it is my hope that this translation will continue the arc of Zagorka’s novels’ vibrant ‘afterlife.’

### III. BIOGRAPHY

Throughout her life as a public figure, Zagorka was very protective of her privacy. Her autobiography, *Stone on the Road*, which she wrote at the age of sixty-five, is the main source of information about her childhood and early adulthood. Nevertheless, several scholars have since published biographies on her, most notably Stanko Lasić and Slavica Jakobović-Fribec. Zagorka was born into a wealthy Roman Catholic family in the village of Negovac in Austro-Hungarian Croatia. For some time, the year of Zagorka's birth was under dispute, but Jakobović-Fribec determined the correct date to be March 2, 1873, and her given name to be Marianna Jurić<sup>3</sup>. Her father, Ivan Jurić, was an estate manager of Šanjugovo estate near Varaždin, which belonged to Hungarian governor Khuen-Héderváry's godfather, Baron Geza Rauch. Her mother, Josipa Domin, was by all accounts a tragic figure: a volatile woman obsessed with the concept of female virtue. Zagorka spent her childhood with her family on the Golubovec estate, though her mother raised her separately from her two surviving siblings: her brother Leonardt Ivan<sup>4</sup>, and younger sister Dragica Jelisava. Zagorka had one other sister, Emilija Berta, who died in early childhood. Both Zagorka's mother and brother would later be proclaimed mentally ill and committed to a mental institution in Stenjevac<sup>5</sup>, where they died.

Zagorka spent most of her time with the staff who were her caregivers, so she identified with the servants and the villagers who felt oppressed by the socio-political system, even though she

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<sup>3</sup> *Bibliographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms in Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe: 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, p. 197-199.

<sup>4</sup> It is fascinating that many researchers allege that Zagorka had two brothers, and that her only sister's nickname was Dragica; I find this information more plausible because no one ever mentions the name of the second brother or his fate.

<sup>5</sup> Today's Vrapče, Zagreb, Croatia.



was a member of an upper-middle-class family that supported the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This comradeship led her to become a vocal patriot and to advocate for the Croatian cause while still in elementary school. She was a precocious child, and was recognized for her scholarly achievements by her teachers and mentors throughout her educational career. She began her education in a home-school environment at the Baron Geza Rauch estate, where she excelled at her studies. The Baron was impressed by her abilities and offered to fund her college education in Switzerland, but her parents disapproved of higher education for girls, perhaps particularly for girls who were deemed unattractive such as herself, and so they sent her to live with her aunt and attend a school for girls in Varaždin. This experience proved traumatic, as the aunt distrusted the girl and accused the nine-year-old of lascivious behavior after witnessing her kissing the priest's hand at church, as was customary at the time.

Zagorka continued her formal education at the Catholic School of the Sisters of Mercy in Zagreb, but her parents prevented her from completing the degree requirements. At the age of seventeen, her parents married her off to Andrija Matray, a wealthy Hungarian railway engineer fourteen years her senior. She was sent to live in Szombathely, Hungary. Zagorka's personal liberties, including her ability to write or speak in Croatian, were so restricted in this Hungarian household that she suffered a mental breakdown requiring hospitalization. Despite these difficulties, Zagorka found a way to study German and telegraphy, and to continue to write and publish articles in both Croatian and Hungarian opposition newspapers and the Croatian youth magazine *Bršljan* (*Ivy*).

When her husband learned that she was the anonymous author of the incendiary anti-Hungarian article "Whip and Wheat," published in 1885, he tried to force her to write for the Hungarian cause, threatening to send her to the madhouse if she were to refuse. Pushed to the

limits, Zagorka ran away to Croatia and hid for a while with the family of her maternal uncle in Sremska Mitrovica. Her uncle, however, also denounced her after she continued to write political articles supporting Croatian independence for the *Hrvatski Branik* (*Croatian Defender*) and *Posavska Hrvatska* (*Croatian Posavina*). Left with no choice, Zagorka set out to live on her own in Zagreb, determined never to return to her family's home. Once in Zagreb, she enlisted a cousin to help her find a suitable hotel room and to occasionally escort her through town in the evenings, given the fact that a woman walking alone at night was exposed to criminal prosecution at the time. On one occasion Zagorka was caught without a chaperone and pretended to be mentally disturbed to avoid jail, a detail that would later play into the fabulous plots of her novels.

Zagorka supported herself as a street vendor selling jewelry<sup>6</sup> when, wishing to get his hands on her dowry upon her coming of age, Matray sent out an arrest warrant for her. She was caught and escorted to the psychiatric hospital in Zagreb, but the attendant Dr. Gutschy let her go, pronouncing her mentally fit. Due to her mother's testimony, however, Matray succeeded in claiming for himself her dowry and the valuables that she had brought into the marriage.

In 1896 Zagorka's sister, Dragica, died of tuberculosis, and Zagorka cut all ties with her family. That same year Zagorka became the first woman to work as a journalist in Southeastern Europe, securing the job after the *Obzor* (*The View*) newspaper published her work under a male pseudonym. She also collaborated with the Hungarian opposition newspapers *Népszava* (*People's Voice*) and *Magyarország* (*Hungary*), which laid the foundation for her public role as a political journalist and democracy-and-women's-rights advocate. At the beginning of her career, Zagorka was pressured to continue to publish at the newspaper under a male pseudonym due to

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<sup>6</sup> From Jakobović-Fribec's "Marija Jurić Zagorka: Protagonist of the Unwritten History of Croatian Feminism," 17.

the stigma attached to working professionally as a woman. She used a variety of male and female pseudonyms in her early career: mostly Jurica Zagorski<sup>7</sup>, Petrica Kerempuh<sup>8</sup>, -ka, Z., (z), Z-a, Vlastelinka<sup>9</sup>, and Iglica,<sup>10</sup> until she published the novel *Vladko Šaretić* in 1903 and settled for the decisively feminine ‘Zagorka,’ which she continued to use exclusively for future publications. Incidentally, the *Acta Croatica* census lists the name ‘Zagorka’ as relatively popular in Croatia today, with peak popularity coinciding with the popularity of Zagorka herself, from 1923-1929.

During the upheaval against general Khuen-Héderváry in 1896, Zagorka participated in Croatian women’s protests and unionized female typographers by forming “Kolo Radnih Žena” (The “Working Women’s Circle” association). In 1897, she assumed the pen name Zagorka, and in 1899 *Obzor* published her first, anonymous feuilleton novel, *Roblje (Slaves)*, a work that addressed the question of the Hungarian oppression of Croats. Vujnović transcribes an excerpt from a 1902 Hungarian newspaper to testify to the strong reaction this novel provoked as it was translated into Polish and Russian: the Hungarians were incensed and attempted to induce the government into imprisoning the “respected” and “deadly powerful” Zagorka for “enticing Croatian people to rise up against Hungarians.”<sup>11</sup>

In the 1903 political protests against Ban Khuen-Héderváry, many editors and journalists were arrested, but Zagorka escaped arrest because of her gender. As a consequence, Zagorka acted as the editor-in-chief of *Obzor* for five months and was eventually imprisoned after organizing and leading the first women’s anti-government feminist protests in Zagreb during her

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Jurica’ being the male given name version of her surname, Jurić.

<sup>8</sup> Kerempuh is a famous folk and literary figure, somewhat of a trickster, visionary cultural commentator. Most notable is his 1936 incarnation in *The Balads of Petrica Kerempuh (Balade Petrice Kerempuha)* by Miroslav Krleža.

<sup>9</sup> Noblewoman.

<sup>10</sup> Iglica is “Small Needle” in translation, a reference to the sword-like power of her pen.

<sup>11</sup> Originally published in ‘*Magyar Prsag*,’ June 10, 1902, excerpt found in *Jutarnji List*, May 15, 1931, 3.)

participation in the Glavni Narodni Odbor (Central National Committee). While in prison, she wrote the play *Evica Gupčeva*, in which she reimagines a historic Croatian-Slovene peasant revolt of 1573 from the point of view of a feminist heroine who courageously supports the efforts of the legendary Croatian hero Matija Gubec. This play was censored and unpublished, but staged and celebrated nevertheless across Dalmatia and beyond.

Zagorka then became a political reporter stationed in Budapest, and in 1906 popularized the political newspaper by her “lively and cinematographic style of reporting,”<sup>12</sup> which I would characterize as modern subjective journalism. In *Zagorka: Kroničar Starog Zagreba* Đorđević includes a transcript of some of Zagorka’s political reports from Budapest, and her word choice makes it clear that her goal was not merely to report the facts, but also to describe the parliament sessions’ atmosphere and to vividly characterize the politicians involved in the discussions. While international newspapers lauded her work and even offered employment opportunities,<sup>13</sup> her situation at *Obzor* was tentative due to the patriarchal nature of Croatian society. She reported from Vienna in 1909, and was advised by Bishop Strossmayer in 1910 to stop her journalistic work and focus on writing novels for serial publication by the newspaper. She accepted the proposition, believing that she would be able to successfully promote the use of the Croatian language in public life and in print by publishing mass-audience novels written in her native tongue. Zagorka’s novelistic work succeeded in countering the anti-Croatian propaganda prevalent in the German and Hungarian publications of the time because she chose mostly historical themes that paralleled the current political situation in order to comment on and support the Croatian struggle for sovereignty while avoiding censorship.

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<sup>12</sup> Jan. 1908 issue of the magazine *Zvono* (*The Bell*).

<sup>13</sup> Pester Lloyd, Budapesti Hirlap, and AZ EST. Vujnović, 137.

In 1910 Zagorka became a founding member of the Hrvatsko Novinarsko Društvo, HND, (Croatian Society of Professional Journalists). She married a fellow journalist, Slavko Amadej Vodvarka, but the marriage ended in divorce after three years. Vujnović reports that interviews with Vodvarka's family members indicate that they edited *Male Novine (The Little Newspaper)* and *Ilustrovani Tjednik (The Illustrated Weekly)* newspapers together, and that the relationship was based primarily on professional interests<sup>14</sup>.

The first novel from this period, *Kneginja iz Petrinjske ulice (The Duchess from Petrinjska Street)*, was published in 1910 and is considered Croatia's first crime novel. She published her most popular novel series, *Grička vještica (The Witch of Grič)* from 1912 to 1914, and dramatized it for stage performance in 1916. *Republikanci (The Republicans)*, published from 1914-16, describes the Napoleonic wars and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century pro-Illyrian movement led by one of the most significant figures involved in the Croatian national revival, Bishop Maksimilijan Vrhovac. In 1917 Zagorka left *Obzor* and began a long-term collaboration with the *Zabavnik (The Entertainer)* and the *Jutarnji List (The Morning Paper)* newspapers. In 1918 Zagorka wrote *Crveni Ocean (The Red Ocean)*, a fantasy novel inspired by the October Revolution and the Marxist ideal of equality for all people. Other notable works include *Kći Lotrščaka (Daughter of Lotrščak Tower)* published in 1921-2, and *Plameni inkvizitori (The Flaming Inquisitors)* published in 1928-9. Both are based on 12<sup>th</sup>- and 13<sup>th</sup>-century historical research and carry strong anti-German and anti-clerical messages, which caused a clerical uprising against Zagorka and her novels. *Gordana*, published in 1934-5, is Zagorka's longest work, consisting of twelve books and covering the events leading up to the Battle of Mohács and the victory of the Ottoman

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<sup>14</sup> These statements are probably just conjecture, because an unfortunate number of current reflections on Zagorka still espouse chauvinist ideals through which they interpret her life and choices; many contemporary critics still feel it important to note that Zagorka was physically unattractive and temperamentally too 'masculine' to be considered desirable as a romantic partner.

Empire in 1526, while focusing on Gordana's Croatian national pride. *Vitez Slavonske ravnine* (*Knight of the Slavonian Plain*), published in 1937-8, describes the Slavonia region under the rule of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century robber Stojan Varnica. *Kamen na cesti* (*A Stone on the Road*), published in 1938, is Zagorka's autobiography chronicling her difficult journey as an intellectual, a journalist and a feminist. *Jadranka*, published in 1953, is a romance novel that takes place in the period between 1850-1859, when the German language was instated as Croatia's official language. Other novels include *Vragoljanka s Trešnjevke* (*The Mischievous Girl from Trešnjevka Street*) 1940-1, *Tozuki* (acronym for a secret society of smugglers) 1922, *Anarhist sa Kaptola* (*Kaptol's Anarchist*) 1925-6, *Mala revolucionarka* (*The Little Revolutionary*) 1939-40, and *Pustolovine Petrice Kerempuha* (*Adventures of Petrica Kerempuh*) 1939-40. She published the following plays: *Novi roman* (*The New Novel*) in 1901, *Što žena umije* (*What a Woman Can Do*) in 1901, *Nesretna Ilica* (*The Unfortunate Ilica*) in 1903, *U lovu za mužem* (*Hunting for a Husband*) in 1903, *Ustrijelit ću se!* (*I Will Shoot Myself!*) in 1903, *Filip Košenski* in 1904, *Petrica Kerempuh* in 1906 and *Jalnuševčani* in 1917. Her autobiographical works include *Poznata Hrvatska spisateljica svojoj publici o svome radu* (*A Famous Croatian Author to her Reading Public Regarding Her Work*) in 1932, *Tko ste vi?* (*Who Are You?*) in 1939, *Što je moja krivnja?* (*What Is My Guilt?*) in 1947, *Iz Zagorkinih memoara* (*From Zagorka's Memoires*) in 1952, and *Kako je bilo* (*The Way It Was*) in 1953. Her political articles are published in *Razvrgnute zaruke* (*The Broken Engagement*) in 1907, and her collection of humorous short stories in *Zagrebačke silhouette* (*The Zagreb Silhouettes*) in 1911. She also adapted two plays for the screen, *Matija Gubec* produced by A. Binički in 1917, and *Grička vještica* produced by H. Nučić in 1920, but these films are now lost.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jakobović-Fribec, *Vodič Zagorkinim tragom kroz Zagreb*.

Though intensely private about her personal affairs, Zagorka is known to have had another long-term relationship with writer Rudolf Habeduš Katedralis, which ended over the controversial publishing of the novel *Katakombe Svetog Marka* (*The Catacombs of Saint Marko*). Katedralis published the novel in 1929 and Zagorka bitterly contested its authorship, claiming that it was nothing but a version of her own novel of the same title that she had drafted several years earlier.

In the 1920s and 1930s Zagorka devoted her time once again to her journalism, feminist activism, and the dramatization of her own works and those of the famous Croatian novelist August Šenoa. In 1925 Zagorka founded the first magazine for women in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, *Ženski List* (*Women's Periodical*), and the feminist-inspired magazine *Hrvatica* (*Croatian Woman*) in 1938. She also collaborated with the organization Hrvatska Žena (Croatian Woman), which boasted members across Europe and the United States. In 1941, after Zagorka refused to collaborate with the fascist rule of the Independent State of Croatia, *Hrvatica* was dissolved, Zagorka's possessions were confiscated and she was banned from public life, which led her to attempt suicide. She was subsequently allowed to publish her novels in *Nova Hrvatska* (*The New Croatia*) over the course of two years, before she was reintegrated into the public life of socialist Yugoslavia in 1945. She then started writing in support of the *Antifašistički Front Žena* (*Antifascist Women's Front*), but found herself impoverished and neglected by the HND.

Upon her death on November 29, 1957 Zagorka was buried at Mirogoj cemetery with much pomp as a member of the intellectual elite. However, her work and letters are only preserved unofficially through the efforts of the two gay<sup>16</sup> tenants, Leo Car and Nikola Smolčić, who shared her apartment at Dolac No. 8 in Zagreb, and with whom she was acquainted from the time

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<sup>16</sup> Sandra Prlenda, *Queer Dolac: Zagorkin Stan na Ružičastoj Mapi Grada* (*Queer Dolac: Zagorka's Apartment on the Pink Map of the City*), p. 88-100.

she lived at the hotel *Esplanada*. In *Vodič Zagorkinim tragom kroz Zagreb (Following Zagorka's Trail, The Guide through Zagreb)* Jakobović-Fribec notes that Zagreb celebrates and remembers Zagorka now, with the existence of a small street named after her, the 1991 statue of Zagorka in Ivan Tkalčić Street, and the naming of one of the Zagreb library's buildings after her. Zagorka is recognized as the first female Croatian journalist, and her legacy includes the naming of the prestigious Marija Jurić Zagorka HND journalist award, and the annual "Days of Marija Jurić Zagorka" festival in Zagreb. Zagorka's readers remember her as *Grička Vila* (The Gric Faerie) and *Kraljica Hrvata* (The Queen of the Croats) after the famous protagonists of her novels, and in December 2007, Zagorka received a postal stamp as recognition of her contribution to Croatian journalism, feminist history, and politics.



#### IV. ZAGORKA AND CROATIAN IDENTITY IN THE XIX CENTURY

##### Political Context

Throughout her journalistic and literary career Zagorka's primary concern was to strengthen and promote Croatian national identity in Croatian territories. But what precisely is that identity based on, given the myriad of foreign political and religious influences in the region over the centuries? The Croats consider themselves the descendants of the Croat people who conquered parts of the Dalmatian coast that were under the Roman Empire rule in the VII century AD and settled there, eventually forming Croatian vassal states of Francia before the first Christian Croatian ruler, Branimir of Croatia, was recognized by Pope John VIII in the ninth century. The tenth century King Tomislav was the first king of Croatia and the Croatian kingdom thrived, merging with Hungary in the early twelfth century to defend itself against the threat of the Ottoman Empire from the South as well as the Republic of Venice from the West. In the sixteenth century Croatia agreed to join the Austrian House of Habsburg in order to avoid being conquered by the Ottoman Empire, preserving its autonomous political rights in the form of a Croatian Ban (Governor). The Ottoman Empire nevertheless conquered and held a significant part of the Croatian territory for most of the sixteenth century, while parts of Dalmatia were under the Republic of Venice's rule from 1428 until 1797.

During the seventeenth-century the Jesuits led the education efforts on Croatian territories and are credited with developing the foundation of the school system and with printing early texts in Croatian dialects. Jesuit Bartol Kašić wrote the first Croatian grammar book, *Institutionum linguae illyricae*, in 1604, and later presented the *štokavsko-ikavski* dialect as the

most generally understood across modern Croatian and Bosnian territories, responding to the perceived need for a sovereign Croatian language and setting the foundation for the present-day official *štokavski*-based Croatian language. Several notable dictionaries and grammar books continued to be published in the eighteenth-century, addressing the issues of various Croatian language dialects and their respective merits, and the efforts to remove Turkisms from official use.

The attempted process of Germanization of Croatia began with the ascension of Maria Theresa to the Habsburg throne in 1740 and continued under the rule of her son, Joseph II. Germanization strove to unify and strengthen the kingdom by forcing the use of German language in all the territories, and promoting German culture and values. In an effort to avoid the pressure from Vienna, Croats aligned themselves with Hungary and exposed themselves to the danger of Magyarization in the nineteenth-century.

Between 1797 and 1809 the First French Empire conquered the Adriatic coastline and named the territory after the early inhabitants of the region, the Illyrians. When the Austrian Empire regained control of the territory, the Kingdom of Dalmatia was restored to the Kingdom of Croatia under the Habsburg crown. This inspired the rise of Croatian nationalism in the 1830s and 1840s in the context of the Croatian National Revival, which sought to promote Croatian cultural and linguistic unification as well as that of all the South Slavs of the Austrian Empire under the collective term *Illyrians*. The Illyrian political and cultural movement included attempts to eschew the use of the Latin language and publish newspapers in the nascent Croatian language based on the *štokavski* dialect, and promote Croatian literature, music and culture in order to resist Hungarian efforts to undermine and infringe upon Croatian autonomy in the

process called Magyarization—a coercive political acculturation and assimilation of Croatian territories.

Ljudevit Gaj was the principal Croatian Illyricist. In 1830 Gaj published a Croatian grammar book written in the official Croatian language, *Kratka osnova horvatsko-slavenskog pravopisanja* (*A Short Grammarbook of the Croatian-Slavenian Language*), and founded the first Croatian newspapers, *Novine Horvatzke* (*Croatian Newspapers*) and *Danicza Horvatzka, Slavonzka i Dalmatinzka* (*The Daily Newspaper of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia*). In his book *The Politics of Language and Nationalism in Modern Central Europe*, Kamusella claims that the publication of *Novine Horvatzke* marks the “beginning of Croatian ethnolinguistic nationalism” (444), which Anderson in *Imagined Communities* defines as based on an “imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and soeverign” (6). Gaj soon after renamed these publications to include the name “Illyrian” instead of “Croatian,” thus hoping to overcome the regional differences and divisions that stood in the way of national unity, but the term “Illyrian” was outlawed by Austria in 1843 for its highly charged ideology. In 1847, the Croatian language was proclaimed the official language in Croatia, which served as legal protection against the attempts to make Hungarian the norm across both Croatian and Hungarian territories, and initiated the process of unifying Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian into one official language. This movement was halted by the 1848 revolutionary movements throughout Europe and the Hungarian War of Independence, which resulted in the formation of the dual monarchy in 1867, the Kingdom of Hungary and the Austrian Empire, dubbed the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1868, the kingdoms of Croatia and Slavonia were united in the Croatian-Hungarian Settlement of 1868 (Nagodba) and retained the use of Croatian as their official language, while the kingdom of Dalmatia remained under Austria’s control despite efforts to unite all three

Croatian-speaking territories. In terms of public opinion, though, the provinces of Slavonia, Croatia and Dalmatia all formed the ‘Croatian nation-state.’

It was around this time that Bishop Strossmayer, Zagorka’s future benefactor, rose to prominence. Strossmayer led the People’s Party and later the Independent People’s Party; advocated for the merging of the kingdoms of Dalmatia and Croatia and the use of the Croatian language on Croatian territories; founded the Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Sciences; and fought against Magyarization. Progress was made with the opening of the Croatian language university in Zagreb in 1874<sup>17</sup>, but the beginning of Ban Khuen-Héderváry’s rule in Croatia in 1883 re-energized the Magyarization efforts and pushed back against hard-won Croatian language sovereignty, promoting the use of Hungarian language in Croatian public life and suppressing the Croatian press. The push for the use of Hungarian in public spaces, like railroad station and schools, was finally suppressed in 1912 with the dissolution of the Croatian parliament which the Croatian nationalists faulted for being pro-Hungarian.

In addition to fighting against Magyarization, from the mid eighteenth-century Croatia had to contend with Austrian Empire’s continued efforts to promote the use of the German language in Croatian territories as part of a process of Germanization. After World War I the Croatian Parliament finally declared independence and joined the kingdom of Serbia to form the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918. The 1921 constitution abolished the Croatian Parliament, though, which was something that the Croatian Peasant Party and its leader Stjepan Radić, whom Zagorka admired, vehemently objected to. After Radić’s assassination, King Alexander instituted a short-lived dictatorship until the formation of Yugoslavia in 1931, and the formation of the autonomous Banovina of Croatia in 1939. Yugoslavia was then occupied by Germany and Italy

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<sup>17</sup> Kamusella, *The Politics of Language and Nationalism in Modern Central Europe*, 464.

in World War II, and the Independent State of Croatia was founded as a Nazi-backed puppet state. In response, Josip Broz Tito formed the Yugoslav Partisan communist anti-fascist movement supported by the Allies. After the war, Croatia became a federal unit of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, constantly striving for greater autonomy and a de-centralized government. Tensions grew until Croatia's 1991 declaration of independence started the Croatian War of Independence. Croatia was recognized by the European Economic Community as a sovereign country in 1992, and the war was won in 1995.

### Zagorka: Choice of Pen Name

Marija Jurić chose the pen name “Zagorka” relatively early in her career, and its significance cannot be overstated; Zagorka is a moniker for every woman who was born in and/or lives in Zagorje, the region of Croatia north of the capital, Zagreb. Therefore, Zagorka effectively presented herself as a quintessentially Croatian Everywoman, who in writing novels about fictionalized historic Croatian heroines also, in a way, wrote Croatia into existence by providing a vision of the perpetuity of Croatian national identity over time. Since she described herself as one of many, she was able to empower all the women of Zagorje to internalize the same ideology and the struggle for the motherland that she herself engaged in.

Kaniecka notes that Zagreb is especially appropriate as a symbol of Croatia's freedom and independence, since the Hungarian King Bela IV declared it a free royal city as early as the thirteenth century. This allowed Zagreb to become the center of Croatian national pride and the inspiration for its struggle toward independence,<sup>18</sup> and it led Zagorka to spend her life conducting historical research about the city, which she shared with the public through her

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<sup>18</sup> Dominika Kaniecka, *Šenoa i Zagorkin Zagreb. Književna kreacija Staroga Zagreba—pokušaj usporedbe*.

novels and in intimate gatherings with members of the community (Dordević, 1965.)

In *Zagorkin pop-feminizam u naraciji njezinih autobiografija*, Dremel writes that she considers Zagorka's act of self-naming an "attempt to throw herself out of her identity, to cast out the melancholy of having her identity revealed, and to cast her father's name out of her future name which we will collectively remember her by as a 'public secret'"<sup>19</sup> (161). I would add that Zagorka chose this name as an act of self-actualization, of coming into her own both in terms of her identity as a woman and an author, and in terms of her belonging to a place that defined her as opposed to a family that she was at odds with. She became "of Zagorje," just as saints or martyrs or queens tend to be tied to the place of their agency, and she thus set herself up as a champion of the people through her fiction, even if she never was granted such recognition in real life.

In *Nezakonite kćeri Ilirije* Badurina writes that the pen name Zagorka might also allude to the traditional notion of a "Zagorski puntarski duh" (Zagorje's rebellious spirit) which Zagorka used to courageously fight for her feminist and socio-democratic convictions, claiming that she was born with the instincts to fight for the oppressed, and that she used her schooling to align her personal beliefs with a political movement.

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<sup>19</sup> "Pokusaj izbacaja sebe iz sebe same, melankolije iz detekcije, očeva imena iz budućeg, još uvijek tajnog identiteta po kojem ćemo je kolektivno pamtit i to kao 'javnu tajnu.'"

## V. ZAGORKA'S CAREER IN JOURNALISM AND MAGAZINE PUBLISHING

Zagorka spent her childhood surrounded by the servants and peasants who lived on her family's property who resented Austro-Hungarian rule, which they experienced as an effort to suppress and oppress the Croatian national identity by pushing Hungarian or German culture into the Croatian public and cultural sphere. Zagorka experienced those injustices keenly, and at the age of twelve published her first newspaper *Samostanske Novine (The Convent Papers)* at the Convent of the Sisters of Mercy in Zagreb,<sup>20</sup> which she distributed to her friends. This also happens to be the first time she experienced censure, as the newspapers consisting of folk stories and legends were confiscated, and she was disciplined for the transgression.

Zagorka published her first article, "Pod Sljemenom" ("Under Sljeme") in *Brsljan (Ivy)* in 1886. In 1889, under a male pseudonym, Zagorka wrote a foreword for the student newsletter she co-founded, *Zagorsko proljeće (Zagorje Spring)*. This newsletter was also banned because of its call for all Croats to live up to their proud heritage and the legacy of Matija Gubec and stand up against Austro-Hungarian rule. After moving to Hungary, Zagorka was involved in the Croatian political scene, writing anonymously for the Hungarian opposition papers such as *Népszava*. She ignited heated political discussions in the Croatian Congress with her article "Whip and Wheat," in which she laid out her arguments against Hungarian rule under Kluen-Héderváry.

After escaping Hungary and divorcing her husband, Zagorka continued to write for *Obzor* in Zagreb. She was *Obzor's* political correspondent for Budapest and Vienna in 1906, reporting on the sessions with Hungarians from the Common Parliament. Around this time Zagorka rejected a

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<sup>20</sup> Vujnović, *Forming the Bubikoff Nation*.

lucrative offer of employment by the Hungarian news agency *Pester Lloyd* in order to serve the interests of her country.

In 1907 Zagorka published *Razvrgnute Zaruke (A Broken Engagement)*, a series of political reports from Budapest. Dujmić notes that this work resulted in a new nickname for Zagorka, “malo novinarsko čudovište” (the little monster of journalism) (Dujmić, *Ljepša Polovica*, ??), which fittingly portrays the horror that the establishment must have felt in being forced to attribute journalistic excellence to a short woman with no connections. After that, Zagorka felt vindicated in being called a “muž na mjestu” (a decent man) by the critic Supilo in 1910, though he did feel obliged to call her a man in order to extend the compliment.

Many of her fellow journalists and the newspapers she worked for resented her for being a woman, regardless of how profitable her contributions were. Vujnović notes that *Obzor* failed to mention the accolades that Zagorka received from fellow European journalists at the 1907 Congress of Journalists in Budapest, and that they continued to overlook her contribution by ignoring her tenure as editor of *Obzor* “in the article dedicated to her journalistic work that was published in the 1935 *Obzor*’s ‘Memorial Book’” and once again “during the 30th anniversary of her journalistic work” (134). Đorđević writes that Zagorka was forced to defend her integrity and beliefs throughout her life on multiple fronts. The aristocratic women rejected her as a working woman of lower social status, the academically educated women rejected her as too populist and plain, and the rest resisted her feminist, anticlerical agenda:

Zagorka is at ‘fault’ to the extent that her practical socialism is tied to the women’s rights movement, just as her basic ‘guilt’ is the social content of her love for her country—the nationalism that is particularly anti-clerical so that



Zagorka suffered heavy blows at that front as well.<sup>21</sup>

Cutting her losses, Zagorka dismissed the scorn of the literary elite by focusing on the measurable success of her journalistic contributions, constantly claiming in various interviews and speeches that she “never contributed to literature in any way”<sup>22</sup> (Đorđević 146), and that she “only ever considered herself a journalist”<sup>23</sup> (Đorđević 148).

Over the course of her prolific journalistic career she collaborated with many Croatian and Hungarian newspapers and magazines such as *Bršljan* (*Ivy*), *Zvono* (*The Bell*), *Vienac* (*Wreath*), *Prosvjeta* (*Enlightenment*), *Trn* (*Thorn*), *Nada* (*Hope*), *Keleti Értésítő* (*Eastern Bulletin*), *Nowa Reforma* (*The New Reform*), *Domaće Ognjište* (*Home Hearth*), *Hrvatski Branik* (*Croatian Defender*), *Narodni List* (*The People's Paper*) and others. Apart from being a contributor, Zagorka also founded and edited *Ženski List* (*Women's Periodical*) magazine in 1925, which was in circulation between the world wars on the territory of ex-Yugoslavia. When the culture of the magazine turned away from the feminist ideals Zagorka espoused, editor Sida Košutić ousted her. In 1938 Zagorka proceeded to found another magazine for women, *Hrvatica* (*Croatian Woman*), which was shut down by the Nazis in 1941. She continued to write for various publications after the fall of the Nazi regime, and her prolific work, geared primarily toward women, helped shape the modern Croatian woman's self-image in the spirit of feminism, national pride and individual sovereignty.

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<sup>21</sup> “Zagorkina ‘krivnja’ je njezin praktični socijalizam povezan sa borbom za ženska prava, kao što je osnovna njezina ‘krivnja’ socijalna sadržina njezina rodoljublja, nacionalizam koji je izrazito antiklerikalan pa je i na tom bojištu Zagorka davala i primala teške udarce.”

<sup>22</sup> “Literaturi nisam dala ništa.”

<sup>23</sup> “Naglasite svakako da sam se uvijek smatrala samo novinarom.”

## VI. PUBLIC APPEARANCES AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Zagorka began her political career early, at the age of thirteen, when she made a political statement against Hungarian rule at a pro-Héderváry reception at Count Rauch's residence by altering the welcome speech she was supposed to give as a young scholar. She believed that the "private is the political" (Jakobović-Fribec, *Vodič*), and she regularly used people's personal experiences as inspiration for political messages. In 1903 Zagorka organized and led what by all accounts was the first all-women's political protest in Croatia by inviting women to join together for a commemorative mass at the St. Marko church to honor the protestors killed in Zaprešić<sup>24</sup> earlier that year. The church was strategically chosen for its location; after mass Zagorka and her collaborators distributed Croatian nationalist insignia and started a protest against Khuen-Héderváry and Hungarian rule in Croatia right in front of the adjoining Governor's palace. This women's protest became a Europe-wide sensation, with some journalists likening Zagorka to Joan of Arc in her fight for Croatia's sovereignty.<sup>25</sup> Zagorka was subsequently imprisoned for protesting Khuen Héderváry's rule, but she claimed to have enjoyed the imprisonment as a sign of her bona-fide infiltration into the male domain of public and political discourse, which she considered the birthright of her personhood: "I found this work a necessary prerequisite for life itself; on a par with sustenance, air and sunlight for my body, I considered my political engagement as something that was absolutely natural" (Jakobovic-Fribec, *Vodič*).

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<sup>24</sup> As part of the "narodni pokret" revolts against Hungarian rule in Croatia in 1903 there was an incident where peasants removed the Hungarian flag from the train station in Croatia and several were killed in the resulting altercation with Hungarian authorities.

<sup>25</sup> Jakobovic-Fribec, *Vodič Zagorkinim tragom kroz Zagreb*.

Throughout her career, Zagorka welcomed opportunities to speak to women's organizations across ex-Yugoslavia's territories. In *Kako je bilo*, Zagorka states that she had given over two hundred lectures on the rights of women, and lists some of the titles of her speeches: "Woman Is a Part of the Nation," "Croatian Woman in the National Struggle," "Voting Rights and Women" and others.

## VII. ZAGORKA'S LITERARY WORK

Zagorka wrote her first historic play featuring patriotic female martyrs at the age of fourteen, when she published and produced *Kalista i Doroteja* with the convent's theater group in 1887. In 1888, she wrote *Katarina Zrinska*, her first verse drama about a famous Croatian patriot noblewoman. Despite evidence to the contrary, Zagorka insisted that she was originally inspired to write historic romance novels by the Đakovo bishop Josip Juraj Strossmayer, who was the first prominent figure to support her literary and journalistic work. Strossmayer helped Zagorka launch her career as a novelist by inviting her to join the gatherings of the Croatian intelligentsia that were periodically held at his house. These gatherings included academics, authors, historians and journalists such as Tadija Smičiklas, poet and editor Jovan Hranilović, and the *Obzor* editor Josip Pasarić. After writing *Roblje* and *Vlatko Šaretić*, Zagorka's first two published novels, she chose to explore historic themes in her novels. The age of the inquisition was specifically chosen for the *Grička Vještica* series in hopes that it would avoid censure and still remind the female reading public of the terrible injustices women endured in the past because they had no legal rights or representation, and to inspire them to passionately support the turn of the century women's rights movements in Europe and abroad.

Zagorka was fluent in Croatian, German and Hungarian, which enabled her to conduct historical research in Pest<sup>26</sup>, the Vienna Palace records from the 18<sup>th</sup> century proceedings under Marija Terezija's rule, the Governor's Palace in Zagreb, documents from Šanjugovo castle, witch trial documents provided her by an archivist and archeologist Dr. Ivan Bojničić, and field research of the castles and estates she wrote about. Zagorka also delved into oral tradition and

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<sup>26</sup> Today's Budapest, Hungary.

her personal experience to illuminate the role and importance of women in Croatian history, as well as socio-cultural research about aristocratic norms of the period, including their details such as the intricacies of the fashionable wardrobe of the time. In her essay *Neznana junakinja Hrvatskog naroda* (*The Unknown Heroine of the Croatian People*), Zagorka compiled inspirational stories of the many revolutionary and heroic Croatian women she learned about as a journalist and over the course of conducting research for her novels, including her own participation in the Zagreb women's protest of 1903. In this essay she claims to have found inspiration for the characterization of her novels' heroines by "observing the lives and the struggles of the unknown heroines of the Croatian people."<sup>27</sup>

To engage the public, Zagorka used intrigue and romance in her story lines and special effects in her productions; a critic wrote in 1921: "Zagorka despises neither ballet nor Bengal fireworks or music, she adjusts to directing for the 'Sunday audience' in every regard. But we should keep in mind that Šenoa did the same in his novels, and that this, and not his poetry or wit, was the principal cause of his success with the wide readership" (Jakobovic-Fribec, *Vodič*). This is significant to note because Šenoa, as a celebrated author, disapproved of Zagorka's work and bemoaned her success, apparently applying different standards to the evaluation of his own work than to hers. It is no secret that Zagorka set out to create a visceral experience for the readers of her novels. She sought to bypass their defenses by making them feel entertained while the familiar tropes carry the seeds of new ideals. Branimir Donat refers to Zagorka's work as "rational-enlightened," and he states that the interesting storylines are used as a "way to connect romantic intrigues and tackle difficult questions that literature itself is not able to resolve, but which can be used to lay the foundations for their future resolution" (94). In other words, Zagorka sows the seeds of feminism and critiques the notion of a 'woman's place' by creating

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<sup>27</sup> "...gledajući život i borbu neznanih junakinja hrvatskoga naroda."

strong and attractive female characters who advocate for Zagorka's personal convictions, and by titling the wildly successful novels after those female protagonists in order to place the 'feminine' at the forefront of the Croatian cultural imagination.

In *Ljepša polovica književnosti* Dujmić suggests that Zagorka's mode of novel writing resembles that of dramaturgy in that her aim is to allow the reader to experience the texts as immediately as possible. While she did gain popularity with this style of writing, which readers found accessible, this attribute also made her novels targets of literary criticism. An additional contributing factor to the construction of Zagorka's prose is that she was paid by the line, and this arrangement favored prolonged descriptions of each scene which were, for the sake of clarity and accessibility, made out of simpler sentences. Dujmić, for example, finds mastery in Zagorka's ability to produce the seemingly endless and engaging plot twists in the context of her historical novels published over long periods of time.

The question of Zagorka's belonging to the literary canon has become somewhat moot; whether or not the critics are amenable to acknowledging her presence, her work has always been central to the Croatian reading public and lauded for its particular contributions to Croatian literature by various scholars. Dremel discusses Zagorka's work as a closed system of purposeful paradoxes and controversies that allowed her to ingrain herself within Croatian popular culture by refusing facile categorization and dismissal. Since Zagorka had no choice but to remain flexible and to develop her work in a new category to rival the existing system of literary values, I would agree with Dremel's assessment that "the unstable space of the margin, though repressive and silencing, provides her with the freedom to override the binary oppositions (man/woman, history/present, factional/fictional, canon/trivial) according to which literature used to be written and divided" (Dremel, "Zagorkin pop-feminizam" 170). Furthermore, by

remaining true to herself Zagorka shows that she is invested in considering herself a protagonist not only in her own life story, but in the story of Croatia as well. This is precisely why I take issue with Dujmić's facile reporting of Zagorka's self-description as a "journalist at the humble service of the reader"<sup>28</sup> (Dujmić, *Ljepša Polovica* 154) as opposed to a literary author. If Dujmić felt it necessary to include this assessment, it should have come with a critical clarification regarding the fact that Zagorka felt compelled to make such strong and succinct statements to defend herself from the incessant attacks launched by the 'literary elites,' and that any serious consideration of her essays in which she reflects on her work would prove that she took herself seriously. Dujmić later quotes Zagorka's reflections of the literal martyrdom she voluntarily engages in<sup>29</sup> in order to conscientiously conduct historic research and deliver a worthy novel to her beloved readers,<sup>30</sup> which in itself delegitimizes the previous quote. Additionally, Dujmić states that Zagorka spent a lot of effort ("mnogo je crnila trošila," 166) on convincing her critics to find a space for her work within the literary canon according to her novels' specific worth, which presumes that they have some worth to begin with.

### Zagorka and the Croatian Novel

The Croatian novel became a noteworthy literary form beginning in the 1880s, in the time of Croatian realism, thus usurping the traditional role played by poetry and drama. A major figure of the period is August Šenoa, whose nineteenth-century historical novels are considered the highest achievements in Croatian literature, since they explore 'serious' questions of politics, ideology and culture by showing how the "private lives and personal experiences directly

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<sup>28</sup> "novinarka u poniznoj čitateljevoj službi"

<sup>29</sup> "moj beskrajani križni put" ("my endless way of the cross"), p. 161.

<sup>30</sup> "Nije imala nikada nikoga osim publike" ("She never had anyone but the audience to call her own"), 162.

correspond to the national aspirations, ideologies and myths of the community”<sup>31</sup>(Nemec, 104.) In *O romanu*, published by “Hrvatska Vila” in 1883, the critic Eugen Kumičić states that the only novels of literary worth are those that focus on understanding the truth of our human condition, and he dismisses those novels which are based on “fantasy and imagination” as nothing but “idle entertainment of the unemployed” (Nemec, 111). In the 1886 article “Moderni roman” critic Pasarić divides the “modern novel” into two types of novels: the historical and the sociological. Novelists are, according to him, meant to objectively describe the world that surrounds them as well as infuse it with progressive and morally acceptable, noble ideals. Eventually, at the turn of the century and in the period of Croatian Moderna, Croatian literature was divided into ‘elite’ and ‘popular’ literature. The distinction was based on intended readership; popular literature strove to be accessible to a wider audience while high literature aimed to create an original, novel work of art.

As I will shortly discuss in more detail, the process that judged the ‘inherent’ worth of one type of literature over another strongly favored those literary works that would appeal to male readers based on subject matter and the educational level required to appreciate it. When women writers made their first attempts to contribute to the literary canon, they clearly understood the world around them and their role within it in vastly different terms than men, and they also inherently wrote primarily for the female audience, the “unemployed” that Kumičić mentions, who had the free time to read since they were unable to engage in politics, business or trade. Their work was therefore almost inevitably branded as inferior because it was different from what was deemed estimable. As trailblazers, female authors had to imagine their path to a new future that would accommodate a change in their social agency, and since their work was to

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<sup>31</sup> “...privatni životi i osobna iskustva neposredno korespondiraju s nacionalnim aspiracijama, ideologemima i mitovima zajednice.”



be instrumental in effecting that change there was no possibility for it to be in any way ‘standard.’

Dujmić writes that all female authors at the beginning of the twentieth century faced the difficult problem of being rejected by both the ‘old’ and established male authors, who felt that they were losing their ground to the new aesthetics of the next generation, and by the ‘young’ male authors, who felt their work was too pure and refined to allow women’s interference in it or engagement with it. Dujmić also posits that, while the men were comfortable with the idea of a woman, even if she is an author, as a literary mother figure or even as an artistic seductress, they were unprepared to accept any movement toward actual equality of expression, which in their minds was tantamount to the work of a proverbial witch. *Zagorka* therefore functions as the witch from Grič herself, a monstrous mythological character who disrupts her community’s status quo. Like her beautiful heroines, *Zagorka* had to overcome obstacles in the course of her tireless work of ushering Croatia into an enlightened future.

Most nineteenth-century Croatian novels were originally published in sequels in newspapers, regardless of whether they were deemed canonical or ‘trivial’ literature. In fact, the very first Croatian feuilleton novel, Dragojla Jarnević’s *Dva Pira*, was written by a woman, and *Zagorka*’s successful novels followed that example. The labor-intensive process of writing weekly, chapter after chapter, keeping her readers engaged and keeping herself in the spotlight to remain relevant is reminiscent of Scheherazade’s<sup>32</sup> art of storytelling, by which she saved herself and other women from certain death; it is through her stories, too, that *Zagorka* succeeded in altering the public’s opinion and reception of women’s work.

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<sup>32</sup> Nemeč, *Putovi pored znakova*.

In “Marija Jurić Zagorka i kanon modernizma,” Grgić sees Zagorka as a modernist who created a legacy by eschewing the designation of trivial literature through the use of self-reference, carnival imagery and folkloric inter-text. Though Grgić states that Zagorka “used her marginal position and her difference to her advantage” (31), she questions the feasibility of including Zagorka’s work posthumously in the Croatian canon as it now stands, since it has only recently, in the 1980s, started to question the divide between serious and trivial literature. Zagorka spent her life defending herself against accusations of being a bad novelist by positioning herself as a non-threat, as someone without high literary aspirations: as a journalist. I would argue that she understood very well that her subversive and ‘marginal role’ would provide her with the exposure her work needed. Her work continued to be published, read, and staged posthumously, and she knew that as long as she had means of obtaining an audience, her legacy would stand a chance to be reevaluated—as proved to be the case at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Zagorka’s novels thrived under the umbrella term of ‘women’s literature,’ though they served an important role of reinvigorating Croatian culture by facing her readers with unpalatable kernels of truth in easily digestible storylines. Her strategy, in this regard, resembles that of fairy tales, which, incidentally, until recently have suffered the same fate of being cast out of the ranks of ‘serious literature.’

#### Influence of the Gothic Novel: Monsters, Romance, and Dangerous Agency

Zagorka’s authorship of the modern women’s Gothic novel places her at the forefront of yet another important development in the Croatian literary landscape. The influence of Gothic fiction, which was also considered a part of feminine or popular culture rather than ‘serious’ literature, can be seen in Zagorka’s use of romantic themes, monster tropes, forewarnings about

the dangers of the Others and female protagonists. As Dujmić notes, “the female characters are often representatives of Zagorka’s political, ethical and feminist ideas, which is why many of the novels bear their names<sup>33</sup>” (164). In *Grička vještica*, for example, Nera conquers the masculine “juridical violence, paranoia, and injustice” (Hoeveler xiv) in relation to the witch-hunts. Despite the fact that rejection from the canon undermined these novels’ valorization, they retained a subversive power, which helped them remain relevant to the process of culture formation. In “Plameni inkvizitori,” Oklopčić compares Zagorka’s opus to the Gothic novel, noting its subversive nature and its accentuated “emotion, sentimentality and imagination” (175). Oklopčić claims that the authors of Gothic novels invited their readers to “read between the lines” and rely on their own imagination to interpret the world within the novel and to critically observe their own lives, thus empowering them to reclaim their agency. This assessment is certainly in line with the intent of Zagorka’s politically driven work to inspire her readers so that they could in turn translate their emotional engagement with the text into political and social change. In Zagorka’s novels women act as protagonists in search of self-actualization, and as readers idolize and identify with the heroines, they are empowered to eventually act as feminists and demand political representation.

Two of Zagorka’s novels in particular, *Tajna krvavog mosta*<sup>34</sup> and *Plameni inkvizitori*, serve as “barbaric, pagan, anti-Catholic” (Oklopčić 176) examples of Gothic novels. *Grička vještica* presents female characters that can be construed as monstrous, given that monsters in Gothic literature represent society’s fears of outside forces that might negatively impact its

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<sup>33</sup> “Ženski likovi često su glasnogovornici Zagorkinih političkih, etičkih, feminističkih ideja pa su mnogi romani po njima i naslovljeni.”

<sup>34</sup> *The Secret of the Bloody Bridge*, part I of the *Grička Vještica* series.

progress and group identity.<sup>35</sup> In her paper “Monstrosity in the English Gothic Novel,” Schneider writes that “monsters cross geographical, physical, and psychological barriers and transgress moral norms, making them visible by their excessive deviation” (2), and though Zagorka does not present us with typical monsters like Frankenstein, the monstrous aspects of Zagorka’s characters are just as sinister because they tend to enhance rather than diminish the status of the characters. For example, the character of Stanka in *Tajna Krvavog Mosta* is a girl who passed as a man and, once disguised, fell in love and formed a close relationship with another man, but she is not cast away as somehow monstrous for acting outside of society-sanctioned gender roles. Instead, she ends up happily married with that male character whose reciprocity of feeling borders on the homosexual, though that impulse is corrected in the final revelation and consequent fruitful marriage.

In “Divno čudovište” Grdešić claims that the androgynous characteristics of some female protagonists render them monstrous outliers, whose ‘masculine’ attributes contribute to the trials they must endure before they are able to attain their happy ending in the form of marriage. I believe that this is too simplistic an interpretation on several levels. If one considers, for example, the *Grička vještica* series, the character of Stanka is of low birth and would never have had a chance to be with her love, Count Meško, if he had not fallen in love with her because he got to know her while she posed as Lieutenant Stanko. Additionally, Stanka does not discontinue this practice once her storyline has been resolved and she is married with a child. In fact, in the third book of the *Grička vještica* Stanka dons menswear again and even enters a pretend marriage with Nera in order to save Nera from being forced to enter into and consummate a marriage with a real man. In this way Zagorka normalized behaviors and traits that her society deemed monstrous at the time, such as transvestite, non-gender specific and even

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<sup>35</sup> Schneider, “Monstrosity in the English Gothic Novel.”

gay behaviors. Zagorka considered the gender norms of her time to be grievous obstacles to the advancement of women, and rightly so, since she herself was persecuted for dressing and acting like a man. Zagorka was literally called a monster for pursuing her non-ladylike journalistic profession.<sup>36</sup> Many forms of cross-dressing in Zagorka have to do with the understanding that men have greater freedom and agency in the world, and that it would therefore be desirable to become a man in order to succeed. The major revelation that Zagorka makes in her novels is that gender is performative rather than biologically determined, and that ‘maleness’ is accessible to women who are willing to sacrifice some of their traditionally ‘feminine’ attributes in the service of gaining power. While Slunjski refuses to quite give Zagorka credit for subversion, claiming that “Zagorka does not diverge from the institution of marriage and traditional forms,<sup>37</sup>” (152) it is important to point out that she nevertheless reimagines the path that leads to that ‘traditional’ marriage as well as widens the scope of the desirable qualities of a marriageable woman. These literary devices are subversive, for while they do not directly challenge the patriarchal structure in order to be presentable to the readership, they reach their comfortable conclusions in risqué ways that legitimize and normalize other sexual expressions and orientations.

Zagorka does not stop at cross-dressing her heroines, but also challenges the gender-normative system by characterizing her protagonists as somewhat spiritually or physically androgynous. I would go even further to state that Nera in particular is strikingly similar to the gender-shifting protagonist of Woolf’s *Orlando*; while she does not turn into a man, she does transition from one gender-specific behavior phase to another with apparent ease, behaving like a

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<sup>36</sup> See section “Zagorka’s Career in Journalism and Magazine Publishing.”

<sup>37</sup> “Zagorka ne odstupa od institucije braka i tradicijskih formi.”

debutante girl, a brave, reckless and stubborn ‘man-like woman,’<sup>38</sup> and finally like a wife and mother at the end of the series.

Zagorka’s novels are generally described as historic romances, but this designation is far too simplistic. Unlike traditional romance novels, Zagorka’s works do not focus primarily on the romantic relationships between the characters, and though her novels consistently have happy endings, the obstacles that the protagonists must overcome in order to achieve those range from ones that are purely entertaining to others that are psychologically reformatory. Furthermore, the *feuilleton* nature of the plot development accentuates the novels’ monstrous inconsistency with the standards of romance novels in that the happy ending is constantly disrupted, and is always in danger of being undermined.<sup>39</sup> The adventure/romance novel is an extension of the genre that stems from classical antiquity and, like the Gothic novel, it was marginalized because its principal creators and audience were women. Slapšak writes that the act of re-examining this type of literature in our day and age is almost a coming-out gesture,<sup>40</sup> as we validate these novels in the context of their cultural importance by studying them from the women’s point of reference. Zagorka in particular accomplishes a great deal in resurrecting the figure of a heroic woman from the archives of history, though some scholars feel that it would be more accurate to call this a re-envisioning of history, a sort of wishful projection of the needs of modern women onto historic records. Grdešić, for example, writes that Zagorka’s novels are important precisely because they rewrite history to include women’s participation in political life; she calls

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<sup>38</sup> In “Odjeća (ne) čini ženu,” Slunjski notes, too, that Nera is described in terms of ‘manly virtues.’ Nera is “stasita” (well-built) and “vrsna u diskursijskom sučeljavanju” (good at arguing her point of view,) 149.

<sup>39</sup> Maša Grdešić, “Divno čudoviste.”

<sup>40</sup> Svetlana Slapšak, “Emma Baronica Orczy i Zagorka: sklapanje muškoga tela u avanturističko-ljubavnome romanu.”

Zagorka's practice the "recreation of the possible or the future or the ideal"<sup>41</sup> ("Mala revolucionarka" 372) that highlights the possibility for women to balance the biological imperative that ties them to childrearing with a more powerful and public social role.

However, some critics, such as Slunjski,<sup>42</sup> conclude that Zagorka fails to achieve individualization in any of her female protagonists, apart from the heroine of her semi-autobiographical novel *Kamen na cesti*, whom she actually kills off. *Kamen na cesti* is the only novel in her opus that ends tragically, in the heroine's suicide, and Slunjski sees this outcome as reinforcing patriarchal ideals because it weeds out the undesirable, flawed women from a productive and thriving society. However, it should be pointed out that Zagorka published this fictionalized autobiography twenty-five years before her death, and that it is entirely possible that some of its tragic tone was meant to spur her readers into action and garner more support for the author in her 'real life' career. Dujmić unfortunately dismisses this work, offering it as evidence of Zagorka's excessive paranoia about being personally persecuted, thus missing the opportunity to laud it as evidence of Zagorka's ability to stray from any clichéd expectations of a 'happy ending,' as well as to initiate a serious conversation about the travails of women in the public sphere, of which her personal struggles speak volumes. Grdešić,<sup>43</sup> for example, sees the heroine's suicide as symbolic of the shattering of the romance novel's structure and the rejection of the standard female protagonist's trajectory and journey within the romance novel—reflecting the shattering of the traditional 'women's role' in society. The demise of the female protagonist obviously showcases the dangers of acting and living against the grain, but the reader is aware that only the imagined Zagorka is defeated and erased with this act, while the blueprint lives and publishes on. Her work and her agency thus constitute a danger to the social order of her time as

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<sup>41</sup> "rekreacija mogućeg ili budućeg ili idealnog."

<sup>42</sup> "Mala Revolucionarka: Zagorka, Feminizam, i Popularna Kultura," edited by Maša Grdešić.

<sup>43</sup> Grdešić, "Politička Zagorka: *Kamen Na Cesti* kao feministička književnost."

her anti-clerical and anti-submissive ideas live on. Given the religious schism in the Balkans, Slapšak<sup>44</sup> suggests that a focus on nationalistic and cultural values rather than religious identity was perceived as the ticket to success in unifying the people and allowing them to find a common ground,<sup>45</sup> with a somewhat revolutionary re-envisioning of Croatia that is free not only of foreign exploitation but of the internal forces that would threaten its unity, strength and progress.

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<sup>44</sup> Svetlana Slapšak, “Emma Baronica Orczy i Zagorka: Sklapanje muškoga tela u avanturističko-ljubavnome romanu.”

<sup>45</sup> In light of the Croatian War of Independence 1991-1995, in which violence was incited based on religious divides, Zagorka seems to have been right to try to shift the focus to uniting cultural factors rather than divisive religious ones.



## VIII. IN HER OWN WORDS...

### Zagorka and Feminism

Zagorka was a devoted feminist and in this section I will reflect on some of her published feminist writings and the documented ways in which she supported the women's rights movement by spreading feminist ideology in her work and public engagements. At the turn of the twentieth century, women in Croatia and Europe began to protest their disenfranchisement and demand political power. Vujnović writes that Zagorka was involved with these protests in a characteristically practical and pragmatic way, as evidenced by an article in *Obzor* in which she states that women who fight for equality and freedom can't possibly do so "while looking like an armored battleship.... First, we need to remove the corset so that we can breathe freely, and then we will be able to move freely everywhere else" (128).

In Croatia, married women were given property inheritance rights, which allowed some women to continue working for the family business that they had previously operated with their husbands. Women attained the right to vote in 1920 for a brief period of time and under strict qualification requirements, including a paying job and a completed high school degree. This right was abolished in 1921 and was not reinstated until 1946. Those women who were able to find employment were paid about half the going salary for men; those who were teachers had to relinquish their profession upon marriage; and any monies the women would earn would legally become their husbands' property. Zagorka's personal experiences with marriage exemplify the extent to which she herself was treated as an object to be traded and profited from by both her parents and her first husband. In her article "Buntovništvo kao Zagorkin životni i književni

lajtmotiv,”<sup>46</sup> Kakkonen claims that Zagorka “renounced love” because she witnessed her parents’ failed marriage and had to literally run from her arranged marriage, “and surely, at least partially, because of her physical appearance.” This chauvinist assessment is not only ignorant but also false, since Zagorka married twice and had at least one additional long-term romantic partner. Her life choices certainly do not imply a ‘denunciation of love’ but an understanding of the complexities inherent to being a woman and a public figure given the legal repercussions of marriage and its effects on a woman’s sovereignty at the time.

In the beginning of the twentieth century female writers whose work did not fall within the category of domesticity were attacked and ridiculed, since they were part of the first wave of feminist literature for which there was no template for ascertaining a given work’s value. Some critics<sup>47</sup> who judged Zagorka’s work unworthy focused on what they saw as her hackneyed imitation of the works of the famous Croatian author August Šenoa. However, the difference in tone, content and characterization of Zagorka’s protagonists refutes that claim; in the words of Slunjski,<sup>48</sup> “Šenoa’s heroines could not have served as inspiration for Zagorka, they could only have been the bases for resistance and counter-formation” (45). In “Šenoin i Zagorkin Zagreb”(“Šenoa and Zagorka’s Zagreb”) Kaniecka writes that Zagorka does continue Šenoa’s tradition by “reviving old legends, spreading important city motifs and, in time, becoming one of the famous symbols of Zagreb”<sup>49</sup> (15) but it is only to be expected that an author such as herself would allow Šenoa’s opus to inform her work and that, given the shared subject matter, some of the tropes would already be familiar to her readers. Notwithstanding these frequent jibes at

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<sup>46</sup> “Rebellion as Zagorka’s Personal and Literary Leitmotif.”

<sup>47</sup> Refer to sections “Zagorka’s Assessment of her Life and Work” and “Zagorka’s Reception and Status in Croatian and Balkan Literature.”

<sup>48</sup> “Šenoine junakinje nisu mogle biti uzor za Zagorku, mogle su biti samo osnova za otpor i kontra-konstruktu.”

<sup>49</sup> “...oživljavala stare legend, širila je važne gradske motive te, s vremenom, i sama postala jedan of zaštitnih znakova Zagreba.”

Zagorka's originality, Kaniecka describes vital ways in which Zagorka's treatment of Zagreb and its past differs from that of Šenoa: Zagorka resorts to its oral history and its legends, which are frequently the recourse for attaining historical perspective from the point of view of the women, whereas Šenoa prefers to be thought of as strictly historically factual and as only using information based on historical research that has generally been produced by men. An interesting juxtaposition of the ways in which Šenoa and Zagorka truly differ is the way they Kaniecka describes their treatment of Zagreb's origin story, at the center of which is a water source called Manduševac. Legend has it that one day, an exhausted knight barely reached the water source and a beautiful maid standing by it, and that he said to her: "Mando, dušo, zagrabi" ("Manda, dear, fetch me some water"), asking for water. Zagorka's version states that prior to fulfilling his request, Manda warned the knight that whoever drinks from the well would never again be able to leave the area. Zagorka concludes that the young knight (ban) stayed, married Manduša and called the well after her, (a conglomeration of Manda and duša, soul), and then built the city around the well and called it Zagreb, after "zagrabi" ("scoop it up"). Šenoa, by contrast, mentions neither Manda nor the well, which historically exists and is now a major tourist attraction. Instead, he makes a biblical reference by having his knight valiantly stab the land with his sword, after which the water gushes out to save him and his men. The name Zagreb in this version derives from the knight's offer of water to his men: "Zagrabite!" (Scoop some up!) Interestingly, Kaniecka adds that Šenoa later writes an addendum to this poem in which he clarifies that he does not, in fact, believe in this legend, but thinks Zagreb is instead a variant of "Zahrib" or "Zabreg"—a city "behind the hill."

The fact that Šenoa willfully disseminated a concocted version of the legend to both erase the contribution and sovereignty of the woman and the land, and to elevate the male-centered

religious and nationalist values shows that his intent, rather than that of being ‘historically accurate’ is just as ideologically driven as Zagorka’s, only Šenoa’s ideology was widely accepted. The way in which the two authors—one acknowledged and celebrated as a literary mastermind and the other neglected and abused—experience and relate to the city of Zagreb is directly related to their respective literary visions. Šenoa describes historical events in light of traditional culture whereas Zagorka’s work is subversive, and her characters, while universally attractive in perfunctory characteristics such as their appearances, successfully push the barriers of the acceptable and the anticipated. The authors’ handling of the Zagreb origin story clearly indicates the difference between the male-dominated, heavily Catholic culture ready to celebrate man as a savior in every sense, and the dark, seductive, feminine magic of the land whose agent is a girl, though she may be a beautiful and pure one, but who still operates on a visceral and incomprehensible level.

Given the critics’ impulse to judge a ‘bad copy’ based on the unrelated merit of the ‘original,’ female authors were compelled to spend significant energy defending their right to a voice while at the same time defending their novels. Jakupović Fribec writes that in 1909 “Jurić, together with Mira Kočonda and Zofka Kveder, publicly debated issues of sexual equality with the influential writer Antun Gustav Matoš, attacking his presumption of fixed ‘roles’ for women—embodied by the trope of *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* (children, kitchen, church) upon which prevailing arguments for women’s inferiority rested” (*Vodič*). Zagorka cast her female protagonists in empowered roles, choosing to write not only historical romances, but also science fiction and criminal fiction as appropriate milieus for female protagonists. In this way, she engaged politically with her readership by reshaping the expectations and boundaries of womanhood.

In her article Slapšak implies that Zagorka even considered women in the public domain to be at an advantage, because she found them to be “stronger, more persistent, more assured fighters for national liberty than men, whose views can be diluted by careerism and their sexuality.” This position is supported by her novels, in which the female protagonists delay their romantic engagements until their politically motivated conditions are met: for example, in *Grička vještica*, Siniša must go through a sort of rebirth, literally cutting his veins to document his transformation via anonymous love letters. Siniša is made to completely renounce any power over Nera and to promise to take up her fight against the injustices of witch-hunts in order to become a suitable object of her love. What’s more, he is made to rein in his ‘masculine sexuality,’ which is traditionally the symbol of virile strength and oppression, and to move beyond objectifying Nera for her physical beauty. This shift is evident when he realizes that he loves her madly even though at one point in the narrative she is, as far as he knows, permanently disfigured. Slapšak calls this a vision of “sexual utopia” in a work that “openly treats the complexity, cultural prescriptiveness and political reflexivity of female desire”<sup>50</sup> (55).

To further promote the suffragist cause, Zagorka attended the 1917 Woman’s Slavic Congress in Prague, gave lectures to women’s organizations, and published and edited two patriotic and feminist magazines. One of those, *Ženski List*, is especially significant because it was meant to be a magazine for cultured women who were primarily “mothers and housewives” (Benyovsky 99), but Zagorka infused it with her characteristic feminist and nationalist ideology. She introduced the magazine in the prologue to its first edition as based on the mantra “svoj k svome” (“an autonomous/free person on his/her own property/home”), and thus provided women with an inspirational, virtual space to call their own, which directly correlated to their ‘domestic corner’—their home in its legal, proprietary sense.

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<sup>50</sup> “...otvoreno tretiraju zapletenost, kulturnu upisanost i političku refleksiju ženske želje.”

It is significant that Zagorka supported the success of other women, and that she sought to accustom the public sphere to their presence. She incorporated biographies and accolades of the various Croatian women who were successful in the public sphere under the column “Zaslužne Hrvatice,” (“Worthy Croat Women”), whose worth extended beyond the passive status of wife, mother or daughter. For example, in 1928, after the assassination of Stjepan Radić,<sup>51</sup> when all the news outlets in the country focused on his political work and legacy, Zagorka published an article on Stjepan Radić’s widow, Marija Radić, reminding the people of Stjepan Radić’s support of equal rights for women as well as of Marija Radić’s accomplishments. This type of activism is reminiscent of what Zagorka accomplished with her play *Evica Gupčeva*, in which she introduced the role of women as vital to the national liberation movements through history; while Matija Gubec was a legendary Croatian freedom fighter and rebellion leader, Zagorka presented the fictional character of his fiancée, Evica, as his equal partner in both the political protest and front-line war effort.

Zagorka was denied a role in the *Ženski list* magazine after the death its founder, Ignjat Švarc, but she persisted in her feminist efforts by publishing a new magazine, *Hrvatica*. Vujnović reports that Zagorka arranged a competition in the first issue in order to initiate a conversation with the magazine’s readers, asking them to reevaluate their identity and agency:

Tell us the story of the most important event of your life ... Are you happy and satisfied with your calling and your earnings, or would you rather live only as a mother and a housewife? ... and, what would be your suggestion to our governmental body if you had active and passive voting rights? The last question we ask here we clarify as follows: If you had a right to vote and if you were to be

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<sup>51</sup> The leader of the HSS party, Radić advocated against the Greater Serbia agenda.

elected to be a parliamentary representative, what reforms and laws would you recommend for the improvement of the life of the Croatian people? (Vujnović 152-3.)

Zagorka sought to reach out and bring more women into the conversation about their political and economic role in the country by encouraging them to get involved. In *Hrvatske Žene i Politika* Zagorka showed that she understood the culture she lived in by arguing that simply parroting European feminist ideals for the Croatian market would be a mistake because “we need to till the field before we can sow the wheat.”<sup>52</sup> Instead she suggested exposing the reading public to feminism by presenting them “with flowers, with sweet treats, as an amuse-bouche, a garnish”<sup>53</sup> in order for them to be considered acceptable and desirable at home, rather than simply be used as fodder for an additional domestic dispute, a “kavgu” (Zagorka, 1908). Zagorka’s feminism is a practical one—regardless of the radical nature of her own life choices, she was aware that her compatriots for the most part did not have the inclination nor the willpower to sever all connections with their disapproving community and venture on a new, isolated life journey based solely on the strength of their convictions. In *Napredna žena i današnji muškarci* Zagorka encourages her readers, telling them that they need not “write books, join organizations and social protests”<sup>54</sup> to make a change in their circumstances. Her plan of action gradually furthers the feminist cause by mooring the initial feminist shift in the traditions that were gender appropriate for women, such as their motherhood, patriotism or mate selection. In the article *Neznana junakinja Hrvatskog naroda*, Zagorka writes that for a country to be victorious, its women must not be indifferent to the struggle for sovereignty and must instead be

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<sup>52</sup> “Valja prije svega krčiti tlo – da na njemu raste pšenica.”

<sup>53</sup> “...u cvieću, u slatkišima, kao zakusak, obložak...”

<sup>54</sup> “...bez pisanja knjiga, bez organizacija, bez javnog pokreta...”

active participants in that struggle: “a home cannot be a home without the woman, nor can a homeland exist without its patriotic daughters.<sup>55</sup>” She urges them to use the power that they already have available to them as homemakers and mothers in their households where “the men are entirely in their possession” to educate their sons, husbands and fathers about the rights of women. Zagorka’s novels also showcase the ways in which women have leverage in negotiating a more equitable world in the future.

In *Putovi pored znakova*, Nemeč states that the first time women’s issues entered Croatian literature and cultural consciousness was with the publication of Zagorka’s fictional autobiography, *Kamen na cesti*, in 1938, which bears a similarity to Virginia Woolf’s canonic *A Room of One’s Own* because it deals with the problematic of the “woman’s awareness of herself as a subject, the freedom she has to make decisions and the need that she has for economic stability<sup>56</sup>” (216-7). The nature of this type of novel is to transform the author into a fictional character, which creates an interesting power dynamic between the character’s lack of agency, which leads to her suicide, and the author’s absolute power to change that fate with a stroke of the pen. This novel intentionally portrays Zagorka as a martyr to the feminist cause, literally forcing the question of a woman’s agency to be considered as a matter of life and death: there can be no compromise. The protagonist, Mirjana, shares Zagorka’s experiences in that she is married off at a young age to a miserly Hungarian who seeks to subdue and exploit her for financial gain in any way possible. This is initially achieved by forcing Mirjana to knit and crochet, which, as Slapšak notes, ironically carves up some time for women to think, and serves as an excuse for Mirjana to retreat from the family and write in secret. The fact that both knitting and writing are handiwork in a way legitimizes writing as part of a woman’s domain, but in order

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<sup>55</sup> “Dom ne može biti dom bez žene, niti može biti domovina bez svojih domorodnih kćeri.”

<sup>56</sup> “...problem ženske samosvijesti, slobode odlučivanja i potrebe ekonomske samostalnosti.”



for that writing to be made public Mirjana has to act anonymously or dress as a man: “woman is an obstacle to everything I authentically stand for.”<sup>57</sup> As Grdešić notes, Mirjana eventually embraces the anti-feminine traits in order to erase her womanhood, and assume a sort of invisibility which enables her to move more freely in a world in which women were not able to occupy public spaces alone past sundown lest they be apprehended as criminals, prostitutes or mental patients. The fact that for Mirjana this liminal space of man/womanhood ends tragically is a testament to society’s inflexibility and unwillingness to treat women fairly.

### Zagorka’s Assessment of her Life and Work

In *Kroničar Starog Zagreba*, Đorđević quotes Zagorka stating that she writes her novels in order to foster “love of Croatian history, the Croatian people, [and] for the socialist and humanist noble ideas.”<sup>58</sup> However, in “Što je moja krivnja,” Zagorka states that “the great literary minds are called to write art, and my sole duty is to entertain the Croatian public,”<sup>59</sup>—a statement she then immediately contradicts by claiming a political motivation behind her work: “I only write novels for the purpose of propaganda against German novels.”<sup>60</sup> As we assess the value of her work, we are therefore forced to deal with the question of her intent: did she only seek to entertain, or did she seek to become an important voice in Croatian popular culture and politics? Should her intent influence how we judge her work? Does the undisputed cultural value of her novels correspond to their literary value?

After an examination of Zagorka’s writings and taking into consideration her position as a female author in early-twentieth-century Croatia, we can ascertain that Zagorka was an author as well as a journalist and that writing was her life’s work. If she called herself anything but an

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<sup>57</sup> “...svemu je što osijećam u sebi na putu žena” (*Kamen na cesti*).

<sup>58</sup> “...ljubav za hrvatsku historiju, za hrvatski narod, za socijalne i općeljudske plemenite ideje.”

<sup>59</sup> “...literarni velikani su pozvani da pisu umjetnička djela, a ja imam samo dužnost da kao pisac zabavljam hrvatsku publiku...”

<sup>60</sup> “Romane sam pisala samo za propaganda protiv njemačkih romana.”

author it seems obvious that this was done in an attempt to protect herself from unjust chauvinist criticism and to shield her work from censorship.<sup>61</sup> Due to the stigma she faced, she likely felt forced to seek the goodwill of the public by bribing those who would silence her; positing them as authority figures over her ‘otherness’ so that she might be free to continue with her work. Đorđević writes that Zagorka assumed the role of a weak and feeble woman even in her ‘private’ diaries, which she saved for future publication, and in which she depicted herself as having to be nudged into important literary work by distinguished male cultural icons such as Bishop Strossmayer. She created the impression that she only humbly devoted herself to research and novel writing after the learned men of her generation professed their support of her work and the worthiness of the causes she sought to champion. I believe that this was a necessary ploy to lessen the backlash by the intelligentsia based on her prior experience in dealing with them; she once requested a “fair trial” for her works to be conducted by the Croatian Literary Association, which they, with a pronounced display of public loathing, declined to entertain as a possibility. This incident shows that the problem of unfavorable criticism would only have been exacerbated if Zagorka had kept on responding to bullying and ridicule in a straightforward fashion, so she pressed on as well as she could by following her personal motto, “always march straight ahead,”<sup>62</sup> in the hope that the future would vindicate her.

In “Moje pravo i dužnost” (“My Right and Duty”) Zagorka outlines her experiences as a public figure and writes about her career as a journalist and about the women’s organization “Kolo Radnih Žena” that she founded at the end of the nineteenth century to promote equality in all political and sociological aspects of public life. She experienced sexism and silencing in both

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<sup>61</sup> Kakkonen also writes that such claims should be “regarded with skepticism,” (“Buntovništvo kao Zagorkin Životni i Knjizevni Lajtmotiv” 79).

<sup>62</sup> From her lecture to the HND about her journalistic work: “[novinar] uvijek marsira smijelo naprijed” (Đorđević 149).

ventures, as men rejected her as a co-worker and sued her, forcing her to continue the women's organization's work in secret.

Around that same time Zagorka was successfully involved with the push against the Germanization and Hungarization of Croatian public life, primarily regarding the use of German and Hungarian languages in all public spaces and transactions as well as the prevalence of German literature on the newsstands and shelves. Booksellers' reports indicate that only six months after the publication of the first chapter of *Grička vještica* the sales of German language publications dropped by seventy percent, and the trend continued in the future.<sup>63</sup>

Zagorka's novels thus managed to make a significant contribution to the national by reviving it with their popularity, if we acknowledge the veracity of Glissant's statement in "Cross-Cultural Poetics" that national literature can be "defined as the urge for each group to assert itself ... the need not to disappear from the world scene" (99).

Zagorka started a youth movement in the context of which the participants would literally approach whomever they heard speak German in public, reminding them that it was embarrassing that "Zagreb should sound like Berlin." This shaming of fellow citizens to perpetuate community standards was quite effective and encouraged by the public, and her involvement with the movement led to the infamous women's demonstration at the Governor's palace, after which she was imprisoned as editor in chief of the revolutionary *Obzor*. From then on, she used her pen to mock the oppressor by writing satire and one-act plays against Germanization. The plays became very successful in that they were widely performed, and some have even had considerable success in theaters, but she experienced further backlash after the publication of her provocative novels.

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<sup>63</sup> Đorđević, *Zagorka, kroničar starog Zagreba*.

Zagorka writes that, despite the obstacles, she was also encouraged by some eminent critics and literary figures, such as Supilo and an unidentified man who characterized her novels as treatises against “tyranny, unlawfulness, slavery, monarchy, the abusive promulgators of religious fanaticism and the exploiters of the working people” (Zagorka, “Moje pravo”). Over the course of her career she had powerful supporters, like novelists, journalists and historians who threw a celebration in honor of her thirtieth anniversary as a political journalist with *Obzor*. This event was significant because her having been publicly acknowledged prompted the emergence of the famous accusation against Zagorka: that her work is nothing but “šund literature za kravarice.”<sup>64</sup> The essay “Moje pravo i dužnost” was written partially in response to that accusation, which Zagorka saw as a politically motivated attack by four young Hungarian writers who alleged that no one should celebrate a woman who has “denigrated a woman’s dignity” by daring to engage in journalistic political work. They further tried to defame her by claiming that her work “stinks of the barnyard” [because she attacked the nobility], calling it “šund” so that “the people would find the word disgusting, and thus be dissuaded from reading Zagorka’s work” (Zagorka, “Moje Pravo”).

Her supporters printed a response decrying the allegations as an example of the “spiritual feudalism of the Hungarians and Germans” (Zagorka, “Moje Pravo”) and implying that the dismissal of her work was not based on its artistic value but its political activism. In her defense, Zagorka wrote that her journalistic work speaks for itself, and that her historical novels were meticulously researched and chosen specifically for the time periods that would correspond to the political situation at the time of their publication while avoiding censorship. In this essay, Zagorka insists that no specific flaw was found with her work, but that the question of its literary worth is irrelevant because she considers her literary output to be a weapon against foreign

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<sup>64</sup> “schundliteratur for milkmaids,” “Agramer Zeitung” newspaper, 1901.

influence in Croatia, and as such it worked as intended: “Since it was useful to the national struggle, it can never be ‘šund’” (Zagorka, “Moje Pravo”) Zagorka deconstructed the very word “šund,” translating it as ‘trash’ and then reclaiming it as a reinvigorating force rather than filthy waste: as trash disintegrates and feeds new growth, so her work serves to nourish the national spirit. But perhaps most pertinently she pointed to the Bibliography of Croatian Dramatic Literature, which lists twenty-three of her works and claims to include them in the number of “works of Croatian dramatic literature that have become a spiritual lexicon of the Croatian literary and cultural public whether by appearing in print or on stage” (Zagorka, “Moje Pravo”). This seems to me sufficient evidence to counter the tired and over-used allegation that her work is “šund,” which I wish modern critics and essayists would stop compulsively repeating—especially when they do so without acknowledging the political context in which it originated.

Zagorka was further alternatively praised by her readers and persecuted by the establishment up to 1941, at which point the occupying Germans confiscated her property and demanded her cooperation, which she refused. She lived out the rest of her life engulfed in her work, meticulously compiling, organizing and saving all the private and published documents pertaining to her career as a novelist and a journalist. She was aware that, after her death, she would be leaving a legacy behind—she believed that her work had value.

## IX. ZAGORKA'S LITERARY STATUS

### Zagorka's Reception and Status in Croatian and Balkan Literature

In *Kćeri Ilirije*, Badurina writes that “Croatia often finds itself within the borders of the metaphorically understood Balkans, and even more frequently in a sort of a liminal position in relation to the Balkans, which makes Balkanism methodologically relevant” (263). In the early twentieth century a nation's literature was of paramount importance as it legitimized its official language and solidified its political presence.<sup>65</sup> In *Remaining Relevant After Communism*, Wachtel writes that “the majority of East European countries were in substantial measure invented by writers” and that their literature “was very frequently a creator of new identities and new social and political realities” (12). The push for Germanization that Croatia experienced led to the gradual expulsion of the Croatian language in the public sphere and therefore posed a clear danger to Croatia's cultural autonomy. Ironically, in trying to ward off Germanization it seems that Zagorka used German ideals for nation building in that her tactics followed those of the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte<sup>66</sup>, a nineteenth century proponent of German nationalism. However, given that language propagation and nation building were considered at the time to be the highest role and responsibility of writers, Zagorka was certainly a pivotal figure for Croatian literature and deserved to be acknowledged as such.

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<sup>65</sup> Andrew Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant After Communism*.

<sup>66</sup> Wachtel quotes German ideology outlined by Johann Gottlieb Fichte: “The noblest privilege and holiest office of the writer is to assemble his nation and consult with her about her weightiest affairs” (14).

Zagorka's place in the Croatian canon remains in doubt, however. As Dremel points out, "Croatian history and Croatian literary critics have still not determined a place for her"<sup>67</sup> (160), and no complete critical study has been made of her work. A turn of the century Parisian journalist for *Le Figaro* called Zagorka "a small miracle of talent and perseverance" (Đorđević 208), but since she was a vocal feminist and suffragist, male colleagues such as Šime Mazzura, A. G. Matoš and Miroslav Krleža, publicly dismissed Zagorka. Her opus was scapegoated and did not receive serious critical attention until author and editor Josip Horvat credited her for revolutionizing the tone and delivery of political journalism. Others who positively responded to Zagorka's career were Vladimir Kovačić, who called Zagorka "one of the founders of our folk theater" (Đorđević 201), Ivo Hergešić who published her journalistic work in *Magnum Opus (Sabrana djela)* in the 1960s, and Stanko Lasić, who acknowledged her literary value in the 1970s in *Književni počeci Marije Jurić Zagorke (The Literary Beginnings of Marija Jurić Zagorka)*, and *Uvod u Monografiju (Introduction to the Monograph)* in 1989. Regrettably, Lasić categorized his work on Zagorka as nothing but an introduction, and dropped his studies to focus on the work of Miroslav Krleža. Hergešić explained the critics' lack of engagement with Zagorka's work by stating that the "air of the ridiculous which enveloped this tragic figure" would "make any serious scholar who would venture to study her work look silly"<sup>68</sup> (203).

In *Povijest Hrvatskog Romana (History of the Croatian Novel)* Nemeč discusses Zagorka's work in relation to the Croatian novel. The general consensus is that August Šenoa is the father of the Croatian novel, having established its narrative model in the 1870s and initiated a new age of Croatian literature with a focus on educating the public about Croatian history and tradition. In contrast, Zagorka's use of Croatian history is markedly different, since she uses its broad strokes

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<sup>67</sup> "...povijest i kritika Hrvatske književnosti još [joj] nije odredila mjesto."

<sup>68</sup> "...aura smiješnosti koja obavija ovaj tragični lik pa čovjek može ispasti neozbiljan ako se daje na taj posao."

to insert modern ideals for Croatian culture into the past and thereby have the past ‘retrospectively’ absorb and espouse those ideals as its own. In that sense Zagorka engaged in re-creating, or better yet ‘retro-creating’ Croatian tradition, and when judged based on established canonical values she has been deemed a poor imitator.

Šenoa was followed by a surge of female authors, like Jagoda Truhelka, Dragojla Jarnević, Zofka Kveder and Zagorka, to name a few of the better-known ones. The period of Croatian Moderna in which these women wrote championed shorter literary forms as a reaction to the perceived dearth of innovation and quality in the novels produced at the beginning of the twentieth century. In that respect Zagorka’s long feuilleton novels did not fit in with the innovative Croatian Moderna aesthetics that placed a value on introspection, a focus on the individual and independence from Romantic literary forms. Nemeč therefore automatically groups Zagorka with the authors who continue to write historical romantic fiction, juxtaposing her work to that of “more serious” authors in the genre. Nemeč writes that “regardless of the fact” of the success of the sales of some novels from feuilleton form to book form, which represent “our first successful novels....most of the popular novel authors (Deželić, Zagorka, Mayer) were simply cast out of Croatian literary and historical criticism” (68).

The topics that Zagorka chose were scorned, as evidenced by Milivoj Dežman’s statement<sup>69</sup> from 1900 *Život*, in which he laments the state of Croatian literature and claims that it is partially the result of the populace’s contentment with books about “crime stories, murders, spies and ghosts in the Croatian language,” after having “somehow phased out German publications” (8). What Dežman fails to acknowledge is that Zagorka’s work was widely acknowledged as responsible for steering the public’s taste toward the Croatian written word, and that without it

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<sup>69</sup> “...mi smo zadovoljni što su nekako istisnuti švapski listići...sto se kriminalne pripovijesti, ubojstva, uhode i sablasti čitaju na hrvatskom jeziku.”



‘serious literature’ would have lost its reading audience. Nemeč writes that because Zagorka admitted to her intention of writing the novels to suppress the spread of German literature, the “story” is irrelevant since it’s nothing but a “means to a goal” (74). He quotes a Croatian critic who, by attacking the popular novel of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, implies that “good” novels which deserve a wide readership espouse “contemporary ideals, the issues regarding life and society....love for one’s people, impetus toward higher-level acts and ideals” (69). By those standards, Zagorka’s novels should be critically acclaimed instead of shunned, but Nemeč instead resents her for following Horace’s maxim of writing literature only to “prodesse et delectare.” On similar grounds he dismisses Deželiić’s work for its “moralistic, national and educational tendencies....burdened by religious motifs,” but he still praises it by stating that Deželiić had “consciously placed artistic goals in the service of raising national awareness and the establishment of Croatian selfhood” and that his novels “burst forth with the same spirit that inspired our patriotic 19<sup>th</sup>-century poetry” (72). He does not give Zagorka nearly as much credit, though he grants her the title of “the most read Croatian author to date” (74). According to Vujnoviić, a drama based on the *Grička vještica* book series was even staged in St. Louis, Missouri around 1917 among Croatian expatriates.

Nemeč corrects his judgment on Zagorka’s worth about a decade later with a new publication, *Putovi pored znakova*, where he cites Zagorka’s political subversion<sup>70</sup> (217), her critique of the Khuen’s system of government, her fight for national security and her critique of anti-nationalist sentiment as well as her fight against societal injustices in regards to women’s rights as positive characteristics of her works that stand in stark contrast to the “artistic

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<sup>70</sup> “Značenje njezinih romana uvelike premašuje njihovu literarnu vrijednost: oni su širili Hrvatsku čitateljsku bazu i uzdizali nacionalnu svijest.”

conformity, cultural escapism and the collective stabilizing role”<sup>71</sup> (Nemec 214) of ‘trivial’ popular novels. By comparing the change over time in the critical assessment of Zagorka from the point of view of the same critic, we can clearly see that the passage of time has made Croatian public consciousness more receptive to the kind of ideals that Zagorka espoused, and that her worth ultimately had little to do with her ability to write, and everything to do with the palatability of her message. In *Kroničar Starog Zagreba* Đorđević distills the critics’ opinion of Zagorka’s work by chronicling a change in one critic’s estimation of Zagorka’s adaptation of Šenoa’s novel for the stage: Zagorka entered the competition under the pseudonym ‘Verus,’ and won. The critic gave the adaptation a glowing review until it was revealed that Zagorka was the author, at which point he published a damning denunciation of the same work.

Matoš, the leading author of the time, actually claimed that “Croatian literature has no critics, no readers and no buyers,”<sup>72</sup> (10) completely ignoring Zagorka’s massive reading public and popular success, which was further used as an argument against her literary value and as evidence of the flourishing of the “trivialized” canonical historical novel. However, Matoš claims that this “pseudo-historical fiction” (66) is characterized by a specific choice of time period that would exalt Croatian nationalism by reliving the glorious days of its past victories, which cannot be applied to Zagorka’s work. Zagorka did not follow prescriptive mass paperback success routes; she chose female protagonists to carry the plot and the banner of national pride, and had to contend with the fact that few historic events, if any, had recorded notable women’s contributions to their cause. In *Grička Vještica*, for example, Croatia itself is not undergoing any political or cultural changes, but Nera is instead the beacon of a spiritual rebirth at a time when Croatian women were targeted and the populace’s ignorance was used to exploit them.

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<sup>71</sup> “...umjetnički konformizam, društveni eskapizam te kolektivna stabilizacijska uloga.”

<sup>72</sup> “...hrvatska knjiga nema kritičara, nema čitalaca, nema kupaca.”

Nemec describes the “trivial novel” as one that serves as an “escape from reality and existential problems and is primarily meant to serve as entertainment, play, effect and ornament” (265). This is not applicable to Zagorka’s work, though she uses such tropes to make her ideas more palatable for the masses. Nemec clearly admits that Zagorka’s work is not representative of the “trivial novel”:

Though discussions about trivial novels often point out their artistic conformity, social escapism and their collective stabilizing role, most of Zagorka’s opus is, in contrast, characterized by its intentional political subversion: the anti-Austrian and anti-Hungarian stance, critique of Khuen’s apparatus, the fight for national independence, critique of denationalization, and social engagement. It is also important here to mention her feminism, or her fight for the rights of women. (77)<sup>73</sup>

When discussing the value of the detective novel, Nemec also chooses to ignore Zagorka’s *Kneginja iz Petrinjske ulice*, which is a great example of the use of Gothic elements in a murder mystery, in favor of a novel by an unknown male author, which he himself calls “dilettante, naïve and weak in every regard”:

Other than Zagorka’s well-known work *Kneginja iz Petrinjske Ulice* ...the unknown Branko Ranimir (pseudonym?) published in Varaždin’s press J. B. Stiefler a short novel titled *The Deadman’s House or the Terror in the Vacant Mill*. The work is written in dilettante form, it is naïve and weak in every regard, but it presents an unusual combination of a novel with a puzzle (the mysterious

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<sup>73</sup> “Tako se u raspravama o trivijalnim romanima redovito ističe njihov umjetnički konformizam, za mnoga Zagorkina djela upravo je karakteristična intencionalna politička subverzivnost: protuaustrijski i protunjemački stav, kritika Khuenova aparata, borba za nacionalnu neovisnost, osuda odnarođivanja, socijalni angažman. Na ovome mjestu nije nevažno spomenuti ni njezin feminizam, tk. borbu za prava žena.”

murder) and the Gothic novel, filled with creepy scenes and dark twists of the plot. Our writer was obviously heavily influenced by Vulpius' novel *Rinaldo Rinaldini*, which was very popular in our milieu at the time. Ranimir's novel was published without noting the year of publication, but if we were to judge by its linguistic and stylistic characteristics as well as by the book's binding we can ascertain with relative surety that it was printed before Zagorka's *Kneginja*, probably at the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (67)

This quote shows that even those critics who were not openly antagonistic did not quite know how to deal with a wildly successful female author who was blacklisted by pivotal Croatian public figures—so they oftentimes ignored her. Some of the criticism addressed her perceived lack of character development and a penchant for two-dimensional characters, when in fact, while the characters do appear to start off as stock characters they develop nuance as the plot progresses: Ivo Skerlec transforms from a sweet and harmless suitor into a menacing, judgmental traitor; Father Smole is idealistic and courageous until his experiences break his spirit and render him a coward; Vojkffy Sr. is a typical soulless villain who repents in time to do the young lovers a favor; and the heroine, Nera, is as beautiful and brave as she is naïve and exasperating at times. In terms of the canon of Croatian science-fiction literature, however, critics generally acknowledge the value of Zagorka's novel *Crveni ocean*, and Vujnović notes that Zagorka was awarded the Medal of Honor by Queen Maria of Yugoslavia in the 1930s.

Despite all the criticism, Nemeč praises Zagorka's semi-autobiographical novel *Kamen na Cesti*, calling it a “heartbreaking and dramatic confession about hypocrisy, lies and marriage pathology written with admirable sincerity”<sup>74</sup> (78). He points to Zagorka's “boundless

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<sup>74</sup> “Potresna i dramatična ispovijest o licemjerju, laži i bračnoj patologiji odiše iskrenošću koja zadivljuje.”

imagination” which he claims is the very “core of narration,” but while he praises the “hypnotic effect of her stories” he claims that the “value of her novels far exceeds their aesthetic value”<sup>75</sup> (79). In *Putovi pored znakova* Nemeč writes that Zagorka is responsible for “the development of a type of prose writing without which Croatian literature would be greatly diminished”<sup>76</sup> (212). Her success is also reflected in theater productions, as fourteen of her plays were adapted for the stage up to 1940 and were shown in the Croatian National Theatre. They attracted the masses, and Zagorka became the most popular public figure in Croatia. Nemeč reports that in one *Jutarnji List* survey citizens elected Zagorka and Hitler as the most recognizable figures of interwar Europe.

Zagorka’s work remains popular, and evidence of that popularity is the continuous reprinting of her books in hardback and gold leaf. Nemeč juxtaposes this development to the fate of texts written by Croatian literary greats such as Krleža or Andrić, whose works are printed in cheap, easily accessible paperback editions, and calls this a “strange cultural inversion”<sup>77</sup> (226). Interestingly, Maša Grdešić also discusses the bindings in which Zagorka’s works continue to be published. Grdešić claims<sup>78</sup> that we should not force the Croatian literary canon to accept Zagorka, since Zagorka simply does not fit into it. She bases this conclusion on the fact that the most recent gilded hardcover editions of her novels presumably did not sell well-enough at the original asking price, but had to be discounted and advertised to readers consisting of,

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<sup>75</sup> “Značenje njenih romana uvelike nadmašuje njihovu estetsku vrijednost.”

<sup>76</sup> “...razvijanje jednoga tipa proznog pisma bez kojega bi hrvatska književnost bil bitno osiromasena.”

<sup>77</sup> “čudna kulturna inverzija.”

<sup>78</sup> “Međutim, važno je još jednom naglasiti da je Zagorku i njezine čitateljice i čitatelje neproduktivno promatrati u sklopu visoke kulture ili silom gurati u priznati kanon hrvatske književnosti. Kao što pokazuje slučaj najnovijega kanonskog, tvrdokoričenog i skupog izdanja *Gričke vještice* (Školska knjiga, 2004), moguće je izvući Zagorku iz popularne književnosti, ali je nemoguće izvući popularnu književnost iz Zagorke. Izdavač je ubrzo bio prisiljen sniziti cijenu knjiga te ih reklamirati u terminu HTV-ove *Ville Marije*, prve hrvatske sapunice.”

presumably, financially disadvantaged and culturally unrefined masses who watch Croatian TV's soap operas and can therefore be considered the "true" target readers for Zagorka's pop-literature. However, these assumptions and the resulting 'conclusions' speak much less of Zagorka's literary value than of the critics' elitist prejudice against popular fiction.

Having inherited a set of Zagorka's hardcover novels, I understand firsthand that the reading public in general is willing to invest in the books they love and that they know the books will need to withstand frequent use and be passed on to the next generation: they see Zagorka as a national treasure and have done so while the literary critics have squabbled over her 'canonic standing' for the last hundred years. In her review Grdešić allows for Zagorka's 'accessibility,' which is in her mind redeemed by the subversive nature of her novels. But Grdešić is still too invested in the clear division of 'low' and 'high' cultural production, and she is still willing to ignore the issue, implying that the low 'quality' of the modern readership presumably defined by their inability to pay full price for gilded hardcovers and their penchant for telenovelas somehow automatically discredit Zagorka's work itself. However, Zagorka's marginalization only serves to ensure her freedom from the oppressive canon—her work must be approached from an interdisciplinary perspective, as Dremel writes: "Historically she was simultaneously visible and invisible, more popular than anyone and still outside of the canon. Zagorka, as well as popular culture in general, escapes cultural definitions" ("Disciplina" 30).

#### Zagorka's Novels in the Context of European Women's Literature

Women writers became popular with the reading public in nineteenth-century Europe, mostly in the new genre of the novel. They generally wrote realist fiction that attempted to shine a light on the personal lives and tribulations of people from different walks of life. Many women writers used male pseudonyms to defend themselves against criticism and gender discrimination

as well as to avoid legal issues concerning ownership, but some, like Zagorka, ultimately chose female pen names that supported their feminist cause regardless of the consequences and personal attacks. While a comprehensive study of nineteenth-century European women writers is beyond the scope of this introduction, considering the experiences of a few of Zagorka's predecessors and contemporaries in Italy, France and England can highlight the challenges that these and other women faced in engaging the public sphere through their texts, including the possible reasons for the negative criticism they received. In choosing comparable authors I endeavored to match their literary output and popularity as well as their social and political engagements to Zagorka's. In covering a period of some one hundred years I mean to show women's public engagement as a process that builds upon itself both within and across national borders, surpassing the most egregious hurdles to ultimately result in the figure of Virginia Woolf, who might be considered the first critically acclaimed unapologetic woman writer unencumbered by the trappings of culturally prescribed femininity. Honoré de Balzac wrote, "if someone thought George Sand wrote badly, it was because their own standards of criticism were inadequate" (Pasco, 161), and even a cursory glance at the career and popularity trajectories of a few famous women writers over time illuminates the complex interplay of cultural and literary standards that influence the perceived quality of women's literary work.

Adriana Chemello writes a thoughtful review of several critical analyses of nineteenth century women's literature, stating that "most of that literature tends to be intimate by nature anyway, but this is essentially attributable to a structural fact regarding the historic denial of women's access to the public, social and external dimension. Women's writing is inherently a transgressive act, as it expresses an attitude of revolt and a necessity to escape oppression and to write about it. The writing will therefore tend to be 'private' not because the woman rationally

rejects the public domain, but because the latter is inevitably filtered out of her self-consciousness”<sup>79</sup> (287-8). Surveying critical responses to Zagorka’s cohort of women writers across Europe who held similar feminist and political ideals helps inform our attitude toward her life and work by addressing the process of inherent rebellion that women had to undertake in carving out a space for themselves and their texts in the male-dominated public sphere.

### Italian Female Authors

#### ❖ *Matilde Serao*

Matilde Serao was a member of the *verismo* movement who wrote realist novels mostly depicting life in Naples, Italy. She was born in 1856 to a family of Greek descent, and she was homeschooled and mostly self-taught. Serao was interested in contributing to the production of an Italian culture and literature by assisting in the birth of the Italian novel; like Zagorka, she was a journalist, editor and even founder of various publications such as *Il Corriere di Roma*, *Il Mattino* and *Il Giorno*. She was a prolific writer and published many popular novels that were translated into other European languages, such as *Il Ventre di Napoli* (1884), *Il Paese di Cuccagna* (1890), *Paese di Gesù* (1898), *La Ballerina* (1899), *Addio Amore* (1901), *Suor Giovanna della Croce* (1901), *All'erta Sentinella* (1904) and *Castigo* (1914). These novels were more accessible to her readers than the purist, formal Italian works, so they became popular and gained a certain acclaim that is entirely depended on such popularity.

Serao wrote in similar circumstances to Zagorka’s and her work helped shape the blueprint for modern Italian culture: in “From Letter to Literature,” Gabriella Romani writes that

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<sup>79</sup> “...gran parte di questa letteratura tende ad essere comunque una scrittura ‘dell’intimo,’ ma ciò è imputabile essenzialmente ad un fatto strutturale, cioè che alla donna è stata storicamente negata la dimensione pubblica, sociale, esterna. La scrittura femminile è già in sé una trasgressione, esprime un atteggiamento di rivolta, una necessità di sfuggire ad un’oppressione e di descriverla. La scrittura tenderà ad essere pertanto ‘privata’ non perché la donna rifiuti razionalmente la dimensione pubblica, ma perché quest’ultima viene inevitabilmente filtrata a partire dalla coscienza del sé.”



verismo “marked a crucial moment in the formation of Italy’s modern cultural identities” (7). Serao also resembles Zagorka in that her language and style were informed by her journalistic work. As Sanson writes in *Ottocento Women Writers and the Questione della Lingua*, her intent was to “document reality carefully, while also keeping the fluency of language alive” (1051). However, while Serao’s use of the Italian dialect in her novels made her works more accessible to the masses, it also drew criticism from academics who chose to look down on the novel as a predominantly female genre, and on the language that the women used as “inaccurate and often nothing more than a careless hybrid between Italian and dialect” (Sanson, 1032).

Modern scholars acknowledge the role that sexism played in branding Serao’s work as inadequate, claiming that Serao’s literary success was only acceptable to her critics once they reimagined her as a hermaphrodite. In 1901 Henry James offered profuse praise mingled with intolerance when he described Serao as an author with “rare energy” and called her simultaneously “robust and wonderful” and “not to be trusted at all” (379), which is a rather scathing assessment to make of a realist author’s work. James thought Serao too passionate and therefore vulgar: “it is at the category of the familiar that vulgarity begins” (380). James instead preferred “truth” and “cool virtue... in reticences and gaps, and the inspired, inconsistent, indefensible superficial” that he finds in the familiar work of Jane Austen, therefore plainly signaling his discomfort with Serao’s overstepping of the established literary bounds of female creativity—those same transgressions that Zagorka undertook in her personal life and that informed the construction of her female protagonists.

Decades later, in 1967, Anthony Gisolfi cautiously praised Serao’s work, finding ‘art’ in shorter forms and parts of her novels, but faulting Serao for her naiveté and “diffusiveness, abuse of detail, excessive emphasis” (xv). In “The Dramatic Element” he calls her works “little

masterpieces,” and the diminutive clearly downgrades their value within the canon, designating them instead as ‘other’ by choosing words reserved solely for women’s work. Serao was somewhat vindicated only after Teresa Russo in 1997 and Helena Sanson in 2010 wrote articles that appropriately discussed her historic place as a female author in Italian literature. Though Sarao had been criticized in the past for failing to portray feminist characters in her novels, Russo concedes that her very life and work are a statement against the oppression of women, and that she was immensely valuable to the suffragist cause for choosing to represent the women of the time and to bring their issues to the forefront of cultural consciousness.<sup>80</sup>

Serao was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature six times. More ‘traditional’ male authors won the prize each time, possibly as a result of Serao’s public stance against fascism, which, incidentally, also jeopardized Zagorka’s career.

❖ *Carolina Invernizio*

Another Italian female author whose literary fate resembles that of Zagorka is Carolina Maria Margarita Invernizio. Born in 1851, Invernizio was a popular Italian novelist whose work has remained unrecognized as part of the canon. Like Zagorka, Invernizio published numerous feuilleton-style novels and novellas, as well as several children’s books. The demand for her novels persisted over time, with continuous reprinting and various editions and formats available of such works as *La Trovatella di Milano* (1889), *I Misteri delle Soffitte* (1901), *Il Primo Amore* (1906), *Peccatrice Moderna* (1915) and others. Her style, much like Zagorka’s, has been described as sensationalist with gothic elements, which led most critics to not take her work seriously. Critics such as Gramsci and Ghirelli called her naïve and romantic,<sup>81</sup> consigning her work to what Zagorka’s critics referred to as “šund literature.” In *Six Walks in the Fictional*

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<sup>80</sup> Russo, Teresa G. “Matilde Serao: A True Verista for the Female Character.”

<sup>81</sup> Sharon Wood. *Italian Women's Writing, 1860-1994*. A&C Black, 1995.

*Woods*, Umberto Eco writes that “in wanting to say too much, an author may become more comic than his or her characters,” and he cites Invernizio, whose work he translated, as one of those authors who “wrote badly” but succeeded in “nourishing the dreams of whole generations of proletarians” (45). Eco suggests that Invernizio’s prose was intentionally slow-moving and simple to cater to the needs and abilities of her readers, and he credits her for “her courage, or the weakness, to introduce into literature the language of the petty bureaucracy of the newly formed Italian state” (46). This criticism, however, seems unjust given verismo’s prerogative of realistically portraying the life of the time.

More recently, Russo acknowledges Invernizio’s breakthrough agenda of “writing about women for women” (125), and concedes that even though the trajectories of her plots at times were clichéd—unrestrained passions ended badly and controlled femininity was rewarded with a happy ending—the fact that women’s lives were highlighted was the beginning of a conversation about women’s issues and women’s place in society.

### French Female Authors

#### ❖ *André Léo*

Victoire Léodile Béra is another under-valued female literary figure. Born in 1824, she was a notable novelist, journalist and member of the International Workingmen’s Association who created her pseudonym André Léo by combining the names of her two sons. Like Zagorka, André Léo was involved with the socialist and the feminist causes, education reform and advocacy for the separation of church and state. In *‘Savoir C’est Pouvoir’: Integral Education in the Novels of André Léo*, Cecilia Beach documents Léo’s avant-garde, humanitarian stance on education and citizenship: “teaching catechism in the public schools instilled in the children a sense of inferiority and of bellicose patriotism, as well as a respect for authority and order which

she viewed as negative attributes” (273). Léo was actively engaged in reshaping her community by founding the “Société (mixte) de Revendication des Droits de la Femme” as well as the journal *La République des Travailleurs* and a daily newspaper *La Sociale*.

André Léo was a prolific writer whose novels mostly center on issues of education, communism and women's rights. Her commercial success allowed her to live off of her earnings; some of the better-known novels with several reprints include *La Femme et les Moeurs* (1869), *Un Mariage Scandaleux* (1862), *Marianne* (1877) and *Légendes Corrésiennes* (1867). André Léo's contributions have mostly been forgotten by modern academic scholarship and offer an opportunity for future research.

#### ❖ *George Sand*

Best known by her male pseudonym George Sand, Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin was a famous journalist, novelist, playwright, memoirist, critic and political activist born in 1804 in Paris. Sand remains a popular feminist author whose work advocates for the rights of women and the oppressed working class.

Like Zagorka, Sand practiced cross-dressing in order to move more freely about Paris. She was subsequently received with harsh criticism from Baudelaire and others who categorized her work as ‘uneven’ at best, due in part to the fact that writers were paid by the line which created “an incentive to produce quantity rather than quality” (Russo). Similarities with Zagorka do not end there; Sand was also prolific in her varied interests and numerous publications, and her political engagement with the 1848 Revolution included the founding of her own newspaper and her participation as a member of the staff at the *Figaro*.

Sand's novels' popularity is based on their scandalous and exciting plot twists and themes. She laid claim to androgyny, aspired to write ‘like a man,’ and aligned her work with

that of French realism by not espousing any ideology, but by thinking of herself in the role of a machine that records what she sees without attempting interpretation.<sup>82</sup> In “Restoring Women’s Voice,” Morrison writes that Sand convinced her readers to feel sympathy for the female characters to whom she gave a voice through the art of the novel, thus highlighting their oppression in nineteenth-century French society. In this fashion the novels, such as *Mont-Reveche* (1852), *La Confession d’une Jeune Fille* (1864), *Flamarande* (1875) and others, build a community of women who, denied the opportunity to gather publicly, find that they do share experiences and desires and that they should stand united against injustice.

Some critics and authors, such as Honoré de Balzac and Gustav Flaubert, did admire her and acknowledge her worth, though through a prism of gender stereotyping. Their assessment conflated Sand’s idealization of characters with ‘women’s work’ which was therefore inferior; as Schor writes in *Idealism in the Novel: Becoming Sand*: “associated with masculinity, negative idealization becomes the positively valorized term, henceforth known as realism, while positive idealization, linked up with femininity, becomes the negatively valorized term, a diminished and trivialized idealism” (66).

Sand was an inspiration to other women writers; Virginia Woolf mentions her in the feminist manifesto *A Room of One’s Own* in which she conjures up a society of women writers across time and space who have all had to overcome similar difficulties in order to practice their nonconforming art. Sand’s work is currently experiencing a resurgence of interest that began in the mid-twentieth century, culminating at the turn of the twenty-first century—her novels, letters and autobiography have been re-published, and the 2004 bicentenary celebration<sup>83</sup> of her birth in

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<sup>82</sup> Naomi Schor, introduction to *Indiana*.

<sup>83</sup> From an article in *The Economist*, “George Sand: What a Woman.”

France included not only exhibits and plays, but conferences dedicated to a critical examination of her work rather than her role as a famous socialite, cross dresser, divorcée and Chopin's lover.

### British Female Authors

#### ❖ *Elizabeth Gaskell*

In her time, Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell was a famous novelist, biographer, and short story writer, but after her death, her literary stock markedly declined, only to be revived in the late twentieth century. She was born in 1810 in Chelsea, England, and like other notable female authors, Gaskell enjoyed the company of the educated elite such as Charles Dickens. Dickens admired her work and collaborated with Gaskell on various stories, facilitating their publication. Though Gaskell originally published anonymously, like Zagorka she eventually declared her femininity and presented herself publicly as "Mrs. Gaskell." Another parallel to Zagorka's oeuvre is the thematic of Gaskell's novels, which featured exciting developments mixed with social realism that highlighted the conditions of the working class and the poor and challenged traditional gender roles, critiquing contemporary society. Some of Gaskell's more famous works include *Mary Barton* (1848), *Cranford* (1851-3), *Ruth* (1853), *North and South* (1854-5), *Cousin Phillis* (1864) and *Wives and Daughters* (1865).

Gaskell's work teetered on the margins of 'worthy literature' for quite some time; scholars largely dismissed her until the 1970s-feminist movement in the United States brought attention to her novels, just as scholars dismissed Zagorka until her 're-discovery' by the Croatian feminist movement in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Winifred Gerin wrote the first Gaskell biography in 1976, which Craik reviewed in 1978 as thorough but too apologetic and passive in accepting past criticism and allowing for 'inadequacies' in Gaskell's writing. Craik laments the lack of critical depth in exploring Gaskell's work beyond the façade that she purposefully offered

to the public eye in order to ingratiate herself to the expectations of the social zeitgeist. The image that Elizabeth Gaskell presented to the public was that of “an amiable, not very intellectual writer who faithfully delineated provincial life and who wrote *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, and *North and South* out of a sense of social duty...a woman who had few of the trials of life and spiritual tussles out of which, biographers lead us to believe, great writers are made of” (Craik, 355), and Craik sees her happy, contented persona as a form of evasion that still needs to be accounted for.

In the 1987 biography *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Patsy Stoneman makes an effort to provide a fair and just analysis of Gaskell’s life and work by taking into account the social pressures that beset her. Stoneman writes that Gaskell’s life and work, much like Zagorka’s, have largely been viewed through the lens of phallic criticism: “a kind of irritation with the author for not properly performing what the critic assumes she is trying to do” (5). In 1992 Davis takes this assessment a step further to denounce the unjust treatment of Gaskell by feminist scholars who rejected her conservative values and resented her financial success:

It is too easy to dismiss Gaskell as simply a less powerful and talented writer than her more acclaimed cohorts. The manner in which she has been dismissed suggests that Gaskell's treatment by feminist critics has more to do with the psychology and politics of feminist criticism than with any real lack in Gaskell's fiction. The feminine nurturance on which she grounded her life and work has appeared to many feminist critics as unappealing at best and traitorous at worst. In the eyes of a few recent critics, however, that emphasis on nurturance has become not only the most attractive part of Gaskell's work but also the most potentially subversive. (Davis, 507)

If one follows this thread of historic criticism of Gaskell's work, it becomes clear that authors such as Gaskell and Zagorka have challenged our ability to understand and place their significance in a cultural context. They belong to the sphere of the "other," both as women and as authors, and it is interesting to note that Gaskell dealt with that concept as her subject matter. In 2012 Pettitt writes about Gaskell's treatment of the historic Salem witch trials in *Lois the Witch*, in which she makes the suffering of Others more relatable: "the very subject of historical fiction at mid-century, then, is the technology that it disavows. Turning to the past, it addresses forms of mediation too new to be fully comprehensible. Gaskell's interest in scenes of historical war and violence, then, reflects her understanding that an increasingly mediated world will also be a world in which the suffering of people once remote will become ever more visible" (601). She also credits Gaskell for being a conscious member of a new wave of "global humanitarian consciousness" (Pettitt, 619) that has addressed such movements as abolitionism and suffrage—a movement of which Zagorka is also a vocal representative.

❖ *Virginia Woolf*

Croatian critics have often compared Zagorka to Woolf's unabashedly progressive feminist ideologies, doubtless due to the fact that Woolf is one of the very few Zagorka's contemporaries whose literary success and personal fame persisted over the years and across international borders, and to the inherent vacuum of comparably impactful female figures. Woolf thus deserves special mention in this introduction, though her decidedly modernist style of writing bears little resemblance to Zagorka's prose.

Adeline Virginia Woolf was born in 1882 in London, and has long been recognized as one of the most important exponents of high modernism. Woolf was fortunate in that she was born into a culture that had already benefited from the industry of her illustrious English predecessors,



such as the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen, and George Elliot; the historic groundwork that had thus been established in support of women's literature led to Woolf's feminist manifesto, *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Woolf was a member of the Bloomsbury group of English intellectuals and artists, whose support, coupled with her own well-to-do position in society, may have helped shelter her from harsh gender-based criticism. She was also not dependent on publishers to promote her work, since she and her husband, Leonard Woolf, founded the Hogarth Press, which published both her novels and the works of some of her famous contemporaries, such as T. S. Eliot.

Notable themes in Woolf's novels include the status of women, the meaning of art, the exploration of mental illness and criticism of repressive societal norms, war and fascism. In "Kako Je Bilo" (The Way It Was), Prlenda compares Virginia Woolf's feminism and effort to resurrect the forgotten and suppressed historic role of women in culture and society to Zagorka's work in resurrecting the Croatian woman as an important agent of the creation of culture and the preservation of its vibrancy. Both Woolf and Zagorka looked to the past to illuminate the role of women in their present, and to encourage a woman's public presence. Zagorka's androgynous characters in *Grička Vještica* and her essay *The Progressive Woman* both preceded Woolf's work by almost two decades, and in her article "Divno Čudoviste" ("A Beautiful Monster"), Grdešić presumes that the similarities in their experiences as female scholars and intellectuals in a male dominated field led them to the same feminist conclusions about the rights of women and the inherent complexity of gender politics. Grdešić states that Zagorka's concept of the "progressive woman" as one who has both traditionally male and female characteristics is closely related to the androgynous characters Woolf presents in *A Room of One's Own*, and this simile can be extended to the treatment of the protagonist in her novel *Orlando* (1928). Woolf

wrote in *A Room of One's Own* that “the normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two [genders] live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating ... it is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine” (98), and it is strikingly similar to Zagorka’s concept of a ‘progressive woman’ which entails honoring ‘nature’ by balancing both the male and the female aspects of one’s identity.<sup>84</sup> Zagorka’s and Woolf’s androgynous personas and the literary heroes represented in their biographical, fictional and nonfictional texts all challenged the traditional notions of femininity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>84</sup> Zagorka’s article “Napredna Žena.”

## X. GRIČKA VJEŠTICA

### Grička vještica's Political Underpinnings

*Grička vještica* has an inherently political component, starting with the choice of language wherein Zagorka used native archaisms as means of reviving Croatian national identity. While this word choice does serve a dual purpose of positioning the novel in a historic period, the use of archaisms, especially in the Croatian language, has frequently been politically motivated to affirm a separate linguistic identity from that of the surrounding Serbian or Bosnian territories and to cement a claim to historical and cultural heritage and continuity of language.<sup>85</sup> Zagorka's also consciously deployed Croatian history in the service of a new, modernized Croatian mythology by using it as a backdrop for her entertaining historical romances.

Zagorka builds her interpretation of Croatia's potential and power into her characterization of the female protagonist, who is idealized and shown to be as pure and as noble as Croatia—the motherland. In Croatian, Croatia is 'Hrvatska,' a grammatically feminine entity; thus Nera is described as a young woman, virginal and full of potential, threatened by the greed and violence of corrupt politicians and the aristocracy, drawing a direct parallel to the nascent movement for Croatian autonomy. The choice of hero who falls desperately in love with Nera and is prepared to die for her sake is significant, as Siniša's career as a commanding officer in the Queen's army is based entirely on his military prowess and valor in battle. Siniša's fight for Nera thus represents everyman's fight for the motherland.

Equating a noble woman with a territory is a familiar trope in literature—the witch hunts and the torture that Nera's physical body endures are reflective of the threat that Croatia's

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<sup>85</sup> Ranko Bugarski, *On the Identity of Serbian*.

territory faced in Zagorka's time, when the land was being carved up by political borders that assigned those parts to various other countries. However, the novels present the country's precarious position as only entailing its geographic boundaries—the national consciousness can and will persist despite all odds, just as the inquisition can only harm Nera's body, and not her 'soul.' Nera literally states under torture: "I will never admit to a falsehood just to stop the torture....I am not a witch, because there are no such things as witches....And now do with me what you will. I will be silent, suffer and die" (388).

Not only is Nera a woman, but she is a young woman, and Zagorka always placed great responsibility on the youth of Croatia to champion humanist and liberal ideals. In *Grička vještica*, Zagorka presents an image of the revolutionary ideal in the youth group *Remetinci*, of which Nera is a member, composed of well-educated and enlightened men and women who bravely stand up to the corrupt 'traditional' system and fight for justice. These young people are willing to sacrifice their lives to their noble quest that centers on the abolition of the immoral but lucrative practice of witch-hunts and trials. The novels present society as one founded on class divisions, but the members of *Remetinci* disrupt that by accepting members from all backgrounds. The pivotal moment that drives the plot itself centers on the abolishment of the class system: Nera and her grandmother, Countess Ratkay, literally put their lives on the line to provide shelter to a young peasant girl whom they had never met before, but who was unjustly persecuted for witchcraft by the city officials. Zagorka drew inspiration for the *Remetinci* from her personal experiences with youth movements in Croatia, such as the 1895 protest in which the youth burned the Hungarian flag at the Zagreb Square during a royal visit. Zagorka called the burning flag a "Torch in the Night" in an article of the same name, in which she stated that this

act would show the Croatian people “the way to the fight, and to freedom” (“Moje pravo i dužnost”).

Zagorka’s own political engagement informed other aspects of the plot development in *Grička vještica*, as well. In “Moje pravo i dužnost” she writes about the journalistic work she did in 1896 to reveal a great Hungarian plot that was meant to falsely portray the Croats as enthusiastic and willing members of the Hungarian cultural past, which would serve to facilitate the planned annexation of Croatia into a region of a greater Hungary. At that time Zagorka discovered the use of such tricks as the dressing of Hungarians in traditional Croatian robes so that they would parade in front of foreign diplomats as enthusiastic Croat supporters of the Hungarian regime. In *Grička vještica*, she has the Croatian aristocrats dress in villager clothes to falsely accuse the heroine of witchcraft at the great trial in Vienna, thus exposing the sabotaging tactics and rallying the readers to stand up for ‘truth’ and ‘justice.’

#### *Grička vještica*: Feminist Empowerment

Zagorka was a renowned feminist, and while her novels educate the public about Croatian culture by making the historical and political backdrop more appealing with the use of copious infusions of romance and intrigue, they also present strong female protagonists who challenge the traditional idea of a ‘woman’s place.’ Zagorka thus successfully instilled in her fellow citizens both a sense of patriotism and a passion for women’s rights, setting a precedent for the way in which women should be treated in romantic relationships: not only to be admired and protected, but to be loved and respected for their innate worth as individuals.

The importance and sustainability of feminist ideals are emphasized through Zagorka’s decision to leave many of her female protagonists in some way orphaned, lacking a patriarch in their immediate family circle. In *Grička vještica*, for example, Nera is raised in a matriarchal

environment by her grandmother, who is a respected member of the aristocracy. She has no male relatives who have the power to assert control over her since her father died in combat when she was a child. This early bereavement left Nera open to the influence of the matriarch of her family, and Zagorka makes a strong point in describing Nera's early years spent in relative seclusion from the 'corruptive' influence of society, under her grandmother's wing.

Nera further subverts gender expectations by eventually discovering a long-lost brother and becoming his savior and benefactor—perpetually a figure of greater power and authority than the boy who in any other scenario would have become the heir to the titles and the lands. The only other male relative present is the spineless cousin Baron Skerlec, to whom she was betrothed for a short period of time, but whose attempt at control Nera rejected along with his proposal of marriage. When Skerlec requested that Nera give up fighting for her ideals and retreat into the shadows of 'appropriate female conduct and interests' by saying: "You were not called to instigate revolutions. You are a woman, and you are loved..."<sup>86</sup> (*Grička Vještica*, 305), Nera responds by calling his manhood into question for pandering to these antiquated notions, breaking the engagement and persisting in her struggle in spite of all persecution and hardship. In "Politička Zagorka: *Kamen na cesti* kao feministička književnost" (Political Zagorka: *Kamen na cesti* as Feminist Literature), Grdešić goes so far as to claim that Zagorka's novels are at their core fantasies about women's power, "radikalna fantazije o ženskoj moći"<sup>87</sup> ("Mala revolucionarka" 372). Grdešić uses Nera as an example of a female protagonist who, over the course of the series, not only achieves the pinnacle of beauty and nobility but starts to wield true political power by becoming a de-facto advisor to the heir to Maria Theresa's throne, the future Emperor Joseph II.

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<sup>86</sup> "Ti nisi zvana da dižeš revolucije. Žena si, ljubljena si..."

<sup>87</sup> "A radical fantasy about women's power."

*Grička vještica* also presents another unconventional female character who is granted a happy ending: Stanka. Stanka spends most of the first book disguised as Lieutenant Stanko, during which time she falls in love and is eventually married to her love interest Count Meško at the conclusion of her cross-dressing, man-acting stunt. In the background of this plot is another powerful woman, Baroness Katarina Lehotska, who at first seems to represent the ‘dark’ antithesis to the ‘pure’ Stanka, but whose actual moral standing is much more ambiguous. Grdešić mentions in her article that the need for the Baroness to use Stanka is a problematic symptom of women’s oppression characteristic at that time period. When analyzed in this context, the character of the Baroness as the femme fatale is actually revealed to be that of a trickster artist, both for her ingenuity and power to dare to challenge the path that was forced upon her,<sup>88</sup> and for the way in which she was ultimately vilified and persecuted by the novel for stepping out of line. Art imitates life—but only to a degree, and with more subversion than is immediately apparent because, while the ultra-feminine character of the Baroness was in too stark a contrast to the ‘man’s’ power she was aiming to appropriate for the plot to be successful, the more androgynous Stanka succeeds in literally and figuratively infiltrating the men’s power domain while also obtaining her own, ‘womanly,’ happy ending involving marriage and childbirth. To further cement the feminist ideology underlining both of these female characters, Zagorka disrupts Stanka’s confinement to the domestic sphere of her happy ending in subsequent novels by introducing the problem of estrangement between spouses initiated at the start of the new chapter of motherhood. This disruption of both the marriage union and, presumably, the shift from the ‘independent persona’ of Stanka to that of ‘Stanka the all-consumed mother’

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<sup>88</sup> As a single woman with no male relatives, she has no opportunities of socializing with eligible men and finding a husband. She therefore engages Stanka to pose as her nephew, and teaches her how to act and pass as a man. It’s interesting to note that Stanka, in order to remain ‘good’ and worthy of a happy ending, had to be relatively clueless and naïve, and entirely coached into playing the part successfully (at first).

serves as the catalyst for a sub-plot development that culminates in a marriage of two women, albeit a platonic one.<sup>89</sup> The new adventure presumably leads Stanka to conclude that in order to be fulfilled and authentically happy, she must continue to balance the ‘male and the ‘female’ aspects of her identity, and not lose herself in any specific womanly ‘role.’ This personal credo that many of her protagonists espouse is consistent with Kakkonen’s assessment<sup>90</sup> of Zagorka herself as a rebellious individual, whose feminist sense of self-worth and purpose was independent of the judgment passed on her by her audience or her critics.

### *Grička vještica* and Religion

In many ways *Grička vještica* is focused on revealing the religious institutions across the Austro-Hungarian Empire as morally bankrupt and corrupt, and offering a sort of humanism in their stead. None of the religiously affiliated characters in this particular series is unequivocally ‘good,’ and even Father Smole, Nera’s childhood spiritual guide, succumbs to weakness and cowardice and is paralyzed by an all-consuming guilt that makes him unable to act as an agent for good. The other priests, nuns, Jesuits and prophets represented in the series are sinful, lascivious and greedy characters who use religion as a convenient façade for their evil plots. In *Contessa Nera*, the focus is on the witch-hunts and the presumed purification and protection of the community from the satanic forces that they represent; however, Zagorka presents those engaged in this ‘holy work’ as the true loci of evil. She portrays the civil servants who kidnap and rape innocent women, inquisitors, priests and prophets who sell their ‘wares’—favors and prayers—to the highest bidders, and dimwitted and hoodwinked masses who are thus kept in

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<sup>89</sup> To escape being blackmailed into marriage, Nera presents Stanka, dressed as Stanko, as her husband. They participate in a marriage ceremony with a hoodwinked priest in order to support this claim.

<sup>90</sup> Gordana Galić Kakkonen. “Buntovništvo kao Zagorkin životni i književni lajtmotiv.”



lowly servitude to the whims of those who purport to represent the ‘higher power.’ As the plot moves to Vienna in the following books, Zagorka targets the Jesuits as murderous and corrupt forces that thrive on the ignorance and naïveté of the people. This relentless and unforgiving exposé of the Church caused Zagorka some trouble—in *Kroničar Starog Zagreba*, Đorđević writes that Zagorka was forbidden from entering churches in Zagreb because of her attack on the church officials in *Grička vještica* (179).

Zagorka attacked the Church in her other novels as well. Anita Dremel writes in “Disciplina, policija, roman—(ne)vidljivost povijesti, ženski protest i politika prikazivanja u Zagorkinoj *Jadranci*,”<sup>91</sup> that “the social logic of the absorption of the deviant material, which exists in opposition to the norms, is a mechanism for continuation of the *normal*” (15). Dremel uses the example of *Jadranka* to show that Zagorka posits a “control mechanism” higher than the existent social structures, which ensures that a culture can change and still persevere in its oppressive values though the specific elements of that culture might change: “when the police proves unsuccessful, the world is not surrendered to anarchy—this serves to show that there are stronger control mechanisms at work, those outside of the law and informal” (21). The same can be said of the failure of the Church to ensure justice and morality, which exposes it to ridicule in Zagorka’s *Grička vještica*; the actual faith is sheltered from criticism, though Zagorka viciously attacks the mismanagement of its representatives on Earth. Zagorka thus presents her text as simultaneously deviant and easily forgiven, for who has not heard of a less than pious priest? Her novels seem to suggest that the overall structure of the belief system need not change, but the way it is managed needs improvement and enlightenment. One could also argue that Zagorka’s response to the perceived failures of the Church was to imply that the world should continue to

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<sup>91</sup> “Discipline, Police, the Novel—(In)Visibility of History, Feminist Protest and the Politics of Representation in Zagorka’s *Jadranka*.”

evolve according to its own, enlightened moral compass. Zagorka's texts are thus deviant but readable, and are 'othered' by their rejection from the canon, though their popularity continues to be influential in creating spaces for the Other within the canon in the future. The 'deviant' changes the definition of the 'normal' as the 'normal' absorbs it, over time.

## XI. FUTURE SCHOLARSHIP

There are numerous opportunities for future scholarship based on the research presented in this introduction, such as addressing the change in the relationship of Croatian cultural consciousness with the category of ‘witch’ over time as an indication of the empowerment status of its women. Attitudes toward female authors have been slow to change over the years. Wachtel discusses an incident in which five female Croatian authors were smeared by the press as “Witches of Rio” in the early 1990s for complaining about censorship. It is important to note the use of the term “witches” and the resulting implied call for a “witch hunt” that both threatened to silence and physically harm the women, one of whom is the now renowned author Dubravka Ugrešić. Zagorka’s choice to write about witch-hunts and to create a protagonist who is an accused witch directly attempted to confront these chauvinist and dictatorial tendencies in Croatia’s cultural consciousness a century earlier, and there is apparently a lot of work yet to be done on that account. In recent years feminist scholars have come to understand the archetype of a ‘witch’ to be a woman who is empowered, and to see a witch-hunt as an attempt by the governing system to control and subdue women’s voices. Zagorka’s *Grička vještica* showed that a woman’s role in Croatian public and political life throughout history was of little consequence in all aspects but one—that of the witch-hunts, which were the only legal proceedings to accept the testimonies of women. This fact explains to an extent the participation of women in the system that is rigged against them and that only offers them a modicum of power in turning against each other. Dubravka Ugrešić herself addressed this topic in her 2008 novel *Baba Jana je*

*snijela jaje*, in which she explores the significance and ramification of folk stories related to the Slavic witch archetype, the Baba Roga.

Historic women's literature itself is still in the process of being unearthed, so to speak, from the confines of the past—but even once we have reclaimed these texts, we need to find an alternate, better-suited critical apparatus with which to evaluate the literary value of these works. In *Nezakonite kćeri Ilirije*<sup>92</sup> Badurina concedes that the lack of high literary value one might assign Zagorka's work is the consequence of the fact that her novels were used as means for disseminating ideologies, and were not 'literary' in the sense of existing as 'l'art pour l'art.' But is there such a thing as 'l'art pour l'art' to begin with, or are some works more easily recognizable as 'propaganda' because they differ more drastically from established social norms? And assuming that this may be the case at times, would not the work of any minority always necessarily stand out and against the 'establishment,' and thus be scrutinized with suspicion and hesitation? Zagorka's critics and contemporaries disapproved of her work for various reasons, going so far as to attempt to whitewash history and accuse her of false scholarship<sup>93</sup> by stating that Zagreb was never involved in any witch hunts; historian Josip Horvat had to publicly come out in support of her research and historical facts that she had used. In future scholarship I hope that we will hone our tools for examining women's work—art takes many forms and if it is born of experience it is time for us to recognize that the divergent experiences of men and women in both the private and public sphere do affect its expression, albeit not its value.

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<sup>92</sup> *Illegitimate Daughters of Illyria: Croatian Literature and Ideology in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> ct.*

<sup>93</sup> Zagorka's life and her continued cultural engagement against all obstacles draws another parallel to the problems we face as Westerners in the twenty-first century, where news outlets with political agendas seek to discredit the voices of those journalists and public personae whose ideologies they wish to suppress.

If cultural valorization can be linked to positions of power, it would be interesting to note the various group allegiances that worked to either preserve or disrupt the status quo. In her article “Queer Dolac: Zagorkin stan na ružičastoj mapi grada,”<sup>94</sup> Sandra Prlenda ties two Croatian “minority subcultures” together in a quest to leave their mark and create a space for themselves in the politicized public sphere. Prlenda focuses on Zagorka’s later years, and her vulnerability as a single, old woman who was both exploited and persecuted at various times by those in power, and who was left with little to live on at the end of her life. Part of the arrangement that Zagorka made in order to continue living in her apartment was to advertise for roommates, Leo Car and Nino Smolčić, who were gay and forced to hide their sexual orientation for fear of persecution. Prlenda writes that both Zagorka and the tenants were socially vulnerable, and that “the societal repression pushed them to the margins of society and the gray area of morality”<sup>95</sup> (95). Further research into the mutually beneficial relationship of various cultural minorities could better inform our understanding of these and other societal power relations.

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<sup>94</sup> “Queer Dolac: Zagorka’s apartment on the pink map of the city.”

<sup>95</sup> “Društvena represija dovela ih je na društvenu marginu i gurnula prema sivoj zoni moralnosti”

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*The Witch of Grič: Contessa Nera*

*Translated by Lejla Marijam*

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## Chapter 1: The Phantom at the Stone Gate

Grič is fast asleep. The moon has spread its silver cape over the church towers and city towers, the castles of the nobility and the small houses of the Grič burghers. The street noises have died down, and the iron shutters covering the windows seem to be bolted shut. No signs of anyone awake. Even the barking of the dogs has ceased. In the midst of the stillness something rustles on the wall under the Mesnička Tower – the ivy slowly parts, a small iron gate opens in the wall and a strange, tall shadow appears, wrapped from head to toe in a long, dark cloak. The apparition looks around, vanishes suddenly, but in a moment reappears leading another dark-cloaked phantom by the hand, and behind it comes a third, a fourth, a fifth... a tenth. They are blindfolded so they move uncertainly, holding each other's hands.

The procession encircles the bushes and the trees, now walking around one, then another bush; now it winds again around the shrubbery, around the large-canopied trees; it walks around the walled garden and is lost again in the thicket. As if out of curiosity, the moon climbs higher above the horizon, trying to decipher the nature of the secretive procession that slithers through the thicket and brush like a great black snake and continues its mysterious patrol in the dead of the night. But now it seems that the curious light of the moon has frightened the procession – it quickly descends toward Mesnička Street, moving away from the light of the moon, and disappearing silently into the darkness.

Determined steps rattle along Opatička Street, echoing unpleasantly in the quiet, sleepy night.

A tall, stout man walks down the street. He carries his hat in his hand. The moonlight spills over his white wig. He seems convinced of the invulnerability of his own powerful body, and therefore moves calmly along the deserted street.

He stops at a one-story nobleman's house and shakes the iron window shutters.

"Mr. Council Commissioner, is that you?," a fearful male voice speaks from behind the shutters.

"It's me! Are you ready?"

The shutters opened to reveal a long, skinny, bearded face, with colorless grey eyes that the moonlight made even paler. His wide, tightened mouth opened timidly, and emitted a hoarse whisper into the night:

"Are we really meant to go, Mr. Dvojković?"

"Well, why else would I come? You wanted to go to Manduševac, so come!" – said the Council Commissioner decisively. The shutters closed. A few moments later, the garden gates opened. Out came the Municipal Court Judge in a long black cape, wearing yellow boots and a mink hat.

"All right, let's go, Mr. Krajačić!" said the Council Commissioner as he approached the Judge, who in comparison with the Counsel's enormous figure looked as if his body hadn't even reached a normal height.

They walk straight down Plebanuška Street and past the king's palace; they come out on Dverce and descended towards Harmica. The Judge stops suddenly and says to his companion:

"There, look, there's no one at Manduševac!"

"The witches only come around midnight!"

"No, no, I'm not going any further!"

“All right, lets sit here and wait!”

The Judge sits down on a stump under a broad oak tree.

“I feel sick *magnifice*<sup>96</sup>! I’m suddenly sick to my stomach!”

“Surely you’re not afraid? Wait a bit longer, the witches are sure to come.”

“And why should I expose myself to such danger?”

“And what about me? Isn’t the situation just as dangerous for me?”

“ You are the Council Commissioner, you only prosecute the hags, but I’m the one, *magnifice*, who sentences them to burn at the stake! They’d love to cook me for the devil’s supper!”

“I see you’re afraid of them!”

“And who isn’t afraid of them? You’re afraid too, you’re just pretending to be amused!”

“So, Mr. Judge, you’d like to catch the witches at their meetings, and you don’t even have the courage to watch them gather from afar.”

“Yes, that’s precisely it! I admit it was a foolish idea. But tell me, what do you think about sending our policemen there to catch them?”

“You can try! No one alive will dare to come out and face the witches at night.

Everyone’s afraid that the witches will snatch them up, carry them up into the air and tear them to pieces. This has already happened several times,” said the Council Commissioner, scowling at the Judge.

“Come, *magnifice!*” whispered the Judge, pulling the lawyer by his sleeve. “Let’s go! Isn’t this making your skin crawl?”

“By Jove, I wouldn’t let those hags curse me or tear me apart! But you are impatient; you’d like me to bring to your court a hundred witches at once. Where should I find them all?”

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<sup>96</sup> *Magnifice!* (lat.) – Nobleman, any person of high rank and importance.

“It’s just that I always imagined it would be best if we could catch them at one of their gatherings. Then we could catch the lot of them and be closer to eradicating them altogether!”

“My dear mister Judge, others would like to be free of them as well. Last year a German city burned a hundred hags, and they’re still managing to wreak havoc among the inhabitants. They simply won’t be destroyed!”

The Judge wipes the sweat off his forehead and mutters:

“Stop! Let’s go!”

“All right!” replies the Council Commissioner, and starts walking down the street. “At least now you see,” he continues, “that your premise is impossible. Just trust in me, I’ll bring them to you even if I have to do it one by one, which is of course safer.”

They pass the Medveščak Creek, cross the bridge and climb to the Stone Gate, discussing the city business.

“Quiet!” the Judge starts and grabs hold of the lawyer’s sleeve.

“Don’t you see that?”

“Something white at the Stone Gate?”

“In the name of God – a ghost!”

“It’s a woman! She looks like she has risen from the grave!”

“Just be quiet, let’s see what she’s doing.”

“Now she’s moving, she’s going to the witches’ tower!”

“Must be a witch!”

The Judge twitches, reaches his hand to his chest, takes out a white object suspended on a black ribbon around his neck, and whispers while staring at the white shadow:

“You can’t hurt me, I’m carrying an amulet!”

“Can you see her wandering around the tower?” Dvojković whispers.

“She must be trying to help the witches imprisoned in the tower.”

“You can’t get in from this side.”

“A witch can crawl in through the slightest crack. She’ll enter the tower through the bars, you’ll see!”

“Be quiet! Let’s get down behind this bush!”

They both hide under the thick bush and stare at the Stone Gate, as the moon shines its bright light over the dark walls of the square tower leaning against the Stone Gate.

A woman dressed in white creeps under the bars of the lowest window. She walks as if her feet weren’t touching the ground, looking around and bending at every turn. She slinks close to the tower, climbs on the rocks that lie on the ground and leans against the wall. For some time she stands there as if she were listening to something, and then she grabs the wall with her hands, as if she were about to climb up to the bars.

“Saint Marko, help us!” murmurs the Judge.

“She raised her arms!” the Council Commissioner adds quietly.

“She’s about to enter the tower through the bars, there, look!”

“Stop shaking, mister Judge, don’t you see witches daily in court?”

“That’s different!”

A hushed cry shivers through the air, followed by a deep, painful sigh.

“For God’s sake, what is that?”

“That’s a witch’s voice from the tower.”

“Look, she’s answering her! She must have sent the devil into the tower through the bars, and now they’re arranging her escape. She must be the witches’ leader.”



“She’s climbing down off the rock,” murmurs Dvojković.

“If only she’d leave soon” the Judge mutters, shaking with fear.

The white shadow looks around again, and slowly creeps away from the tower and disappears in the darkness in front of the Stone Gate. Dvojković jumps out from behind the bush, but the Judge grabs hold of the skirt of his trench coat.

“For God’s sake, hide!”

“Can’t you see she’s gone?”

“But what if she’s hiding under the Gate?”

“Stay put, I’ll go see if she’s still there!”

The Judge holds on to the lawyer’s coat even tighter.

“Let me go! I’ll check where she went, I’ll come right back. I have an amulet on me, too!”

“No, it’s not safe!”

It was pitch black under the roof of the Gate, only a small oil lamp was flickering in front of the painting of the Holy Mother of God, shedding faint beams of light on the ground. At a glance, Dvojković noticed something unusually shiny.

He bends down and feels something thin, cold, and heavy. He steps up to the light.

“A woman’s belt!”

He hides the precious object under his coat and quickly descends towards the Judge, who was still crouching behind the bush.

“Help me up, *magnifice!* I’m stone cold with fear! I thought you’d never come back.”

“She disappeared! Let’s go home, I’ve had enough of this chase!” says Dvojković.

Suddenly something flies out from under the Stone Gate and lands in front of them.

Scared witless, Krajačić squeezes against Dvojković.

“Now what’s wrong with you?”

An enormous black cat stops before them and stares with its bright eyes at the Judge, who was shaking violently with fear and crossing himself.

“A black cat” says Dvojković.

“*Magnifice*, it’s the devil!” whispers the Judge. “He always transforms into a black cat. The witch noticed us, she ran away and now she has sent the devil after us.”

“*Apage, satanas*<sup>97</sup>!” Dvojković tells the cat.

“Mister Council, he’ll jump straight at us!”

The Judge crossed himself again, and the cat ran away along the wall.

“Had I not crossed myself, we’d be lost!”

“Come on, let’s go home now” Dvojković says, disregarding his warnings.

“It’s not pleasant to go through the Stone Gate at this hour. I never heard of hags meeting at this Gate. Until now, they’ve only gathered at the Mesnička Gate.”

“But we just saw one with our own eyes, which means that they’ve already made this place their home as well.”

They entered through the Stone Gate. Their eyes had grown used to the moonlight, so they felt it was completely dark under the Stone Gate. Krajačić looked around in fright. Fearing that another black cat might jump out at him from some dark corner, he rushed forward and exhaled with relief as soon as he found himself in front of the chapel of Sv. Ursula.

Dvojković escorted him to Opatička Street, and then headed to his palace in Plebanuška Street. The moon sank in the west.

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<sup>97</sup> *Apage, satanas!* (Greek) – Away with you, devil!

\* \* \*

Dawn awoke from her slumber, spread out her white arms and embraced Grič, waking its burghers, shopkeepers, craftsmen, serfs and servants.

The iron shutters on the windows swung open, front doors creaked, and hardworking people appeared on the streets. In Mesnička Street the butchers cut their meat to prepare it for their customers. Vegetable peddlers dragged their baskets filled with greens, pushed their little carts packed with produce up to Sv. Marko's Square. Burgher women from Velika Ves carried buckets full of milk, and women with eggs and fowl, fruit and mushrooms came from Kaptol. The cacophony that engulfed Marko's square was pierced by the sharp cries of quarrelsome peddlers.

The baker Andrija Palčič was tidying his shop under the Stone Gate. He fed burghers with fresh bread and satisfied their thirst with the grape brandy that people seek out even at the crack of dawn.

Palčič stood at the door and waited for the Kaptol vendors coming to Grič to stop by for a drink. His small, stout body and large, baldhead filled the doorframe. He stretched and began looking around, winking at passersby to tempt them into his shop.

"Why are you staring at people?" a thin, hoarse voice croaked behind him. The honorable Palčič jerked away from the threshold with fear, and a tall, skinny woman carrying a broom appeared at the door. She had a pointy face and thin nose, lips tightly shut and restless, sly eyes, and she turned to Palčič to furiously attack him:

"Don't you have work to do? Ms. Cindek will fill her window up to the top with bread any moment now, and you're standing here counting the carriages from Kaptol!"

Then she turned her back to her husband, swung her broom in front of the threshold, and started to sweep the dust in front of the small shop.

She stopped sweeping and looked up several times at the adjacent shop bearing the sign: “Bara Cindek, Bread Maker.” Then she muttered and added to her husband: “Hmm, the button-seller Adam is coming, and Ms. Cindek is still not here!”

Palčić peeked out of the shop and looked up toward Opatička Street to see a tall, well-built young man with a twirled blonde mustache. The young man greeted the Palčićs and opened his shop.

“Well, she’s sure to come now too!” Ms. Palčić said hatefully, pushing the trash into the corner. Suddenly, she stopped sweeping and bent down, scared as if witnessing an awful sight, and screamed:

“Saint Barbara, help us!”

Palčić poked his baldhead through the door of the shop and looked at his wife.

“What the hell are you screaming about?!”

“All the saints of God, help!” Mrs. Palčić continued to twist/writhe and grab hold of her head.

The people passing in the street stopped and bent down toward Mrs. Palčić.

The button-seller Adam was the first to come to her aid to see what had happened.

“What’s wrong with you? Why are you screaming?” Palčić kept asking.

“Look down” Mrs. Palčić replied, twisting as if something had bit her.

The button vendor looked at the ground and noticed a handkerchief, from under which protruded a small, purple baby’s foot. He removed the handkerchief and, to everyone’s horror, a small baby, dead and stiff, was revealed.

Its little hands were clenched as if it were fighting someone for its barely awakened life. People crowded under the Stone Gate to hear what had happened and to see the dead baby.

Soon enough the whole city learned the news. Even the Council Commissioner came to the Stone Gate. The people let him pass. The Council approached the baby and looked at it. It was dead, with no trace of violence. The lawyer thought it probable that the baby had died of hunger, having been cast away by an unwed mother. When he had covered the corpse with the handkerchief, he turned to the people and shouted:

“Hear my words, you honest burgher folk! Today has dawned a sad and tragic day for our city! We have found a baby that has been stolen and killed by the witches!”

“To the stake with them!” shouted several voices.

“Calm down! We carry in our hands the sword of justice, and with it we keep watch over you! We will ensure that every witch is punished according to the law!”

“Long live the Council Commissioner ! Long live the Judge!”

“Thank you, dear burghers, but we are only doing our duty to you and to the law. And we will continue to do so even more conscientiously from now on. Never before have we had this opportunity to clearly see a victim of a witch’s evil deeds. This little human being, whom God created so he can live and be joyful like the rest of us, was killed by these accursed women and used as an offering to the devil, so that they can perform their spells, fly in the air and cast storms, hail, lightning, disease and death down on us!”

Cries of horror and hatred ensued from a hundred mouths.

“My honest burghers, I’ll tell you who committed this crime!”

Cries of astonishment and curiosity were heard from the crowd, and their fearful, scared and vengeful looks were fixed on the Council Commissioner, who continued:

“Last night, Mr. City Judge and I went to Manduševac to look for witches. You’re astonished that we dared go there! We acted out of a sense of duty; we put our lives in jeopardy because we decided to free our city from these horrible servants of the Devil. Mark my words, my burghers! The devil notified the witches of our intentions to wait for them at Manduševac, and they never appeared. But as we were returning to our homes, we nevertheless saw one at the Stone Gate.”

The crowd grew quiet. Surprise mixed with fear paralyzed their speech.

“She was dressed in white. She was sneaking around the tower, flailing her arms about, and when she completed her unholy business she disappeared under the Stone Gate. We went after her, but she had vanished. Then we returned home, without noticing anything in the darkness under the Gate. She must have killed the baby before we saw her. I promise you I will find her, because I already know how to track her down. She is among us somewhere, in our city, and we must find her.”

Something heavy settled on the crowd, as if the roof of the Stone Gate had collapsed on them. The eyes of the men alighted more and more often on the women who were squeezed next to them in the crowd, and it was as if in each glance lurked the suspicion: “Are you the accursed woman?”

The women’s voices that had been heard along with the men’s seemed to have lost their force/strength and assurance. Something materialized among like a quiet, secret fear. They lifted their eyes unwittingly to the gray tower behind the walls of which were kept several of their neighbors and acquaintances. All of a sudden, the women dashed at the Council Commissioner , shouting as if possessed. Each one wanted to show as clearly as possible how upset she was about the heinous acts of the unknown witches.

“I stand here before you honest folks and I promise you that you will see her burn, even if it costs me my life!” the Council Commissioner concluded, as he walked down Stone street to Mark’s square.

The crowd cheered him on and followed after him, after the city Judge and the officers who carried the corpse to the magistrate court.

Palčić stayed in front of his shop and angrily watched the people run to Sv. Marko’s Square, while his brandy remained untouched on the table.

The button-seller Adam had no customers either, so he came out of his shop to talk to his neighbor Bara Cindek who leaned against the doorframe, looking at handsome Adam with a smile on her face. Her beautiful body, her ease of movement, clean uniform and healthy, rosy cheeks were the best advertisement for her shop.

“What do you think, Adam, who is the witch that the Council Commissioner saw?” Palčić called from his shop, just to interrupt the widow’s conversation with the button vendor.

“Who knows! He’ll find her, for sure.”

“The fastest way to catch her would be to find out the identity of the murdered child’s mother!” Ms. Cindek chimed in.

“What will they discover?” Mrs. Palčić snapped. “If its own mother sold it to the witch, she will surely not talk about her child’s disappearance. And there are women who have no husbands, but they have lovers, and when they find themselves in need of hiding a child they simply sell it to a witch!” Mrs. Palčić uttered these words bitingly, with a peculiar inflection.

“That is also possible,” said Ms. Cindek calmly, swaying at the door with her hands on her hips. “And how do the witches use a child for witchcraft?” she asked.

“The whole world knows this, only you are ignorant!” Mrs. Palčić meanly retorted, clenching her wide, thin lips.

“My dear neighbor, there are many more things of which you’re ignorant in this world!” Ms. Cindek responded, gazing at Sv. Ursula’s chapel.

“Look, here comes Countess Ratkay’s servant to get bread,” said Ms. Cindek to the button vendor. “That’s a valuable account, they buy a lot of bread and they pay well!”

The servant approached wearing a clean surka<sup>98</sup> and carrying a large basket and greeted the bread maker.

“How is her highness the Countess?” she asked.

“Thank you for inquiring/asking, she’s doing well. The Countess would like for you to visit us and announce yourself in such a way that Countess Nera won’t recognize it’s you.”

“Yes, I already know the reason! Tomorrow is the Countess’s birthday! I will bake a fine loaf for her, fit for a king.”

“Hm! The whole world is talking of nothing else but the baby that was found, and Ms. Cindek is praising her bread and talking about the Countess. She’s shouting, just so we can hear her making a sale!” Mrs. Palčić was furiously surveying the table on which lay about thirty untouched loaves of bread.

One could hear the clamor of the crowd that had gathered on Sv. Marko’s Square in front of the magistrate’s chamber to hear any news about the witch of the Stone Gate. Every policeman, every witness that came out of the magistrate court was showered with questioning looks and cries of the curious crowd.

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<sup>98</sup> Short coat with trim, a symbol of the Illyrian movement and allegiance to the Croatian people.



Presently an odd young man appeared at the door. He proudly lifted his brazen, shaved face with a hooknose high in the air as he smugly shoved a stack of documents into the pocket of his too-tight surka, the sleeves of which were too short on him.

The crowd rushed toward him, shouting joyfully:

“Here comes Mikica Smernjak! What do the gentlemen say? What’s the name of the witch? Tell us everything you know!”

He did not say a word, but only began more urgently to hide his documents in his pocket. Everyone’s gaze turned toward them and their hands reached out to grab them, as if the people were sure that the answers to their questions lay in those letters. His attitude confirmed their hopes.

“Tell us, Mikica, what are they going to do?” the people shouted.

“I can’t tell you that! You know that the gentlemen trust me, and that I always know everything but must keep quiet.”

“Did they find the witch already?”

“Don’t be foolish, it’s not that easy!”

“Well, tell us what you know?”

Mikica patted the pocket in which he had placed the files, and said:

“Everything will be revealed, just trust the Council Commissioner. If it weren’t for him, witches would be flung around us in broad daylight like crows. I’m an authority on this subject! I’ve studied the books and I can judge who has any worth. The Council Commissioner is our salvation!”

There was a sudden disturbance in the crowd. People excitedly pushed forward, while the policemen tried to chase away the urchins who were crowding around the entrance to the

courthouse. A young Capuchin<sup>99</sup> showed up at the square, his handsome and noble features pale and serious, and a whisper spread among the crowd:

“Father Smole!”

“The witch confessor!”

He attracted more attention than usual today. The people crowded around him and listened as if he were a prophet. The number of listeners kept growing, and business in the city gradually died down.

The shopkeepers and their assistants, the masons and their apprentices, housewives and maids, sellers and peddlers left their work and hurried to the court building. The usual racket quieted down at the marketplace in front of Sv. Marko’s church; even the vegetable sellers stopped their bickering and stood in small groups, tallying the white witch sightings and guessing at her fate. The gentlemen went their separate ways. Dvojković came out of the Judge’s room, crossed the hall and entered his chamber. He sat down on a tall chair covered in black leather, and turned to the policeman who submissively stood by the door awaiting his orders:

“No one is to enter this room! Do you understand? No one, no matter who it is!”

“Yes, your grace!”

The policemen understood his master’s wishes, and immediately shut the window to block out the sound of the crowd in front of the courthouse, then he left the room and carefully closed the door behind him.

Dvojković looked around, went to the door and bolted it, returned to his desk, took a key out of his pocket, and opened a drawer. Before him lay a red belt made of heavy silk, embroidered with gold and embellished with diamonds.

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<sup>99</sup> A friar in the Order of Capuchin Friars Minor of the Catholic Church; an offshoot of the Franciscans. Typically dressed in brown hooded cloaks.

Dvojković took it out of the drawer, connected the two ends and scrutinized the waist circumference; he grabbed a tape measure out of his pocket, the same kind that the fabric merchants use, and started to measure its length.

When he had completed the task, he put the tape measure back into his pocket, picked up the belt and muttered:

“So, it’s a rich woman or an aristocrat! Either way, she won’t escape me!”

A smile flitted across his sly, shaved face.

Someone knocked at the door.

“It’s me, Krajačić!”

Dvojković threw the belt back in the drawer, placed several files on top of it, quickly locked his desk, went to the door, opened it and said:

“I locked the door so I could work in peace. I’m sure many curious citizens will be coming around today.”

“Forgive me, but I had to disturb you. The crowd outside refuses to disperse, the agitation is growing.”

“I’ll go and calm them down.”

In a few moments the Council Commissioner showed up in front of the courthouse and waved to the student Mikica Smernjak, who was still telling people stories about the witches.

“Stop it already, let the people go home!” said Dvojković.

“Well, they won’t leave!” Mikica responded, turning toward the crowd and shouting:

“Long live commissioner council Dvojković! All hail Dvojković!”

The crowd loudly took up the cry. Dvojković waved his arm. The crowd fell silent, and he said:

“Go calmly to your homes, honorable burghers! Justice watches over you, and I promise you that I will not rest until the white witch of the Stone Gate is punished. But you must help me!”

After Dvojković repeated his request, the crowd finally started dispersing, but all over town business did not return to its usual flow for the rest of the day.

For the hundredth time people discussed the white witch by the Stone Gate...

## Chapter 2: The Witch's Daughter

The following afternoon Father Smole sat in deep contemplation in a little room of the Capuchin monastery.

A profound peace permeated the monastery, but one could feel the heavy pressure of the summer heat.

The young Capuchin leaned his head on his hands and appeared lost in thought. His gentle blue eyes looked saddened, and his noble features were hardened by a heavy burden that led him far away from this little room. At that moment the door opened and a village girl came in. She held two boys by the hands.

“You’re obviously lost, you’re not allowed to come in here!” Father Smole said to her.

“I am not lost, holy Father,” the girl responded. “I sneaked in here through the church.”

“Do you wish to make a confession?”

Instead of answering, the girl burst into tears, as did her brothers.

The Capuchin incredulously and carefully looked them over, and when he saw that he did not know any of them he asked:

“Why are you crying, children? What do you want from me?”

“Mercy, holy Father, mercy! Have mercy on us poor wretches, we beg you on our knees!”

The girl knelt down, and the boys immediately followed.

“How can I help you? What can I do?”

“Our mother is in the tower!”

The Capuchin understood the petitioners and his face grew more serious, his eyebrows gathered together, his eyes lit up.

“Don’t let them burn our mother, Father, we beg of you on our knees!”

“I don’t have that much power. My only power is in hearing your mother’s confession and guiding her to the stake.”

“Oh, God!” both boys screamed when they heard the word ‘stake.’

“Are they going to burn her?” the girl asked, petrified.

“When have any of the tower prisoners returned to their home?”

“I know, I know, but perhaps none of them came to you to beg for mercy!”

Father Smole turned his face away from the girl, furrowed his brows, tightened his lips and sighed deeply. The room was quiet, only the sound of the boys’ breathing could be heard. The young village girl knelt before the Capuchin in her white clothing, bareheaded, with her hair smoothly combed.

“What’s your mother’s name?” Smole asked.

“Margareta Kušenka.”

“She will be sentenced tomorrow!”

The three voices cried and wailed again, and the Capuchin lowered his head.

“Look at these two children, Father! They are so small that they can’t work. What will they do without a mother? Father, just say a word to the magistrate gentlemen!”

“My dear, I have no say there.”

“But you have a say at church, how can you not have a say at court?”

The Capuchin did not answer. His brow furrowed, his eyes flashed, and he looked out the window as if he were gathering all the force of his convictions. He finally asked:

“Who are the main witnesses that testified against your mother?”

The girl opened her eyes wide, glanced at the Capuchin with fear and answered quietly:

“My father and – me. Yes, me!”

Father Smole remained calm, as if her words did not surprise him.

“And who forced you to make this accusation?”

“My father! When they took mother to the tower, my father said to me: ‘Jelica, if you don’t support everything I say about your mother in court, just you wait! You will never walk again!’”

“Go home and tell your father to come see me, but don’t speak about this to anyone!”

Tears ran down the girl’s face.

“Father won’t come! He ran away!”

“Ran away? Why? Where?”

“When they brought our mother to the tower and then took his testimony, he went away with our neighbor’s wife.”

“So!, the Capuchin said to himself. “And do you truly believe your mother is a witch?”

“I – I don’t think she is! It’s true, we always had enough of everything, although my father did not work much. “There was always bread in the house, fowl in the yard. My mother wore a silk kerchief on her head on Sundays and dressed us nicely, but I still don’t believe that she was a witch! She worked. Witches don’t need to work, and they never lack for anything.”

The Capuchin went to the door, but the boys jumped in front of him and threw themselves at his feet, and a cry full of desperate fear of losing their mother tore from their fragile little chests. They did not rationally understand all the misery that awaited them, but they felt it in their little hearts and they sensed it in their little children’s heads that they lay in front of

the Capuchin's feet, drenching them with tears. Their little hearts were convinced that he could help them, so they kept shouting with their exhausted little voices:

“Have mercy, have mercy!”

Father Smole bent down and lifted the children off the floor. His face went pale, his eyes misty. He approached the bed, took his hat and as if he had made a decision, he said:

“Come! We're going to see the Judge!”

The boys wiped their tears, Jelica wiped her face with her apron, and the three of them left the room and followed the Capuchin full of hope in his help. Father Smole led them through the church out onto the street.

The burghers who met them on their way stopped and watched them pass. The tearful little village boys and the girl with a face swollen from constant weeping drew everyone's attention. When they arrived in front of the City Hall, Father Smole whispered to the girl:

“Tell the Judge everything you just told me.”

The Capuchin walked into the building first and knocked at the door to the room where Judge Krajačić sat at his desk. He was writing a deposition about seeing a witch by the Stone Gate yesterday and finding a murdered child. His dark, colorless eyes turned to the Capuchin, who entered the room first, followed by Jelica and her brothers. The three of them looked shyly around the room and cautiously stepped toward the Judge.

“This is Margareta Kušenka's daughter!, the Capuchin said.

“ I know her, I took her testimony once before!,” Krajačić replied, then turned to the girl and asked her sternly:

“So, do you have any additional evidence to show against your mother? She already admitted herself to being a witch!”



“No, your highness, she is not a witch!”

“What? Do you recant your testimony?,” Krajačić roared.

“I testified falsely, my father forced me to do it! Everything I said was a lie!”

“Who instructed you to recant?”

“My heart, your grace, because I lied, my father threatened me!”

“Be quiet! Not a word from you! She already admitted to being a witch, and that is enough for us.”

The girl fell silent and looked at the Capuchin with fear in her eyes, as if asking him: Could it be true that she admitted to being a witch?

“Away with you!” said the Judge.

Father Smole silently watched the scene. When they had removed the village girl with her brothers, the Judge looked sternly at the Capuchin and told him:

“It is your duty to get a confession out of these hags before they die, but you have no right to plead their case. This is improper in a godly man and a friar, and it is not to be repeated! Please don’t interfere with the law’s orders and the business of the city court.”

“Forgive me, magnifice,” the Capuchin replied calmly, “I accompanied the girl in a purely church-related matter.”

“In that case please state your purpose?”

“The girl fought with her mother, and it is my conviction that I am not to release anyone from sin if they are not reconciled with everyone. So I beg you to allow the mother and daughter to meet!”

“I will not allow a meeting! You can take her to the guardhouse, but she can go no further. You are welcome to conduct the reconciliation there. I will give you written permission,

but I will not allow the mother and daughter to speak. The old witch might still teach the girl some sorcery to save herself or to harm us.”

The Capuchin hurried after his wards. They were standing in front of the City Hall, crying.

“Come with me!,” the Capuchin called to them, and, when they got to the street, he whispered to the girl:

“Now we will find out whether your mother really admitted to being a witch or not. If she did, we can’t save her!”

“I heard that the women are so dreadfully tortured in the tower that they are forced to admit to the things they did not do!,” the girl said.

They walked to the big tower on which the sundial showed five o’clock in the afternoon. Father Smole entered the door of the guardhouse, which leaned against a tall four-cornered tower by the Stone Gate. A guard sat in the low-ceilinged room, while the other two were fast asleep.

The Capuchin showed the guard Krajačić’s permit allowing him to speak with the witch Kušenka, explaining briefly that he needed to conduct reconciliation between mother and daughter.

The guard ordered the girl to wait with the boys, and they disappeared behind a door that led further into the tower.

The girl got up and approached the door. She listened at the door and then opened it.

A dark, dismal room gaped before her. Hammers, axes and pliers hung on the wall, and a dirty table with remains of food and little round chairs surrounding it sat in the middle. Three straw beds lay on the floor, along with a couple of goblets and broken plates. A heavy iron door was closed shut in the corner of the room, and the girl immediately realized that this was the

door through which Father Smole and the guard had gone into the tower. She tried to open it but the door was locked. She was about to go back, when the sound of heavy sighs shook her body. It sounded as if someone was moaning.

Shivers went down Jelica's spine. Those horrible sounds came from nearby, as if someone was with her in the room. She looked around, but the room was empty.

Suddenly someone moaned again, and then she made out a woman's voice.

The girl followed the voice, which seemed to come out of the wall in the corner of the room. In the darkness she noticed black bars in the wall of the tower, close to the floor. Behind the bars everything was black as a grave, but when she bent down to look, she noticed a light. It flickered in the depths like a candle in a tomb, and from this tomb the sound of sighs, muffled crying and quiet moaning rose upwards.

All her limbs shivered, and a cry of horror escaped her breast.

"Who is up there?," she heard the Capuchin's voice from the depths.

"It's me, Jelica!," the girl replied as her voice quivered, encouraged to hear that the Capuchin down there.

"Run away from there before the guard comes!," he shouted.

"Jelica, my child!," a woman's voice cried weakly.

"Mommy!," the girl screamed from behind the bars. "Mommy, I didn't accuse you, father made me. I didn't want to do it!" The girl's screams reached her brothers in the other room, and the boys came in to join her. Seeing her stare through the bars, they threw themselves down on the floor and started to push their little heads through the bars like puppies in an attempt to see their mother.

“Mommy, where are you? Mama, give me your hand!,” the older boy begged through his tears.

“Mommy, I’m being a good boy, I’m not climbing the pear tree anymore!,” the younger boy said innocently.

“Give me your hand too, mommy! Why don’t you come? Where are you?”

All three of them waited tensely for the answer, but all they could hear from those horrible depths was sobbing, so heartbreaking and rough as if it were coming from a torn, dying breasts.

“Don’t cry, mommy, they won’t burn you!,” the girl started to comfort her mother. “Well be together again.”

“Ah, never, never again, my children! We will never see each other again! Let them burn me, just make it quick, the sooner the better! I can’t bear to live any longer! Father Smole, what are they waiting for?”

Those words, uttered in a hoarse, broken voice, rose up like ghosts from the depths of the tomb to the bars, where three horrified faces stared and waited for at least a word of comfort.

“Mommy, don’t say such things... Mama, come closer!,” the girl begged through her tears. “Come, look at us!”

“I can’t, my darlings!”

“Why not, mommy?”

“I can’t, they crushed my legs!”

“Christ, Mother of God!,” the girl screamed and threw herself to the floor. The boys did not understand what their mother said, but they sensed that it was something terrible and they started to cry.

“Pray, children, that my suffering may end as soon as possible!” their mother said from the depths. “They should burn me today, right now!”

“I wish I could see you one last time, mother!” Jelica cried.

“Don’t wish that, daughter! I look horrible, I am no longer a human being!”

A tired guard, still half-asleep, showed up at the door to the guardhouse and started to shout and curse so loudly as to rattle the little windows.

“Damned urchins, who let you come in here?,” he said.

At that moment Jelica felt two heavy arms grab her by the shoulders and push her into the first room, toward the door to the guardhouse.

She hadn’t yet fully come to her senses when the bony guard showed up at the entrance to the guardhouse carrying a terrified boy in each hand. He held them by the nape of the neck like kittens, and with one swing threw them onto the street so that their little heads knocked against the hard pavement/stones. Jelica couldn’t move at first. She felt as if her body had turned to stone.

Jelica then noticed that Father Smole had left the tower together with the guard. She could see a woman rinsing her brothers’ blood that flowed from their noses and heads and colored the street red. But she could not move. Pale and stiff she stood in front of the guardhouse staring at the bloody stains on the street.

“You heartless people!,” Ms. Cindek yelled at the guards. “What did these children do to you? Is it their fault their mother is in the tower?”

“Don’t, neighbor!,” Adam whispered. “It’s not a good idea to get on these bullies’ bad side.”

Ms. Palčić watched Ms. Cindek take care of the witch's children from her shop, but she did not approach them.

“That one will be a witch, too” Ms. Palčić said with hatred in her voice, and looking at Jelica, she yelled: “Like mother, like daughter!”

Jelica felt the blood rise to her cheeks, and that something was forcing her to throw herself at this woman and strangle her, but at that moment Father Smole stood before her.

“You should not have gone there! That's the window that the inquisitors use to watch the witches at night.”

“At least I heard my mother's voice! Did she really admit to being a witch, Father Smole?”

“Yes! Now Jelica, take the children and go home. There's nothing else we can do.”

“This morning they kicked us out of the yard, because we are witch's children...”

“I wanted to help you, but you see that I can't!” Father Smole said. “I'm poor, I have no money! Try to find a job, maybe you'll come across some good people somewhere.”

Jelica said nothing as she listened to her brothers cry. With misty eyes she watched Father Smole walk toward Marko's square, as if he couldn't stand to listen to the crying of the boys who were standing on the street.

As if regaining consciousness, she went up to the children, took them by the hands and led them down Marko's square straight to the Capuchin's church. She did not kneel to pray, but she dragged the children through the small door that led from the church into the courtyard. The courtyard was deserted, and in the middle there was a wide well, surrounded by a low stone fence. Jelica released her grip on her brothers' hands and told them softly:

“Stay here, the Capuchin will have mercy on you! He will not desert you.”

She left the shocked children in front of the church, ran toward the well and started climbing the fence.

The children subconsciously understood what their sister planned to do, and they ran to her screaming and grabbed hold of her dress. At the last moment, Jelica managed to push the older boy away so that he tumbled down the fence, while the younger held tightly to her skirts. She could not push him away and the little boy tumbled down into the well with her. At the sound of the boy's shocked screams Capuchins and monastery servants ran to the well from all directions. When they realized that living beings were drowning in the well, they quickly grabbed the bucket and a daring servant climbed in and had himself lowered into the well. In a short time, they pulled the girl up. She was unconscious, but the little brother had stopped breathing. The Capuchins tried to revive him in vain. Finally, Father Smole arrived.

When he saw what had happened, he covered his face in his hands. The Capuchins looked at him in surprise and asked him to explain what had happened.

“Her mother is a witch, she will be judged tomorrow,” Father Smole said to the custos.<sup>100</sup>  
“Let her stay with us until tomorrow.”

“What are you thinking? A witch's daughter under our sacred roof! That can't be! Who knows whether she's a witch, too, in which case she might bring some misfortune upon us. A righteous person doesn't leap to his death. It's your fault that this happened here, and remember: after the evening prayer she must not be inside these walls.”

The custos ordered everyone to keep quiet about the event, and left the yard. Father Smole looked around helplessly as they carried the dead boy and the devastated girl to the servants' quarters in the basement.

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<sup>100</sup> Religious superior in the Franciscan Order.

He started to walk forward hesitantly, like a man who ventures into the dark without knowing where he is going or where he will end up.

In front of the monastery he looked around as if he were seeking help from the passersby, but they went on their way without compassion or understanding for the sorrow that pressed upon his soul.

Then his gaze fell on the castle that peered from behind a tall wall, just at the corner of Grič, north of the Zrinjski palace.

A glimmer of hope reflected on his face. He walked toward the castle. His steps were slow at first, tentative, but soon he quickened his pace and in a few moments he was already at the gate that led to Countess Ratkay's castle, the 'Red castle.' When Father Smole closed the gate behind him, he found himself in a sweetly scented flower garden. In the middle of this garden stood a castle covered in roses. If two little towers and the roof had not been rising into the sky, one might think the castle was made out of red roses and not stone. Because of these roses, which no one else in town had, the burghers called Countess Ratkay's castle the 'Red castle.'

Six steps led into the building. On each side of the stairway there was a marble balustrade covered in roses.

The Capuchin went straight to the stairway to enter the building, but he had barely taken a step when he heard a determined, yet sweet female voice:

"Father, Father!"

The Capuchin turned around. His face lit up.

A girl stood before him, young and beautiful, dressed in a pink gown. Her pretty oval face with its fine, resolute little nose was smiling at him affectionately, and her big eyes, black as



night and deep as the universe, watched him intently. Her hair was a curious ashen color, and the thick locks that fluttered across her forehead and her temples were reflected in the blackness of her eyes so dramatically, that the Capuchin almost forgot what he had come there to do.

“My deepest respect, Countess!” he bowed.

“You wanted to escape me and run into the house, but you didn’t make it!” the Countess said cheerfully. “We haven’t seen you since the day before yesterday, and I’ve been waiting eagerly for you to come! Tell me – is it true that they found a child at the Stone Gate yesterday and that the witches committed the deed?”

“That’s what the city Judge and the Council Commissioner say.”

“And what do you say? Come and tell me about it, Father Smole! You won’t be reading for Grandmamma today anyway. She went out visiting!”

“Visiting?”

“That surprises you, doesn’t it?”

“The Countess has never left the house as long as I’ve known her!”

“It’s been a full ten years since she went out, not even to church, just to avoid seeing the world, and today, as you see, she left the castle in a fully decked-out coach to see baroness Skerlec.”

The Capuchin gave the girl a meaningful look.

“I know what you’re thinking now! You’re right! I suspect the same!”

A veil of sadness fell over the Capuchin’s face.

“You look as if you’d be sad to see me married off, Father Smole?”

“You are still very young and you have not gotten to know people well enough, and it would be a misfortune for you to marry before you learn more about the world.”

“You’ve got that right! That’s precisely why I won’t be leaving my Grandmamma’s cozy nest anytime soon.”

“But still, one day you will need to build a nest of your own.”

“Must I? Nera doesn’t have to do anything she doesn’t want to do. Come into the gazebo, Father Smole, and tell me what you know about yesterday’s events. Grandmamma won’t be back soon.”

“I didn’t come here today to see your Grandmamma anyway; I came to see you. I’d like to speak with you in private, so that we can’t be overheard.”

“That sounds very serious, Father! I have a bad feeling about this, but I’m not afraid. Lets go inside.”

The girl climbed the steps into the castle, went up to the first floor and showed the Capuchin into the library.

“This is the place where serious matters should be discussed,” she said, then sat down and offered the Capuchin a chair.

He was quiet for a moment, as if collecting his thoughts, and then he looked the Contessa in the eyes and started speaking timidly and anxiously.

“I won’t beat around the bush. This concerns a great tragedy, Contessa. A village girl, a bright and hard-working person, has lost both her mother and father in an unfortunate incident. The girl was left alone with two little brothers, and her misfortune drove her to her death. She tried to drown herself and was just recently pulled out of the water. She survived, but her younger brother, who had grabbed her skirts as she threw herself into the well, drowned. She is left without a roof over her head or anything to eat, and I fear she will resort to suicide again.”

“Couldn’t I help her? Tell me, could I help?”

“I worry that this will cause you much trouble.” “I am seriously upset with you for speaking to me in such a way, and as punishment I will take care of the girl and her brother as long as I live.”

“No, that is not necessary! I only ask you to let her stay with you for a few days, until she can find work.”

“Isn’t there work to be found at the castle? I’ll keep her in my employ!”

The Capuchin was confused.

“Father, Father, you are keeping something from me!” said the Contessa, horrified.

“No, of course not! It’s just that I feel uncomfortable to burden you with this matter, and trust me, there’s no need to keep the girl.”

“But why shouldn’t I keep her? Is that what you’re afraid of? Just tell me where she is, and I’ll send for her.”

The Capuchin was confounded again and at first unable to answer, but he composed himself and said boldly:

“She is with us, at the monastery. She came to the church and threw herself into our well.”

“My God, now I understand your distress. She can’t stay with you! But what was she thinking, throwing herself into the Capuchins’ well?”

“She used to come to the church...”

The Capuchin choked on his words, and he glanced at the Contessa to see if she would notice his lie, but she didn’t realize what caused his confusion.

“Now I understand!,” she said. “You were her confessor. You should have told me that to begin with! Go home,” she continued, “and have them bring the girl immediately down to the

estate, and I will visit her tomorrow. Send a servant here to get some dry clothes for the poor girl, she is sure to need them.”

Father Smole got up. The Contessa held out her hand, and he bent down to kiss it.

“What are you thinking?” she said, and pulled her hand away.

“Contessa, I am very grateful to you! You have lifted a great burden off my soul.”

“In that case I am doubly pleased to be able to help the poor girl.”

The Capuchin gave the Contessa a warm, faithful look, said goodbye and returned to his home. He found Jelica already completely conscious. She was lying in bed and staring at the ceiling.

The older boy was sitting next to her and crying quietly over his unfortunate brother, who lay dead on the table. The capuchin did not want to discuss the girl’s act with her. Even the old gardener who was in the room with them did not mention it, because the custos had forbidden this.

The capuchin sent the gardener to Countess Ratkay’s castle to bring the dresses for Jelica, and when they were left alone he approached the bed and said:

“The gardener will take you and your brother to Countess Ratkay’s tomorrow.”

“Does she know that I am a witch’s daughter?” the girl asked quietly.

“She does not know! The Contessa will come to the estate tomorrow and speak with you. If she asks about your parents, tell her that both of them died of illness.”

“What if they ask me who I am and where I’m from?”

“Tell them you’re from Zagorje, and that you came here looking for some relatives, but found out that they had all died. Tell her your name is Jelica Kozjak. It will be best for you to keep to your room and speak to no one.”

“And what should I do next?”

“In a couple of days you will leave for Zagorje. No one will recognize you there, so you will be able to find work. You can’t stay here. Even if the Contessa asks you to stay, tell her you must return to your hometown because you can’t live here, where everything is foreign to you.”

“I will do as you say, Father!,” the girl sighed.

“Keep one more thing in mind: don’t tell anyone, other than the Contessa, that you know me. No one must know about what happened today. The two of you will now go straight to the estate, and as for this poor child – the Capuchin looked at the little dead body – don’t worry about him. I’ll burry him myself.”

“He is no longer in need of anything!”

In an hour the girl was sitting with her brother in a small, clean room on Countess Ratkay’s estate, wearing a clean, dry dress. A hot meal steamed in front of them. The boy was exhausted and gulped down his food, while Jelica stared in front of herself with fixed eyes in which flickered the desperate question of the future.

### Chapter 3: Shadows of the Past

A thin twilight fog already settled on Grič when, a week later, the young Capuchin found himself in front of the “Red Castle’s” gate again. Incredulous, he watched a multitude of people gather on the street in front of the castle and peek curiously through the windows. Father Smole could not figure out why so many people stood in front of the castle, so he hurried to open the gate and look inside.

He noticed Contessa Nera on the steps. Her beautiful body was wrapped in white attire, cut high and covered in lace. A bouquet of white roses rested on her breast as fresh as if it had only just blossomed. A white parta<sup>101</sup> inlaid with pearls shone on her curled tresses like a crown.

The Capuchin lingered at the door and looked up at Nera. He almost did not recognize her at first glance. He was lost in the gaze and greeted her only when the Contessa addressed him:

“Come, come, Father! You’re not even in yet, and you’re already overcome with excitement!”

“People are standing outside peering through your windows, and you’re dressed so smartly?”

“The people are right to gather. It’s a miracle! Grandmamma got out of her shell and reopened her heart and her ballrooms to society.”

“What had happened to her?”

“You don’t know? I thought she confided in you more than me.”

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<sup>101</sup> A bejeweled headpiece for unmarried girls worn as a symbol of their virtue.

“You’re mistaken. I only read to the Countess, or we discuss religion, but she never opened up about her feelings about society.”

“And she never told you why she secluded herself from the world?”

“Trust me, she did not!”

“I believe she was more bitter about my mother’s death than my father’s. He was killed in battle, and everyone who has a family member on active duty is prepared for that fate. But when mother died of heartbreak after father’s death, Grandmamma took me in and closed us off from the world in the “Red Castle” as if it were a convent. And do you know what I think?”

“I think my poor mother must have committed suicide, which broke Grandmamma’s spirit.”

“The thought often crossed my mind.”

“Let’s let these things go! Today is no day to speak of such sad matters. So, you had no idea why Grandmamma surprised me with a new gown today and told me that we will be receiving guests this evening. I have a feeling that Grandmamma wishes to marry me to my cousin, baron Skerlec. It can be no other; Ivo is the only man I know.”

“And what do you have to say about that?”

“Just that you have to stay with us today! I need to have my friends close by today.”

“Aren’t your friends Ženka and Terka here?”

“Don’t waste your breath. They are my peers, I rejoice and dilly-dally with them, but you are my friend whom I can speak with about my feelings.”

A wonderful happiness lit up Capuchin’s face.

“I will come later, Contessa! There is something else I need to take care of first.”

“All right, but hurry!”

Father Smole said goodbye and left, and Nera looked once more after him before going up to the first floor, which was abuzz with the chatter of the guests.

Nera lingered at the door, behind the curtain, and watched the colorful *mélange* she had never seen before. She could not believe that this was truly her grandmother’s castle. Ballrooms whose doors were not open for over ten years were now aflame, lit up by hundreds of candles that were reflected in grand crystal mirrors and that glimmered in the jewels and the shimmering silks of the guests.

For ten years no one sat on those expensive chairs and chaises, and no dainty feet in silk shoes walked over these rugs. It has been ten years since the envious eyes of the ladies took in the golden chandeliers on the ceilings, the vases and the statues on the tables, and the beautiful paintings on tapestry-covered walls.

Not until now, that she saw these ballrooms aglow, did Nera realize that her grandmother was truly rich. But she also noticed that she knew how to decorate her rooms in better taste than those of aunt Skerlec and her friends, Terka Nadaždi and Ženka Drašković.

With great joy Nera noticed how her grandmother’s white head stood out wonderfully in her black silk dress, and how the great diamond necklace that hung on her neck sparkled against black silk like a chain of stars. She couldn’t take her eyes off her Grandmamma, and lovingly watched her for a while. Then, from her hiding place, she started to observe the guests.

She only knew her aunt, Baroness Skerlec, who wrapped her small body tightly in maroon silk, and decorated her head with a white wig. Her husband, Baron Skerlec, was heavy and much taller than his wife, and was dressed in ceremonial Croatian garb. His tall and skinny son, Baron Ivica, followed his lead in choice of wardrobe. The fat Count Petar Oršić filled out a



great recliner and faithfully sat next to Countess Ratkay, constantly fanning himself and looking around as if afraid that he could at any moment be forced to get up.

Countess Julija Čikulini, a tall blonde in a navy dress with a long train, was talking with the young officer Malakoczy and watching her two guests with scorn—a tall, dark featured Terka Nadaždi and a short brunette Ženka Drašković, who chatted with well-built twins, the Counts Erdody. Nera's gaze halted at the Baroness Orehoczy, whom everyone called Baroness Linčika. She constantly circulated and mingled with the guests, coming up to every man, and she had something to say to everyone.

In vain she jumped up and down, laughed and moved like a little girl. Her swollen gray face, fat protruding lips and wrinkled forehead mocked her forced youthful gestures.

Nera laughed unwittingly at the red ribbons in her powdered hair, and the red rouge on her bulging, wilted cheeks.

Among the gentlemen she particularly noticed Priest Pulingar, with his fresh face and smiling eyes that covetously landed on the city ladies' décolletages, and the City Captain Ladislav Sale, who stood next to the Priest in a silk uniform, constantly stroking his shaved face and slyly checking out the ladies.

She noticed them whispering and smirking whenever a beautiful, young woman would pass by. At last Nera remembered that she needed to finally enter the salon to meet the newly arrived and incoming guests.

She opened the dark silk curtain and entered the room.

Everyone looked at her soft silhouette, which, framed by the dark curtain, was even more striking. She headed straight to the Countess. As she walked she glanced at Priest Pulingar and the city notary. She noticed that Sale shoved the Priest a bit and whispered as she passed by, but

she walked on proudly, bent toward the Countess and touched her grandmother's head to her own. Two heads—like visions of two lives! One was just illuminated by the light of Spring, and the other covered in snow, but one could easily tell that the old lady's hair was just as voluminous as Nera's beautiful locks in her youth, and that her body was once as voluptuous and beautiful as that of her granddaughter.

The gentlemen admired the beautiful granddaughter of the striking old lady, and the ladies thought enviously how Nera will in due time inherit the diamond necklace that glimmered around the old lady's neck. As Nera was talking to the Countess, Count Čikulini entered the room and said:

“From the dining room balcony I saw a flame rise up behind Mesnička Street. I don't know what that could be.”

Everyone raised their heads, and the faster ones ran to the balcony to see for themselves. Even Count Petar Oršić got up and followed the others to the dining room.

Long tables were set for dinner, and the iron balcony stretched down the length of the room. Ladies and gentlemen pushed onto the balcony and against the windows. It was dark outside. The moon had not risen yet, and a breeze brought in fresh air from the vineyard that spread from the “Red Castle” all the way to Mesnička Street.

On the hillside above Mesnička Gate several flame tongues shone, and a thick smoke was rising toward the sky.

“It's a fire!” the gentlemen screamed in fear.

“There are no houses there!” Count Petar Oršić was trying to clam them.

“The wind is blowing and can carry the sparks to the city!” Countess Ratkay noted. “This is surely a house fire!”

“Have no fear,” Priest Pulingar said, “It’s not a fire! It’s a stake!”

“A stake?” the Countess repeated in a low voice.

“Yes, they’re burning a witch today!” notary Sale informed the guests.

“Is she young or old?” several gentlemen asked instantaneously.

“Neither young nor too old!” city notary Sale explained... “She was married, but her husband left her because he noticed that she was a witch.”

“What’s this woman’s name?” Nera asked.

“Margareta Kušenka.”

“Does she have any children?” the ladies asked.

“Of course, she does!”

At that moment they heard a horrible, stifled and mutilated scream of a living being. Everyone grew quiet. Countess Ratkay stared mutely at the bright flames, which swallowed the sounds of a terrible death.

Her face grew pale, her mouth contracted and horror and dread showed in her paralyzed eyes. Nera noticed her Grandmamma grow paler, close her eyes and stumble. She hurried to her side. Broken down, the Countess grabbed hold of her hands and swooned onto her lap. The girl held her Grandmamma with the youthful strength of her body and laid her onto the recliner.

The ladies gathered around the Countess. When they saw how old lady’s paleness, her eyes closed, showing no sign of life, they started screaming, sighing and crying for doctor Stiller who stood by the window.

The doctor rushed to the Countess, felt her pulse and asked the guests to give her some space.

Frightened, the guests left the dining room while the doctor started to rub the Countess' temples and veins with vinegar water.

"Dear God, what happened to her?" Nera asked, shaken. "I never saw her in such a state before."

"Old age and unusual excitement that she's not used to!" the doctor said. "But have no fear, it's just a light fainting spell."

The doctor soon managed to get the old lady to come to.

"You had a fainting spell, your highness!" said Stiller to the Countess when she recovered.

"Where are my guests?"

"In the other rooms!"

"Please tell them to stay, the weakness has passed."

"Yes, yes, I completely agree! I'll inform them of your wishes," the doctor said, and left.

Nera stayed alone with the Countess.

"Grandmamma, why were you so shaken at the sight of that fire?" she asked gently.

"What about you, Nera? Didn't you get a chill in your bones when you heard that awful scream? It was as if I felt the flames catch her hair, fry her living flesh and her live, boiling blood!"

The Countess shook so violently as if her whole body felt the heat of the flames.

"Grandmamma, for goodness sake's!" Nera screamed, "Calm down please come down for the sake of your Nera." The Countess lowered her eyes and looked at the girl that knelt before her: as young as dew, as beautiful as spring.

She opened her arms to embrace her and she started to cry.

“My dear Nera, if you only knew!”

“What, Grandmamma? Tell me, you’ll feel better if you do.”

But the Countess winced, looked straight ahead and said determinedly:

“No, no! Never! I never told you anything. Do you understand me – I never said anything to you. Keep quiet, my child, and don’t ask. Don’t ever ask me anything about this again.

Straighten my hair and go see Count Petar, have him come over and take me to the ballroom. We must wait for dinner until all of the guests have arrived.”

Nera straightened her Grandmamma’s gray hairs and entered the ballroom. The guests were gathered around the Council Commissioner, who had just arrived, and was telling them about the white witch from the Stone Gate and the baby that was found, all the while eyeing the women carefully.

He was just wrapping up his story when Nera walked into the room and whispered into Count Oršić’s ear. The Council Commissioner Dvojković noticed Nera and whispered to Priest Pulingar:

“Come, introduce me to the beautiful hostess. I wasn’t so lucky as to see her up close yet.”

As they were talking, Countess Oršić entered the ballroom and the Council Commissioner was not able to approach Nera.

“Is Count Oršić a friend of the family?” Dvojković asked the priest.

“Yes, they were childhood friends,” the Priest replied, winking with his malicious eyes.

“Is that so? Now I must greet the Countess and introduce Count Vojkffy.”

Nera and Countesses Terka and Ženka sat down in the little piano room. Young guests gathered around them, including the Erdody twins, Milan and Mark, and the young Baron Skerlec. They discussed music and attempted to play one tune, then the next.

The party was instantaneously interrupted when Father Smole appeared. Nera got up to warmly greet him, and offered him a seat.

“And now tell us, Father, what kept you so long?” Nera said.

Capuchin excused himself based on his religious duties.

“Just be frank with us: you led the witch to the stake!” someone behind Nera’s back entered the conversation. She turned around, but just at that moment the Council Commissioner approached her and bowed:

“I am the Council Commissioner, the noble Dvojković!”

Nera apparently disliked his attitude, as she was not overly friendly.

“Who was the burned witch?” Countess Terka asked curiously.

“Some village woman from Trnje, Margareta Kušenka,” Dvojković responded. “A deadly witch! But I almost forgot, your highness,” Dvojković turned to Nera. “I brought along an unknown guest. I already introduced him to the Countess and asked for forgiveness for daring to bring him along. He came to visit me unexpectedly, and since I didn't want to deprive myself of the joy of spending several hours at the Countess’ house, I brought him along. May I introduce him?”

“Please do! If Grandmamma was happy to have him, he will be my welcomed guest as well!”

Dvojković took a few steps back to a place where a man stood, dressed in a French tailored suit of dark blue velvet, his face closely shaved, with sharp manly features and glistening grey eyes.

His head was covered with a fine white wig combed in the latest fashion.

“Count Matija Vojkffy,” Dvojković introduced him.

The new acquaintance bowed very elegantly to Nera and said in a pleasant tone of voice:

“May I hope for mercy for an intruder?”

“If you intend to amuse us, then you shall have it,” smiled Nera, “isn’t that right, Terka?”

The girls agreed and greeted the count. His elegant demeanor, his smooth movements, his interesting face and endearing gaze captivated both Countesses.

The new guest also attracted Baroness Lina, so she skipped into the ballroom with Judge Krajačić by her side. She immediately engaged in conversation and asked the Council Commissioner:

“Please, I’m keenly interested to know how you will find out the identity of the white witch that you saw at the Stone Gate?”

“For now that shall remain my secret!”

“And tell me, what kinds of witches are these? I have never seen one, and I am extremely interested.”

Dvojković obviously found that question pleasant and started to discuss it in detail.

“These are women, Baroness, who out of their greed for money and a comfortable lifestyle sold their souls to the devil. Between such a witch and the devil a pact is formed through which he gives her the money to live well, and the power to harm anyone in anyway she likes.”

“So, a witch can harm whomever she wishes?”

“Of course! She can destroy her neighbors’ crops, she can maim her enemy, and she can inject hatred or love.”

“Oh, that is horrible, Mister Council,” the spinster sighed.

“And are there witches in high society?” Nera asked and looked at the ironically made up Baroness Lina.

“Of course! Germany just recently burned many noblewomen and feudal ladies.”

“They don’t need the Devil for money!” Nera said.

“They become witches to do evil. An evil woman must commit evil deeds, for otherwise she cannot live,” the Council Commissioner said earnestly.

“Was their beauty perhaps seen as enchantment?” Nera asked.

The Council Commissioner gave Nera the stink eye, and the city Judge Krajačić turned bright red.

“Hasn’t it ever happened that they accidentally burned an innocent woman?” Nera asked innocently.

The Judge’s face turned crimson, and others now noticed that he was fuming with anger.

“The court is justice, and justice cannot be wrong! No witch was ever burned without having admitted to her crimes.”

“Are there only female witches?” Nera asked further.

“Often a man will engage in that criminal work. In France and Germany several men have been burned at the stake; even some boys that served the devil.”

“And what about here?”

“Our men fear God, so they won’t be tempted, but woman is weak. Why didn’t the devil tempt Adam? Because he was strong and resilient. The husband of the witch that we burned



today is proof of that. She wanted to lure him into joining her satanic circle, but he refused and surrendered her to the court while contrarily, her daughter was an easy target.”

“Is her daughter a witch too?” Baroness Lina asked.

“Her own mother admitted to that a day before she died.

“She confessed? When?” Smole asked.

“Right after you took her confession. The girl went to see Krajačić and revoked her statement... and Mister Judge thought that was suspicious. Didn't the daughter revoke her statement out of fear that her mother would avenge herself and betray her? So he put the old woman on the torture device once more and she admitted that her daughter was also a witch.”

The Dominican felt as if the whole room spun around him with all its guests, and he closed his eyes for a moment.

“And will they burn the girl now as well?” Nera asked.

“Certainly, if the investigation proves her guilt. But the young which disappeared from the village. Obviously the other witches hid her since it would be a shame for them to lose such a masterful witch. Some villagers say she knows how to make hail.”

“I can't understand how people could make hail?” Nera said.

“This is the power they get from the devil” the City Judge replied.

“When the devil joins in with an evil woman, she gets great powers. That's why the devil is everywhere and has created whole societies of witches so that he can take over the world.”

Nera turned to face Krajačić and said, determinedly:

“I can't understand that!”

The Countess appeared at the door behind her. Seeing her granddaughter in a heated discussion, she stopped.

“You are too intelligent not to understand this!” the city Judge replied.

“Quite the contrary I’m not, because my mind will not allow me to believe it!”

Dvojković glanced at Nera suspiciously, blood shot up to the city Judge’s face, Father Smole grew pale and Baron Skerlec began to leaf through a random book in agitation.

No one present knew what to say. Everyone waited for the Council Commissioner’s response, but Count Vojkffy gestured him to stay quiet.

“Contessa,” Krajačić replied instead of the attorney, “Don’t you believe in laws?”

“Mister Dvojković,” Countess Ratkay’s strong voice sounded from the door, “I believe that I invited you and the Judge to come here and join the festivities, not to engage in juridical conversations with a child who grew up sheltered by the four walls of this castle, and who knows nothing of your laws.”

Nera opened her mouth as if to correct the Countess, but at that moment her eyes met her grandmother’s, and she said nothing.

“I beg your forgiveness, my lady,” the attorney said, getting up from his chair, “but Contessa asked such astonishingly insightful questions, that I almost forgot I was speaking to a young lady rather than an attorney.”

The Countess’ appearance and every word she spoke induced deep respect in all who knew her.

The guests collectively affirmed her words.

The Council Commissioner approached the Countess, bowed humbly and said deferentially:

“I admit my sin, and I beg your ladyship for forgiveness! It is indeed my fault! Contessa, I beg your forgiveness as well!”

“I will now reveal the secret of this conversation,” Vojkffy said, rising from his chair. “Mr. Council did not know how else to make Contessa lay her beautiful eyes on him, so he started the discussion.”

“It appears that the Count is right,” Father Smole smiled.

“He’s absolutely right,” the Council Commissioner concurred. “May I kiss your hand, Contessa, as a sign of my humility?”

“Isn’t this a heist? Now he desires a prize,” Vojkffy said disapprovingly.

Nera smiled and extended her hand to Dvojković, saying:

“As penance I’ll require some lessons on the law.”

“It’ll be my pleasure to repent,” Dvojković replied gallantly.

“There you have it,” Vojkffy noted, “It’s no use being a saint, when sinners are rewarded.”

Everyone was in a good mood again. The Countess gratefully watched her granddaughter, and color returned to the priest’s cheeks.

Baron Skerlec was also in a good mood, so he started to consider ways for the young people to be entertained after dinner. The gray-haired castle steward announced to the Countess that dinner was served, and she called for the guests to go to the dining room. As they were leaving the ballroom, Vojkffy whispered to the Council Commissioner:

“What the hell are you doing, putting this emblem of beauty in an difficult position with your deliberations!”

Father Smole heard the remark, and when the Count noticed that, he hurried ahead.

“From this day on, Krajačić will be your enemy,” Father Smole whispered to Nera as he passed her.

“Is that such a great misfortune?”

She laughed and accepted Baron Skerlec’s hand when he offered to accompany her to the table. At dinner no one spared a thought on the incident, and even Nera’s attention was focused on her Grandmamma. Only an hour ago the old lady lay in this room unconscious, and Nera was concerned that even a glance at the balcony would distress her. She was wrong. Grandmamma was cheerful, she even kept laughing at Count Petar. Every time a servant would offer him a plate, he would respond gravely:

“Forgive me, your Countess, I shouldn’t eat anymore, I might get fat!”

At the same time, however, his plate was piled high with a miraculous assortment of dishes.

Only Father Smole was restless, dejected and contemplative. He felt defeated by what he heard the Council Commissioner say about Kušenka. He never imagined that the mother would accuse her daughter, whom he placed on Countess Ratkay’s estate. As the Capuchin struggled with dark thoughts, the other guests were in a state of expectation.

Countess Ratkay’s invitation came as a surprise, and they were convinced that something momentous would occur. Some were convinced that Contessa Nera would get engaged to Skerlec, the only man ever to visit Countess’ home, others held that the invitation was the old Countess’ passing whim, and the rest thought it was Nera’s debutante ball. Even she did not know what her grandmother had in mind for today.

After dinner the guests got up from their tables, disappointed at not learning why they were invited.

The younger crowd milled around the gardens, where Nera was surrounded by a flock of young men. She enjoyed the merry and boisterous revelry. But this did not last long, because soon enough Father Smole approached them and told Contessa that the Countess requested that she join her for a moment in the ballroom upstairs.

Nera said goodbye to the gentlemen.

“Contessa,” the Capuchin called to her.

“Yes, dear Father?” she asked as she turned toward him.

“Tomorrow morning I must speak with you about a very important matter.”

“Alright, come see me.”

“And now allow me to retire.”

“No, I will not allow that!”

Capuchin looked at her helplessly. He could not go against her wishes.

“All right, I’ll stay!”

“I noticed that you’ve been agitated and restless.”

“I’m not used to company,” the Capuchin apologized.

Nera left him on the stairs, and hurried to meet her grandmother.

“Listen, child,” the Countess whispered. “Ivo keeps looking for you, he wants to take you out for some garden games. You know he’s not pushy and he won’t lead you away from the others, but he would like to start some entertainment.”

“Oh, so would I!,” Nera smiled. “I will look for Mr. Cousin right now and pull his ears! Why didn’t he just ask me directly?”

Nera searched through all the rooms, but she did not find her cousin so she headed to the garden. At the bottom of the stairs she found Count Vojkffy. He was admiring the flowers on the balustrade, which were bathed in moonlight.

“What are you doing here all alone, Count?”

“I’m enjoying your garden, Contessa! I love flowers, and I’m interested in various species. What is that bush whose leaves glisten in the moonlight as if they’re made of silver? When I came to this garden today, I was struck by the beauty of the flowers,” he said.

“Nursing the flowers gives me a singular pleasure.”

“You’re doing a marvelous job of it!”

They exited into a small alley of flowering bushes. As they admired the yellow roses, Nera plucked a bloom and pinned it in her hair.

“It seems to me that everything you touch with your hands or your gaze comes to life.”

“How would you know?”

The moon lit up his face and Nera noticed a flame in his eyes.

“I can feel it.”

“Society dictates that one should compliment the hostess whenever one gets a chance.”

“No, Contessa. I didn’t come here to shower you with compliments. I came here to see you from up close.”

“And up until now you only saw me from a distance?” she laughed, but the smile vanished quickly from her lips. The Count stood in front of her as if riveted, leaning forward and looking at her as if willing his gaze to penetrate the depths of her soul. His eyes shone with a passion that she never saw in anyone else’s eye.

As he stared at her, he whispered in a strange tone of voice:

“I was watching you from afar, but I was closer to you than you ever knew!”

The intensity of his words made it impossible for the girl to laugh them off.

“I forced my way in here, making the Council Commissioner to take me along just so I could see you in person, and hear to you speak.”

“Do the gentlemen always lie this way to the ladies?”

“Contessa, your words force me to explain myself further! Don’t you ride out to Sljeme every day? Haven’t you ever been to the St. Žaver woods with your stableman to read? Didn’t you ride out to Sljeme one day, and your horse got spooked on your way back? A passerby caught him by the reigns, but you rode on.”

“Yes, all these things are true! You were the man who halted my horse eight days ago in the dark?”

“Yes, Contessa!”

“How come you saw me at St. Žaver ’s, and I never noticed you?”

“Because I always waited for you in a hide-out, just so I can see you. Now you can be sure that this is not the first time I see you, and that you did me wrong!”

“I admit it, Count. How can I make it right for you?”

“Allow me to visit with you sometime.”

“I’m happy to agree to that,” Nera said with a smile, and offered him her hand.

The Count greedily held the small, white hand, like a hungry beast would an offered crumb, and kissed it passionately and almost madly, as if he was going to crush it with his lips.

Nera winced and looked with strange fear at the Count, who seemed to have forgotten everything in a frenzy induced by the touch of her hand.

“Hon. Count!” Nera warned him.

He lifted his lips from her hand and looked at her with his fiery gaze.

Nera pulled her hand away, and the Count bent his head, as if asking for forgiveness.

They heard fast-approaching footsteps from the distant end of the alley. Through the branches Nera saw the sinewy figure of the young Baron Skerlec.

“Ivo, Ivo!” she called out to her cousin, and Count Vojkffy lifted his head and looked at her reproachfully.

The young Skerlec looked around and started toward Nera. Noticing the Count, he gave an icy bow.

“Why are you wondering around in the garden?,” Nera scolded him firmly. “I’m waiting for you to prepare some sort of a game.”

“May I join you?” the Count asked.

“Absolutely, you must!” Nera asserted. “I hope you didn’t decide to take shots with the old gentlemen instead! Go upstairs and bring the Council Commissioner, Priest Pulingar and Father Smole.”

The Count was not happy to leave, but he hurried to oblige Contessa’s command.

He walked with an elegant, steady gait and Nera had to admit that he was very attractive.

“Do you like the Count?,” Skerlec asked, looking at Nera with his sad blue eyes.

“Do I like him?”

“He has a way with women.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Well, you’re a woman!”

She lifted her head, looked crossly at the Baron and remarked sharply:

“I am – myself!”



“I don’t know what you mean by that.”

“You don’t? Then let me explain. I mean to say that I have my own mind and my own soul, and if you don’t know how I feel, you shouldn’t Judge me based on what you know of others. Do you understand now?”

“I’m sorry, Nera, I didn’t express myself well! I don’t even know what I’m saying anymore!”

“You don’t? Why? Had too much to drink?”

“Nera, please, don’t torture me any further! You promised to give me a reply...”

“First I need to know what it is that you’re asking me?”

“Haven’t I asked you to be my wife?”

“Yes, but I am still not sure whether or not I wish to marry you.”

“Grandmamma would like to know today!”

“Grandmamma would? Hm, Grandmamma is impatient! How can one force a young man to seek an answer like this?”

“Your words sting. Don’t you think that I want to know the truth already? Grandmamma just wanted it to happen today, so she can announce our engagement.”

“An engagement already? She didn’t say a word about that to me.”

“I tried speaking with you for three days in a row now.”

“And yet you didn’t have the courage to face me, hold my hand and ask: ‘Tell me, will you be mine or not?’”

“You’re always scurrying about, busy with one thing or another, you’re always engaged in something else and you run away from me.”

“Well you should come in my way and make me face you! Force me to look into my heart and see whether it beats for you or someone else.”

Such pain was reflected in the Baron’s face and his yearning eyes that Nera came closer to him and said:

“Ivo, give me your hand!”

Hope sprung in the young Baron’s heart and he fell to his knees in front of her. With warm devotion he extended both his hands to her, and she took them and looked sincerely into his eyes:

“Ivo, I will tell you whether or not I will marry you when the time is right! It’s too early today to decide! Tell Grandmamma, too.”

The Baron’s face grew sad again. He kissed both of her hands with a warm, sincere, faithful and shy kiss.

“Nera, Nera!” Terka Nadaždi’s voice resounded as she walked down the alley.

“Here I am!” Nera responded, and joined Contessa Terka.

Baron Skerlec went to see Grandmamma to tell her of Nera’s decision. Terka, a beautiful, olive-complexioned beauty, came up to Nera, held her around the waist and asked in a whisper:

“Nera, do you think there’s a difference between the kiss of one man versus another?”

Nera was surprised by the question, thought about it a bit and replied:

“I think so! As soon as someone kisses your hand you can feel the difference between his kiss and someone else’s.” The girls talked quietly as they walked down the alley.

But nothing came of the games. As soon as Baron Skerlec told Countess Ratkay about his conversation with Nera, she invited all the guests to the dining room where the tables were already laid out with cold cuts and champagne.

When the guests gathered the old Baron Skerlec stood up and everyone looked up at him curiously.

“My sister Countess Ratkay,” said the Baron, “authorized me to say a few words in her name. Obviously you’re surprised to see the Countess leave her years-long hermitage to receive you, noble guests, into her house again. Tomorrow’s day marks the seventeenth year of her favored grandchild Contessa Nera, and at this time the Countess is prepared to leave her solitary life. Her young granddaughter is entering society and the Countess begs of you to receive the beloved child with the good grace and love that she herself is prepared to extend to all the nobles. She also begs forgiveness of her old and new friends for allowing the grief after her lost child and son-in-law to force her to completely withdraw from society. Nera, I wish in the name of your Grandmamma and all of us that your first step into society is crowned with happiness and blessings, and so that you will remember it fondly for the rest of your life, your Grandmamma wishes to present you today with a gift of all of her mobile and immobile possessions!”

The room was quiet as a grave. Nera stood by the window. Everyone looked at her.

Everyone awaited her response. But she just ran to her Grandmamma and fell into her lap. For several moments Grandmamma and granddaughter stood in a silent embrace. Old ladies were wiping their tears, Count Petar lowered his eyes, and when Nera got out from Grandmamma’s embrace the whole room was filled with cries:

“Long live Contessa Nera!”

The young guests swarmed to the girl as if competing to congratulate her on her birthday and her grandmother’s gift.

Skerlec watched her with a melancholy gaze. Nera understood. In the context of this celebration she was supposed to have been pronounced his fiancée as well, but she prevented that from happening.

Vojkffy was the last to approach her and kiss her hand, in silence. The kiss seemed formal, but was as hot as a blaze, and Nera felt it even as she held out her hand to the Capuchin, who congratulated her and simultaneously sought to take his leave.

“Tomorrow before noon!” Nera whispered to the Capuchin as he was leaving, and he departed.

Vojkffy stayed close to Nera the whole evening, shooting hot glances her way the entire time.

Baron Skerlec noticed that and was so upset that he began to look at the Count with derision. Nera entranced all the young men, but Skerlec only had eyes for Vojkffy. The silent duel for the girl was interrupted by Count Petar who, after midnight, got up to leave the castle and let the Countess get some rest, which was a sign for the other guests to retire as well.

Countess Ratkay’s rooms were soon dark and quiet again. The servants blew out the candles and peace reigned again in the whole castle.

Countess Ratkay was getting ready for bed. The maid undid her silver hair and braided it for the night. When she was done, the Countess asked her to fetch Nera because she wished to speak with her again before she retired.

Nera walked into her Grandmamma’s room quietly and cautiously. Her hair was half undone, and it reached down to her knees, while her young body was covered by a pink nightgown.

“How are you doing, Grandmamma? Are you tired?”

“I had already given up the duties of a hostess.”

“But why did you give them up?”

“Because after the death of your parents, I grew to hate society.”

“It’s not their fault that daddy got killed in the war, and it’s not their fault that mother’s life ended so unfortunately.”

“Not their fault?,” the Countess cried so harshly that Nera shivered with fear.

Never before had she seen so much anger and hatred in the eyes of that good woman, and after Grandmamma’s cry she was even more convinced that the death of her mother was veiled with a secret. The Countess quickly regained her composure, and having noticed that Nera got scared, she said to her calmly:

“You’re right, my child! It is not their fault.”

“Isn’t it true, Grandmamma, that my mother threw herself off the tower in Mokrice out of despair for my father?,” Nera asked her with pain in her voice.

“Who told you that?”

“I heard it from Terka.”

The Countess grew pensive, and Nera quietly waited, not wishing to disturb her.

Fresh nighttime breeze reached them through the open window, and they could hear the echo of slow footsteps pacing up-and-down the street.

Nera went to look out the window, but she immediately turned away from it.

“Who is it?,” the Countess asked, and as if not trusting Nera to tell her, she went to see for herself.

The moonlight illuminated Count Voykffy’s French suit and clean-shaven face.

The Countess turned to Nera, looked at her perceptively and said:

“This Count is handsome, but I don't know what kind of a man he is. In my mind I chose someone else for you, but if this man down there is the one you want...”

“I haven't chosen anyone yet!”

“Are you telling the truth?”

“Nothing but the truth! Grandmamma, I will never lie to you.”

“If you truly haven't chosen anyone yet, then I am glad. Perhaps you will still choose Baron Skerlec. My nephew is a good and decent man. He loves you very much.”

“Grandmamma, I expect much more from love.”

“What do you expect?”

“Daring acts, wild struggles, crazy sacrifices, something beautiful, awesome.”

“Do you speak in favor of that man down there?,” the Countess said, pointing at the open window. “Don't you think I noticed the way he looks at you?”

“But, Grandmamma, you don't believe me! I'm not advocating for anyone in particular today.”

“My dear child, do as you wish. I won't try to force anyone on you. You're free to marry whomever you choose, but I would like to share some of my life experiences with you, in case they prove useful in the future. When I was eighteen I had the same ideals as you do now. I wanted a knight who would plow through the earth and take down the sky for me. This crazy dream of mine clouded my heart so that it remained mute and cold to all the tears of my friend Petar Oršić. Then a young Hungarian man came to Zagreb. He told many stories about his heroism, and I believed that he was the man of my dreams. But I was wrong. One night during the first year of our marriage, the serfs stormed our castle, and my heroic knight ran away and left me alone and at their mercy. The serfs, however, were nobler to me and they spared my life.

From that day on I was the unhappiest woman in the whole world. My husband disgusted me and I started regretting losing Petar. He wasn't that eloquent, but he was truly a knight. You see, this is what young people's excessive imagination will lead to."

"Perhaps you are right, Grandmamma, but I'm not asking for my husband to go to battle for me. I just want love to warm me with its flame, and I don't want to marry out of custom."

"You are free to choose both the man and the time of your marriage. I shall only advise you, and you may take my advice or leave it. There is one thing, however, regarding which you may not refuse my advice: you engaged in a conversation today that could have had grave consequences."

"Regarding the witches?"

"Yes, my child. Do not speak of them anymore."

"But tell me, Grandmamma, do you believe that witches can truly make it hail and that the devil grants them this power?"

"I only believe in the evil of man, and in men's corruption."

"You see, Grandmamma, I feel so too," Nera said joyfully.

"But you can't always say what you mean! And then – yes – don't forget what I said to you. The dining room must be moved from the hall with the balcony to the great room in the back that looks out to Sljeme. The old dining room must be permanently closed."

"But why, Grandmamma?"

"Don't ask me this."

"But Grandmamma, am I not old enough to share all your pain and worry with you? You'll see, it will be easier on you to share with me everything that weighs you down."

“No, my child. The past is mine, and the future belongs to you! I don’t want to mix it with the past that was filled with horrors and pain.”

“But then you should forget about the past too, and enjoy my future.”

“That’s what I was hoping to do. But then, all of a sudden, in the moment when I wanted to bury all that happened, I was ambushed by the shadows from the past that disturbed my peace.”

“What if I could disperse those vile shadows, Grandmamma? I would be so happy to do that, Grandmamma! Tell me what haunts you?”

“Nera, no more! Your pleas would find a way to the heart of the deepest cavern. Be quiet and don’t ask anymore. Listen to me. You’re seventeen years old today. I’ve raised you without restraints to allow your young mind to develop freely, in fresh air, not surrounded by people with their malicious and misguided philosophies. Today you are already almost too smart, but still, don’t ask me for the cause of what you saw, or for the reason behind my strange decision about moving the dining room. That room needs to be closed, and that should be enough for you. Understand: when the time comes, I will tell you everything of my own accord... Now go, it’s already late.”

Nera faithfully kissed her grandmother’s hand and went to her room. She sank into the armchair and fell deep into thought. Since she was not allowed to ask, she would at least ponder what her grandmother’s secret might be. She recalled again all of the horror that had shaken up the calm and cool Countess in the dining room. That paralysis, that fear and faintness, the desperate look of an old woman whom she had never before seen too excited or moved – called forth in her the suspicion that the secret she was hiding must be great and awful. And something



unconsciously troubled her soul. As if she felt in advance the horror hidden in the shadows of her grandmother's past.

She was snatched out of those thoughts by the renewed echo of Count Vojkffy 's firm, measured, patient footsteps on the street. Nera listened to them, but she didn't show herself at the window.

## Chapter 4: In a Safe Haven

Nera got up very late. As soon as she opened her eyes, the maid announced that a whole horde of women had come by to wish her a happy birthday and that father Smole was waiting for her in the library.

Nera quickly braided her beautiful hair, put on a new dark blue gown, placed a dark blue *parta* on her head, and driven by curiosity hurried to the library to see what it was that Father Smole had to say to her that was so important. She couldn't help but feel that this important thing had something to do with her grandmother's secret.

"You've waited a long time, Father Smole. I'm sorry – I overslept," she said to the Capuchin as she entered the room.

The young friar looked at the Contessa carefully, and said with a smile on his face:

"You look very good today..."

He always said this when she looked particularly beautiful.

"And you look very bad today! As if you hadn't slept all night."

"Indeed, I did not."

"And what were you doing?"

"I was whipping my conscience."

"You speak so strangely. You haven't done anything wrong, have you?"

"I have, Contessa!"

"I don't believe it."

"And it is you whom I've wronged!"

“I especially don’t believe that. Well, what’s the matter? Why aren’t you speaking? Did something really happen to you?”

“I abused the trust and the kindness that you showered me with.”

“But how?”

“I lied! You know I begged you to take care of that village girl?”

“Jelica Kozjak from Zagorje, who lost her parents?”

“Her name is not Jelica Kozjak, nor is she from Zagorje. This is where the evil lies. That girl is the witch’s daughter... The very one that was burned at the stake yesterday!”

“Jelica Kušenka?”

“Yes, Contessa!”

“And you advocated for her out of mercy?,” she asked, watching the friar carefully. He expected to be berated, so he was surprised by her behavior. He looked the young girl in the eyes and replied, astonished:

“Yes, Contessa!”

“But you were not horrified by the fact that she is a witch's daughter?! You had mercy for that creature?”

“Yes, Contessa. If you will hear me out, I will tell you everything.”

Nera grew quiet, and he told her about meeting the girl and wanting to help the poor thing, in detail, just the way it happened.

“When Dvojković said yesterday that the poor thing is under suspicion of being a witch and that the court is looking for her, it was as if the whole world crashed on top of me. I prayed to God to let me live until I had freed you from the terrible responsibility of keeping that girl under your roof.”

“The girl will continue to stay with me, Father. Don't protest, it won't help. When I want something, that is how it's going to be.”

“No, never. I cannot allow that. Do you understand the peril of your action if you hide a witch who is sought by the court?”

“That village girl is a witch? That is too stupid, too ridiculous.”

“But the court says that she is. They are looking for her, and you're sheltering her. I will send Jelica away, let her go with God's grace, and I shall do it immediately. I was already down at the estate, and I told her to get ready for her journey.”

“No, my dear Father, I will not allow that to happen. You protest in vain. I am the mistress of this house!”

At that moment, someone knocked at the door. The Contessa went to see who it was. Her maid stood in the hallway with a young girl dressed in city clothes, carrying a small bundle. Nera pulled her into the room. It was Jelica, dressed as a burgher woman.

The Friar jumped off his chair and went toward her.

“Why did you come here? Didn't I tell you not to move before nightfall?”

“I had to get out of there. Wherever I turned I'd hear that Kušenka admitted under torture to her daughter being a witch. All the servants were talking about it and I couldn't listen to it anymore, I just couldn't!”

“How could you come here in broad daylight? What if someone recognized you?,” the Capuchin scolded her.

“Who would recognize me? Who knows me?”

“Why are you here?!” the Capuchin said angrily. He was uncomfortable that the girl had come to the Countess' house.

“I have to see the Contessa once more.”

Father Smole looked at Nera as if to say: You’ve cast a spell this one as well!

Nera looked at Jelica’s comely, pale and suffering face for a moment, and then said decisively:

“Lets go see the Countess!”

Father Smole could not protest. Nera looked at him commandingly and he followed without saying a word.

They found the Countess sitting on the chaise reading a book. When she saw them come in, she quickly shoved the book under the chaise cushion. Nera noticed her attempt to hide it. She was overcome with curiosity: what kind of book could this be, that the Countess felt it needed to be hidden from view? But she had no time to think about that. When the Capuchin greeted the Countess, Nera approached her with the village girl and came straight to the point:

“Grandmamma, may I allow this girl to stay with us? She is all alone in the world, and they just burned her mother at the stake yesterday.”

The Countess’ face twisted. The silent terror that Nera noticed in it yesterday quivered again in her grandmother’s eyes. Nera exchanged a glance with the Capuchin. They found the Countess’ behavior odd, and the village girl thought that she horrified the Countess so she burst into tears.

Her crying seemed to bring the Countess to her senses.

“You’re the daughter of the woman they burned?” she asked the girl, trying to conceal the trembling of her voice.

“Yes, Grandmamma,” the Contessa answered in her place. “Isn’t that a terrible pain to endure to lose a mother at the stake and to be rejected by the whole world?”

“Take her in, let her stay!,” the Countess said, with difficulty.

“But they’ve accused her of being a witch, too!” the Capuchin warned.

“No matter! Let her stay!” the old Countess said passionately, not heeding the Capuchin’s words. But as soon as she had said this, she arose and left abruptly, almost as if fleeing to her bedroom.

“Don’t cry!” Nera comforted the witch’s daughter. “Go to the other room there and wait. Don’t cry, the maid must not see your tears.”

When the village girl had left the room, Nera approached the Capuchin.

She became lost in thought. The memories of yesterday’s events came back to her. She kept repeating her grandmother’s words, trying to find their true meaning. All of a sudden, her gaze fell on the chaise where the red spine of a book peeked beneath the cushion. She went toward it, sat down and took it in her hands. At that instant the Capuchin jumped toward her and grabbed hold of the book, as if he intended to snatch it from her.

“What? You know about this book, and you haven’t even looked at it? Why do you want to take it from me?”

Father Smole blushed, and did not answer, and Nera quickly opened the book. The first page bore a Latin title in black ink:

‘Cautio Criminalis.’

Right after the title she read a line in German:

‘The voice of one man against the burning of witches.’

“Father, you knew about what was in this book?”

“Why did you do this, Contessa? The Countess would not be pleased to know that you had seen this book.”

“But why?”

“Because it’s a forbidden book. Whoever reads it is punished by excommunication from the Church.”

“And you brought it to Grandmamma and read it with her?! And Count Petar was with you, and you closed the door so that I wouldn’t hear anything.”

“I see that I can no longer keep secrets from you.”

“And you should not keep anything from me,” said the girl, putting the book back where she found it. “I am no longer a child. If you only knew what I care about, what I think and what I do? Nobody knows this about me. I will tell you about it, but only if you will be honest with me.”

She got up from the chaise and came up close to him, looked at him sweetly and offered him her beautiful white hand.

“Will you be my only friend, my only confidant, father Smole?”

For a few moments the young Capuchin silently took in the devoted smile that lingered on her face. Then he took hold of the hand she offered, and said:

“I never wished for anything more than that in my whole life.”

His words were warm, and his face shone with secret joy.

Then the Countess opened the door. Nera noticed she her eyes were teary, which surprised her. She had never before seen her grandmother cry. The Countess’ gaze stopped at the divan, where the red book rested. Nera immediately understood why the Countess had returned.

“I’ll go look after our ward,” Nera said, and left the Countess alone with the Capuchin.

That day around noon numerous carriages raced through Sv. Marko’s square, halting at the “Red Castle.” Ladies in their rustling silks and gentlemen in their brilliant Croatian uniforms and their rich French suits made of silk and velvet descended from their carriages. Everyone came to offer their good wishes to the granddaughter of Countess Ratkay, the most respected lady in town. Everyone hurried to be the first to get a look at the young debutante. Only Baroness Lina Kukinić complained, muttering to her brother:

“Why should we bow down to that young girl? Who does she think she is?”

“Be quiet, my dear,” her brother replied, who had also lost his spouse. “We are just humoring the Countess. When she was in Vienna, even the Queen herself paid her a visit and talked with her for a full hour.”

“And I’m sure I know why she did it! Fifteen years ago the Countess sent a large sum of money to the Queen to finance the war. I don’t see how this makes her especially deserving.”

Lina grew quiet as they came inside the Countess’ gardens. From there they took the stairs to the first floor, where the Countess was receiving her guests, dressed in black silk, smiling and holding her silver head up high as if she were only thirty years old.

The nobles showered Nera with spectacular gifts. The whole room was suddenly crowded. It was customary to bring gifts to aristocratic debutants. Everyone brought an expensive vase, painting, rug, embroidery, fan or similar items. Baron Skerlec gave Nera two flower vases, and Count Vojkffy sent a basket woven of golden thread. Two golden birds were poised on the basket’s handle—each holding a small ivory leaf in its beak. The basket was filled with fresh flowers. The Count sent the basket but did not appear in person. The gift provoked everyone’s admiration, as well as surprise that the Count did not come himself to offer his



congratulations. In fact, his little basket drew such great attention precisely because he was absent.

Once the well-wishers had left, the Countess approached the basket and said to her granddaughter:

“My child, I can foresee that this Count is trying to push his way into our home.”

“Why, grandmamma?”

“Here, look, didn’t this little basket outshine all the other gifts? Doesn’t it speak in a whole other language than the rest of the presents? As much as I don’t like the man, this idea of his makes an impression and calls attention to itself, forcing you to remember him. He’s the type of man who knows how to get your attention!”

“I noticed the same.”

“This is dangerous for you, my child.”

“You think so, grandmamma? I don’t feel any danger.”

“Once you start to feel the danger, it will be too late.”

At that moment the maid opened the door, and announced to the Countess know that the staff wanted to offer their congratulations to the Contessa. At the maid’s request, Nera went to her quarters.

Choice flowers and roses hung on the walls, the chandelier and the windows. The staff had decorated the rooms and were now gathered in formal uniforms, bearing their gifts.

Everyone brought something they had made by hand for their beloved lady.

The beautiful young widow and baker Barica Cindek had came along with the servants. She brought Nera a loaf of bread, the likes of which no one in the city had ever seen. It looked like a big heart, and it was braided with great artistry. The servants could not take their eyes off

it, and even Nera and the Countess admired the baker's skill. Ms. Cindek watched with pride as everyone admired her creation.

Nera rewarded all the well-wishers, and the Countess granted the servants a day off to celebrate. Only Count Petar joined them for lunch. He wobbled in in his wide *surka*, his even wider pants and big boots. His fat face blushed like a poppy in bloom, and his small bluish eyes smiled at those around him. He stroked Nera's curly ashen hair and asked her if she was pleased with her celebratory debut.

"Believe me," Count Peter said, "I don't recall any of our girls receiving as much attention and homage as you did. I noticed that both the mustached young people and the smooth-shaven gentlemen have fallen in love with you."

"Who do you mean, godfather?"

"Everyone. You inflamed the hearts of all the young bachelors yesterday."

"That's all because of grandmamma's gift!" Nera replied with a smile.

"You godless ingrate!" the Count berated her. "You're overindulged, my child; nature bestowed excessive bounty upon you."

"I wonder if that's to my benefit," Nera said pensively.

"Such a gloomy tone on this special day," the Countess noted.

"I feel somehow melancholic, grandmamma. As if my heart is frightened of something. Of what? I can't tell."

"What strange thoughts! This is nothing like my Nera. Lets go for a walk. Count Petar, have them harness the horses."

In half an hour the Countess was seated in a four-horse carriage. The count took up the whole wide seat opposite her, and Nera sat by the Countess in her white dress, wearing a purple

cape and a bonnet that tilted charmingly on her curly hair.

Four magnificent gray horses drew the carriage towards the Stone Gate. There at the door of her shop stood Ms. Cindek the baker, and confidently greeted them. All eyes watched the beautiful Contessa. Only Mrs. Palčić turned green with anger when she saw the Contessa wave back at her rival, Cindek.

The next day Judge Krajačić visited the Countess regarding some lawsuit concerning the estate. When the business conversation was over he started telling her about witches, and then he told his her story about how he turned to the vice Governor to get help in his fight against them. The Countess asked:

“What can the vice Governor do?”

“He must take my advice. Last year in Slavonija I met the officers of the Slavonian guard. You know those are the Trenk men.<sup>102</sup>”

“I know. After the death of Baron Trenk the Queen formed his soldiers into a new guard which is now called...”

“The Slavonian battalion,” Krajačić offered. “I told the captain of the battalion about the witches, and he said to me: ‘I would gather all of your witches and deliver them to you in the middle of Sv. Marko’s square, along with all of their devils!’ So now you understand why I thought of that Captain. The vice Governor has to try to get one Trenk battalion to come here because I want an end to this terrible fear that terrorizes us once and for all.”

“If you manage to do this,” Nera said, “the people will celebrate and honor you!”

A smile of satisfaction flashed across Krajačić’s face. He obviously found those words to be pleasing.

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<sup>102</sup> The Trenk Guard (Trenkovci) were a regiment of Croatian soldiers who participated in the wars led by the Habsburg dynasty in Europe. They were founded in 1741 and led by Baron Franjo Trenk, and the soldiers hailed mostly from the Croatian province of Slavonija.

“Your grace is too kind to me, but I’m only doing my duty. The Council Commissioner and the Captain claim that we can’t get rid of all the witches at once, and that we can only catch them one by one. But I will prove to them that we can do it, if only we have the people who are brave enough to stalk them at night.”

“Yes, I’ve often thought the same thing” Nera interjected. “We should catch them when they meet up. Why hasn’t anyone done this before?”

“Because people are afraid,” the Judge replied. “You can’t subdue witches that easily. They will start to steal and rob people.”

“Don't witches have money? The devil gives them money!” Nera said.

“They never have enough money, and they're also terribly wicked. Perhaps you've heard of how several months ago they came into a tavern at St. Žaver’s, poured out all the wine and filled the barkeep’s barrels with water?”

“They did all of that in one night? How can you fill the barrels with water so quickly?” Nera continued, with a wry smile on her face.

“Your Grace may think this is funny, but trust me when I say that I find this horrifying. I have to stay up and watch over the poor people who are being persecuted so mercilessly by the witches.”

“No,” Nera replied, “I don’t think it’s funny, I just find it a bit odd.”

“I understand that you find this unusual. That is precisely why I’m concerned about the safety of my fellow citizens. We burnt Margareta Kušenka at the stake yesterday, and now we’re looking for her daughter Jelica. The mother confessed under torture that her daughter was a witch.”

“Did you find her?” Nera asked calmly.

“I sent my men everywhere to investigate, but I’m afraid that she won’t be easily located. The witches must’ve done a good job hiding her.”

“Perhaps she found shelter elsewhere?” the Countess inquired.

“I don't believe so! Nobody will give her shelter, because everyone is afraid of the witch. And then again, everyone knows what would happen to them if they were to protect her.”

“Perhaps you will still manage to find her,” Nera said.

“I won't rest until I do find her. Your Grace, allow me to say my goodbyes. I must see the Vice Governor, I already announced my visit.”

“Thank you for visiting us,” the Countess said and offered the Judge her hand, which he kissed. He bid Nera goodbye, and walked out through the gardens.

The Countess and her granddaughter silently stared after him, and when the gates closed behind him Nera jumped up to her grandmother and whispered:

“Grandmamma, did you hear what he said? They’re looking for Jelica!”

The garden gates opened again.

“Father Smole!” Nera shouted and rushed out to meet him, impatient to give him the news.

The Capuchin walked hurriedly. His face was frowning and pale.

“What has happened?” Nera asked.

“Your Grace, we need to have a serious talk,” the Capuchin said, “but not here.”

“Let’s go upstairs,” the Countess invited them. The three of them went into the castle and entered a small, intimate salon of the Countess.

“Your grace,” he started to say when the Countess had sat down on the chaise, “You must feel what terrible peril threatens this castle. Jelica must not stay under this roof a moment longer!”

“Should we cast her away and hand her over to Krajačić now? Wouldn’t that be cowardly of us?” Nera said.

“I’m not saying we have to turn her in to Krajačić. But she must leave your house. We will send her somewhere far away.”

“But what if someone recognizes her on her journey?”

As Nera was still speaking she heard noise and shouting coming from the street. A screeching voice was heard over the cacophony, shouting:

“To every God-fearing and honest resident of this city who believes in God and honors our laws, if you know anything or if you have seen Jelica Kušenka anywhere, you must report her to the court or turn her over to the hands of the law. Whoever fails to report the witch, to reveal her hiding place or whoever presumes to protect her will be considered himself to have liaisons with the witches and will be sentenced to burn at the stake!”

The Countess, Nera and Smole were silent. The three of them mutely listened to the screeching words that reached them with such clarity, and proclaimed such horrible threats. None of them moved, or went to the window. Silently they stared straight ahead, listening to the crowds gathering in the streets, to the crowing voice that repeated the horrible announcement and then slowly faded into another street.

Someone started running in the hallway. You could hear fast steps approaching. Someone suddenly flung open the door to the room, and a girl dressed in city attire leaped before them. She threw herself to the floor as if an invisible force pinned her to the earth.

“I am not guilty, I am not, I didn't do anything! I don't know anything, your Grace! Don't give me away, Contessa, don't give me away to that horrible man who will break my bones!” the girl screamed, choking in tears and flailing her arms desperately.

Father Smole quickly shut the door, and Nera ran to the girl and told her in a half-whisper:

“Don't scream, Jelica, or the maid will hear you!”

The girl grew quiet, but she threw her whole body on the floor and started writhing with muffled crying.

“Calm down!” Nera comforted her. “We won't give you away to Krajačić.”

The girl lifted her head and desperately turned her face to the Countess as if she were asking whether what the Contessa said was true. The old lady stiffened, and as she looked upon the face distorted by fear and horror, she said to her:

“The Contessa spoke the truth.”

“For God's sake, what are you planning to do?” Smole asked the Countess timidly.

“You don't think I would let the girl leave my house now?”

“I know how very kind you are, your Grace, but you must send her out of this house.”

“That would be very pathetic and mean of us!” Nera said determinedly. “We know the girl is innocent so we must defend her.”

“I want the same, Contessa, but for God's sake, think about how this mercy might cost you your lives!”

The old Countess jumped up from the chaise. Her face was flushed with bitter resentment. She stood up straight and shouted in a voice that neither Smole nor Nera had ever heard her use before:

“Never! Krajačić’s rule will never cross the threshold of my house! That I swear to you! This girl will remain in my house and I will protect her. Do you understand me? You don’t know anything about this girl, Nera, nor you, father. You don’t know where she’s from, who she is, or what she is. I took her into my service and I’m responsible for her. I alone. I’d like to see someone dare to imprison Countess Ratkay for witchcraft.”

“I’m afraid, Countess, that those who burn people at the stake for entertainment would not spare you, either.”

“They wouldn’t dare cross the threshold of my castle. There is someone greater than they, and that someone is the Queen.”

“Do you think the Queen would listen to you?”

“Hear me out, Father Smole. There was a time when the Queen lived in great poverty. Wars threatened from all sides and the country’s treasuries were empty. When I heard of the trouble she was in, I decided to do something unusual. I secretly sent the Queen an enormous amount of money for the war. When she found out that it was I who had sent it, she visited me in my apartment in Vienna, gave me a hug and said: ‘If ever in your life you need something, Countess, my door will always be open to you. I will fulfill your every wish’ So understand, Father, that if they dare even touch my reputation, I am going to Vienna to see the Queen.”

Father Smole hung his head and grew silent, and Nera approached her grandmother and said to her quietly:

“Grandmamma, you have fulfilled my greatest wish! We will protect this poor orphan.”

“But where will you hide her?” Father Smole inquired, finally submitting to the wishes and plans that the two ladies put forth.



“I know where!” Nera said. “There is a hidden room in the little tower, and that’s where we will have Jelica stay.”

“The servants will still know that you’re keeping some girl there,” Smole noted.

“Jelica will pretend to be sick. She must stay in bed and recuperate, and my chambermaid will take care of her. The servants don’t know her, and it would never occur to them that she might be Kušenka’s daughter.”

“That’s a good idea,” the Countess affirmed.

“Finally at some point the excitement in the city will die down and they will stop looking for her, and then we will be able to send Jelica to our estate in Zagorje where there is no risk that Krajačić or someone else will recognize her.”

“Good,” the Countess said. “Do this, but do it now!”

“May this be the opportune time for action!” the Capuchin said quietly. “I will pray to the Lord to protect your good deed.”

“May God repay you for your kindness,” Jelica said through her tears, kissing the hands of the Countess, Nera and the Capuchin.

Nera immediately took her to the tower that looked out toward Sljemen, and helped the scared, desperate girl settle in.

When she returned to the room, she was surprised to find Baron Skerlec and Count Vojkffy there.

“We weren’t expecting you,” Nera said, looking at the two men.

“We came to pay our respects to the Countess,” Vojkffy explained.

As they chatted they started talking about the white witch at the Stone Gate, and the various crimes of the witches who prepare love potions.

“Oh, well! So such potions exist?” Nera asked, surprised.

“Don’t you know that?” Skerlec asked.

“I haven’t tried it yet,” Nera laughed.

“But others have!” Vojkffy said. “Fervent glances from beautiful young eyes can intoxicate people to the point of insanity.”

“We used to have a maid,” Ivica Skerlec interposed, “who had three of our lackeys drink such a potion, and all three of them almost lost their minds lusting after her. They said so themselves.”

“It’s a good thing she didn’t try to offer it to you,” Nera said, “because I would’ve ended up with quite an unpleasant sister in law.”

Skerlec felt the irony her words were steeped in.

The Countess interrupted the conversation with an invitation to the gentleman and the Capuchin that they stay for breakfast, and she led them into the small dining room on the ground floor.”

Vojkffy lingered for a moment before leaving, and whispered to Nera:

“I’m not sure how you took my failure to personally come and congratulate you yesterday.”

“I just thought you had other obligations,” Nera replied.

“No! But I knew I would be forced to speak just a few empty phrases to you, and I did not wish to do that. I would like to explain this more thoroughly, but I’m afraid you wouldn’t understand.”

“If you are able to speak intelligently, you can rest assured that I will understand what you have to say.”

“No, you would not understand because you do not wish to understand. And yet I know that you can guess very well that I didn't come yesterday because I wouldn't have been able to control myself, and that I came today because I could not stand to not see you again.”

As he was talking, the Count took her hand in both of his, and held it up to his lips.

“Hon. Count, they are expecting us downstairs...”

With some difficulty Nera freed her hand and set off toward the dining room. The Count silently came after her.

Breakfast commenced immediately. Nera had enjoyed herself with the Capuchin, Skerlec and Vojkffy, and accurately doled out the same measure of kindness to each of the guests.

After breakfast, when the guests had departed, the grandmother probingly looked at her granddaughter and noted:

“Vojkffy stood under the windows again last night.”

“I went straight to sleep and I didn't notice him.”

“It seems as if he is truly in love with you. But what do you say?”

“Nothing! At least not anything yet. Do you not like him?”

“I don't know. I find him off-putting, but I'm not sure why. They say he has already turned forty. Of course, he is very handsome, he looks as if he's just thirty, but he is still a little too old for you. However, the heart doesn't care about such details.”

“I can see that my grandmamma is worried about Skerlec.”

“I'm not worried about him, but you.”

“You don't need to be afraid, grandmamma. I'm not interested in getting married.”

“Are you interested in love?”

“Well, yes, I often think about that and I’m almost curious about what it would feel like, and whom I will end up falling in love with.”

“I only hope that you don’t fall in love with someone who is unworthy of you.”

“I believe that if something is without worth, one doesn’t even notice it!”

The old lady smoothed her beautiful grandchild’s locks and said:

“I won’t bother you about this any longer. I see that you are reasonable enough to govern your own heart.”

The Council Commissioner still could not discover whose baby it was that was murdered at the Stone Gate, just as Judge Krajačić could not find the whereabouts of Jelica Kušenka.

Both of them offered rewards to the people; lavished promises upon them, but it was all for naught. Nowhere in the city or the surrounding area could they find a mother whose baby had been stolen, or the witch who murdered it, nor could they find evidence that such a baby may have been born in secret. All the men, and especially the women, spied on their neighbors with an eagle eye to find evidence of suspicious or unusual activity. But it was all in vain. The golden Venetian ducat that the Council Commissioner promised to give the person who found the mother of the murdered baby still lay in his pocket, and all of Judge Krajačić’s promises of big rewards could not bring the angry and money-hungry people to sniff out Jelica Kušenka’s trail, though the people now searched harder for her and longed to discover her whereabouts more than those of the witch from the Stone Gate.

Her name was on everyone’s lips and every unfamiliar village girl that was met on the road, on the streets or in the square was dragged before Judge Krajačić to affirm whether this was not Kušenka. Every time when they brought a village girl to him he would rush from his chair, strip the bonnet off her head, peer into her face, but then he would shake his head again,

slam his fist against the davenport and shout with a curse:

“She isn’t the one, either!”

In the meantime, Jelica lay in a clean and comfortable little room in the tower at the North end of the ‘Red Castle’. She lay there staring at the white, wavy ceiling, eavesdropping on every voice, every commotion that she could hear. And whenever she heard footsteps in the castle or a man’s voice in the garden, she would jump off her bed and her soul would start quivering:

“Krajačić is coming!”

For entire days and nights his pale, shriveled face with its piercing eyes, the kind that she thought only witches could have, floated in front of her. She was forever hearing his voice and listening as he sentenced her to burn at the stake.

Exhausted she would bury her head in the pillows and fall asleep. In her dreams she thought she was locked in the witch’s tower and that she could see Krajačić standing before her. His shriveled face would suddenly turn into a skull, and his cunning eyes would turn into snakes that would leap out of the empty eye sockets and land down on her straw mattress. She wanted to run away, but on all sides were thick black walls, and high above her were iron bars. She ran wildly across the dungeon while the snakes threw themselves after her, hissing with their long, venomous tongues.

Jelica woke up. Her whole body was dripping with sweat. She jumped off the bed and looked around her, but the walls were white, the window had no bars, and through the white windowpane she saw the golden sun.

At that moment Nera suddenly swung the door open.

Jelica screamed with fear and threw herself on the ground.

“They’ve come, they’ve come to get me!”

“What are you doing, Jelica? Nobody has come to get you. Can’t you see that it’s just me?”

“Didn’t you come here to tell me that Krajačić found out where I was?”

“What led you to think such crazy thoughts?”

“You opened the door so suddenly and you looked at me as if you were terrified!”

“That’s because I heard you screaming in desperation.”

It was only then that the girl understood why Nera had burst into the room, and she calmed down a little.

“I had a horrible dream, Contessa,” Jelica said. “There’s no hope for me now.”

“What are you talking about? Dreams are always deceiving.”

“Oh, I wish it would deceive me! But I dreamt that a snake bit me, and nothing can save me now. You’ll see, I’ll fall into Krajačić’s hands. But I will kill myself first! He won’t be able to capture me alive.”

Nera noticed that her protégé was already quite ill. It had been eleven days since she was trapped in that tower, but the hunt for her was still ongoing. And the girl was terribly agitated by that knowledge, so the Contessa could see that her protégé was deteriorating, her face was growing paler, and her eyes were inflamed as if in a fever. So she would come as often as possible during the day to support and comfort her.

“I told you, Jelica,” the Contessa said determinedly, “that no one can find you here. If you continue to constantly shiver with fear you will make yourself ill. None of Krajačić’s people can enter this castle. How could they even think that you would hide in this tower, at Countess Ratkay’s?”

“That’s true but I’m still afraid. I know that the witches sent me this awful dream.”

“What crazy thoughts those are!”

“Yes, Contessa, today is their day!”

“What do you mean ‘their day’?”

“Today's Tuesday, so the witches meet at the crossroads by of St. Žaver’s and then they send these awful dreams to people.”

“They’re meeting at St. Žaver ’s today? Who told you this?”

“The whole world knows about it! On this day in Trnje no one leaves their homes after vespers.”

“And the witches only get their powers after vespers?”

“Yes, your Grace,” Jelica said quietly. “That’s why I am so afraid today.”

Nera looked at the window. The last rays of fading sunlight blazed through the windowpane.

As she looked out the window, Nera was lost in thought. Then she turned to Jelica and started to calm her with comforting words, and then she went to see the Countess.

“Grandmamma, I have a great desire to go out riding. But I’d like to go on my own.”

“I don't like you going alone. I'm always afraid that something bad will happen to you.”

“Have no fear, grandmamma. I’ll be back soon.”

“Have a servant accompany you anyway.”

“No, grandmamma. I’ll go see the Skerlecs, Ivo can come with me.”

A cautious joy shone in the Countess’ eyes.

“Go ahead. Ivo will only be too happy if you honor him in this manner.”

A quarter of an hour later the great gates of the 'Red Castle' opened and a white stallion proudly exited through them, carrying on his back a beautiful, courageous rider robed in black velvet. White lace fluttered around her neck and a tricorne hat was charmingly tilted over her ashen locks. She looked like a heroine leading an army. The men's tricorne underscored the lines of manly daring in her face.

Seated on the trim white stallion the Contessa turned in front of the Capuchin's monastery, but she did not go down Plebanuška Street, to Skerlec's castle. Once she was sure that no one could see her from her castle, she pulled the reins and the proud white stallion flew down Stone Street and raced by the small shops under the Stone Gate.

"Where is the Contessa going all alone?" the bread maker Cindek wondered, standing at the door to her shop and looking after the beautiful rider.



## Chapter 5: The Secret Rendezvous

The spirited white stallion carried Nera further away from the city toward Zagreb mountain Medvednica. Gradually, the sounds of people's voices and dogs barking faded in the distance behind her, and the first waves of the mountain's silence swept ahead of her in currents flowing under Sljeme's slopes, broken up now by the drumming of hoof beats.

From the bell tower of the little church of St. Žaver the sound of the bell rang out and echoed in the distance, the proud sound from Sv. Marko's bell tower responded in turn from Grič, followed by the bell of the church of St. Margaret and, finally, by the peal of the majestic cathedral bell. Even further away the slight, gentle bells of small steeples sounded off, only to be drowned out by the waves of the bigger, stronger sounds that together wove a weary day's lullaby over fatigued Grič.

Nera halted her horse and looked around the Žaver valley, listening to the sounds carried by the air as first harbingers of nighttime slumber as they slowly and sadly died out in the airy heights. She shuddered and tightened her horse's reins, steering the white stallion toward the copse by the road.

Before Nera's eyes the twilight spread its gray curtain, growing darker by the minute. Through it she could make out two white roads that met down below, before the forest, and at the spot where they formed a cross stood a tall, dark crucifix and its wooden Christ.

The Contessa halted her horse, struggling to see through the darkness and staring expectantly at the crucifix. But it kept progressively losing its shape and pretty soon her eyes could only see the dark wooden pole and the faded shadow of the gray road beneath it.

The white stallion grew tired of waiting and started to stamp its hooves and scratch the dirt as if warning his mistress that it was time to head home.

But she smoothed the mane on the horse's svelte neck and quietly whispered:

“Quiet, quiet, Dido—be patient! We are going to see the witches!”

The beautiful animal calmed down as if he understood the words of his mistress.

Almost half an hour went by and the horse grew impatient again, as if he was uncomfortable standing there in the darkness and the quiet of the woods far away from the city.

Nera comforted him again, patting his beautiful, noble white neck, but the animal no longer heeded his mistress' words. He kept tapping the dry branches and disturbing the silence that was so precious to the girl.

Nera got off the horse, tied him to a tree and quietly walked towards the crossing.

When she drew close enough, she stopped under a tree, leaned against the trunk and waited, hardly able to see through the thick darkness.

The night grew darker still. There was no sound of anyone moving and everything was quiet, as if the world around her was filled with expectation.

Suddenly something rustled in the thicket behind her. Nera could tell that the sound came from the side opposite her. She turned around but she couldn't see anything in the darkness. She could only hear the cracking of small branches and the rustling of leaves under someone's feet. She held tightly to the tree trunk and tried to hide. Something was stealthily advancing toward her. Silently, stealthily, as if stalking her.

She slowly reached for her belt, where she carried her gun.

She hadn't even grasped it when she felt someone's heavy, steely hands grab hold of both of her elbows.

She didn't make a sound. Nera wanted to break free, but two strong hands held her so tightly that she could hardly move.

She turned her head and saw through the darkness that a tall man was holding her. Weapons clanked at his waist and the clatter echoed unpleasantly through her soul.

If only she could reach her gun! But the man held her by her arms. She used all her strength to try to wrestle herself away from him, but the man's arms wrapped around her tightly like a pair of pliers.

Seeing that she would not be able to defend herself, Nera gave up the fight, surrendered her hands to the attacker, and said in a calm tone of voice:

"It's not necessary for you to attack me this way. If you kill me, you won't profit by it. I will voluntarily give you all my jewels and all the money that I carry on me."

"Thank you! I want neither your life nor your jewels. I would only like to know what it is that you're doing here?"

This odd question emboldened Nera, and she replied in kind:

"And what are you doing here?"

"Well, look here! You're no ordinary woman. Allow me to get a better look at you. Don't struggle. As you can see, I'm a very well-mannered bandit. I want nothing more than to take a little peek at your face to see if I have the honor of speaking with an old or a young woman, because I need to know."

Nera stood calmly while the tall man bent down to her and glanced at her face from up close.

“I’m truly betrayed by the night. It’s as dark as a dungeon here, but your voice sounds so youthful and resolute that I feel that you are young, and this of course is more pleasing to me than if you were some old hag.”

“What do you want, then?” Nera asked sternly. “I’m in a hurry to get home.”

“You are not in a hurry at all. You sat on your horse for an hour, and now you’ve been standing here for almost half an hour, which means that nothing so very pressing awaits you.”

Nera listened to the deep and reverberant voice filled with irony and a furtive, roguish laughter. Never in her life had she heard such a voice, so she couldn’t even begin to think who the stranger might be.

“All right, then,” she said, “I’m in no hurry. But tell me, why you are detaining me?”

“Because I want to know what you were waiting for right here, on such a dangerous spot where the witches come to meet...”

“That is none of your business.”

“O-ho, don’t you think you might be mistaken? Perhaps it is precisely I who have the right to ask you about this—and to force you to answer me.”

“I won’t respond to any questions!”

“Fine, then. In that case you will answer to the Municipal Court Judge, Krajačić.”

“Krajačić?!” she wondered and thought to herself: What business does this man have with Krajačić? Is he perhaps a City Hall policeman or an inquisition torturer of some sort?

“You’re tongue-tied? It looks like your conscience isn’t quite clear since the name of the Court Judge scared you so. If I take you to Krajačić, he will be convinced that you had a meeting with the devil here at the crossing. And you see, I’m rather convinced that your devil has neither horns nor hooves. So be smart and tell me who it is that you were waiting for.”

“All right then, I’ll tell you. I was waiting for my lover.”

“Well that’s something else entirely. Anyway, I suspected that was the case.”

“And now, if you please, allow me to go home.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that.”

“You are insolent!”

“Quite the contrary, I’m very courteous and obliging to you. Actually, right now what I should be doing is taking you to Zagreb to Judge Krajačić, who would torture you and tell you that you are a witch, and wish to know what you were doing here at the crossing at this time of night. But you see, I’m not doing that, but am instead suggesting that you sit down on the grass and help me pass the time. Your choice.”

“Why do you keep on mentioning Krajačić?”

“It looks like you find his name very unpleasant... So, let's stop talking about him. I would much rather know what kind of an ass your lover is to let you wait so long for him at this hour.”

Nera saw that it was futile to resist and that it would be best if she calmly stayed put and talked to this stranger in the same way that he conversed with her. Either way, she would not have been able to escape.

“My lover is not so bad. He never made me wait for him before.”

“So why isn’t he here today?”

“I don’t know. Maybe something happened to him.”

The man bent down, threw something on the grass and said:

“Please feel free to sit on my cape. I’m sorry I can’t offer you a more comfortable seat.”

The stranger sat opposite her. For a while he didn't say a word. The girl could see that he was filling his pipe, and then moments later a spark flamed up and cast some light on his face. Nera noticed the contours of his profile, and he seemed to be a young man with long, curly hair. She sat down on the grass, waiting to see what would happen.

“Who is this man? What is he doing here, and why is he making me stay?” the girl kept asking herself, but she could not think of an answer. At first she thought of attacking him with her gun, but she gave that idea up. He would clearly be faster than her. Therefore, Nera accepted her fate and decided to sit until the man let her go home. “I guess he won't keep me here until morning. And my best defense is to show that I'm not afraid,” she thought.

“Listen,” the stranger began, “wouldn't you like to tell me who you are?”

“It's customary for a man to introduce himself to the lady first.”

“Ha-ha,” he laughed, “You're right. But, you see, I hate social norms. What's the point of insulting this beautiful forest, the dark sky and the green moss that we sit on with society's dictates?”

The girl was more and more convinced that the man she thought was a bandit was actually an elegant gentleman.

“I concur,” she said, “My name and your name are absolutely irrelevant!”

“I find you absolutely captivating.”

“But you still can't see me.”

“Precisely because I can't see you, I feel your presence all the more. Your voice and your words strike me like a beautiful mountain shepherd's song, and I feel as if I sat here every night, talking to you. What do you think of—me?”

“You certainly are somewhat of a strange man. Your voice is very pleasant, your words are not witless, but your behavior toward me isn’t very nice.”

“But it isn’t bad, either. If I do keep you here by force, it’s obviously because I enjoy spending time with you. Don’t you feel that we are having an unusually beautiful time together? We are surrounded by the thick forest and silence, not a living being in sight. Just the two of us. Nothing but two feet of deep darkness separate you from me.”

Nera felt him lean his elbows on the ground and touch the edge of her riding skirt.

She pretended not to notice it, and only moved her right hand to her belt, where her pistol was hidden in case she absolutely needed to use it.

She forced a smile and said ironically:

“I hope you won’t start composing verses?”

“Almost! I have lain at the feet of many women, admiring their enchanting beauty, but never before have I felt as much sweet endearment as I do now, sitting next to you whom I haven’t even seen before, and I still can’t see you now.”

“If you could see me, you’d get over that loving feeling!”

“That’s impossible. You must be gorgeous.”

“Ha-ha,” Nera uttered a forced laugh, “You are certainly mistaken, because truly I’m not beautiful.”

“Do you believe that beauty is only reflected in the face? Beauty is like the scent of a flower. Many times a flower is not beautiful, but its scent entices you with its enchanting, senseless, mysterious beauty... Your words, your very being radiates a beauty that clouds the mind and kills the consciousness...”

His words scared Nera as they shivered through the silent darkness and, whispering, crept to her ears. She jerked her head as if she wanted to shake off those strange sounds by force. Both were silent for a moment.

Suddenly the sky lit up to the south. Nera looked up and in the flash of the lightning saw heavy clouds floating above them.

“There, a storm is coming,” she said.

“Yes, a storm, a storm is coming,” he repeated quietly, as if speaking to himself.

The lightning flashed a few more times, and then it thundered.

“Do you hear that?” she asked.

“I hear it! It’s beautiful. The wind, the thunder; they soothe me!”

Nera began to feel anxious.

“There’ll be a shower,” the girl started again, wishing to remind the stranger that it was time to leave this place, or to let her go home alone.

“A shower? I’m used to that.”

“But I’m not,” Nera said.

“So get used to it!” he said quietly, not budging an inch.

Nera was quietly thinking of what she could do to get rid of this man. She finally decided: she would point her gun at him and demand that he let her go home. At that moment the lightning flashed above them and its light, as strong as daylight, shone down on them for a moment. In this light Nera could plainly see the face of the young man staring at her with his deep, dark eyes.

The lightning waned.



“You must be mad: why do you wander in the darkness when you're more beautiful than the sun and more youthful than the dawn? Your lover is a bastard, a scoundrel, an unworthy fool! Why does he leave his flower unplucked in a dark forest to entice a stranger's heart...”

Lightning struck again and lit up Nera's face and figure. Thunder followed the bolt. It rumbled and disturbed the entire Žaver valley and cracked against Medvednica. Then everything grew quiet again, as if the earth and the sky had died away.

Nera decided fight for her freedom. She got up, but immediately felt the man's strong arm around her waist, felt the warm breath of his young lips and heard his threatening, fervent voice say:

“Just a taste of your lips!”

Nera grabbed hold of the tree and started to struggle, but the arm held her even tighter.

“You can't escape me, you won't get away!”

She gathered all her strength and broke free from his arms, he got up on his knees and wanted to rise, but then a gunshot rang out... Nera held the fired pistol in her hand and listened intently to the grave-like calm that followed. The stranger was silent and still.

“Could he be dead?” Nera thought to herself, and stood motionless for a moment as she stared into the darkness.

Then she took a few steps toward him.

“You're not a very good shot!” the deep voice sounded from the grass. “You just hit my arm.”

Nera shuddered and took a few steps backwards.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, “I hope you don’t think I’d pull a trigger at a woman. I’ll bandage my wound and that should do it.” He spoke calmly and cold-bloodedly, as if nothing had happened.

“Look at the blood spurting out, as if it could hardly wait for the chance to spill out of my veins. You did a good deed; perhaps I’ll be less crazy from now on. Don’t think I’m a bastard. I’m just ardent youth, and you’re fatal beauty. If you’ll allow me, I will escort you to Grič. You will ride, and I’ll walk by your side.”

“Thank you—that won’t be necessary!”

“As you wish. But it would be prudent not to tell anyone of this encounter, because if Krajačić were to learn that I found you here, you might find yourself in a great deal of trouble. He’ll rouse the crowd, and paint you as a witch. I’m prepared to answer to your lover. What’s his name?”

“You don’t deserve to know!” she said and rushed to her horse that, having heard the gunshot, thrashed around trying to break himself free. But as soon as he felt Nera’s hand on his neck and her weight on the saddle, he flew as if possessed to the road and into the dark night toward Grič. The clouds, lightning and thunder rushed after him. Nera held onto the reins tightly, and her white stallion jumped over bridges, gaps and rocks that littered the road in hopes of reaching Grič in time to escape the storm. But the deluge caught up with them while they were still far from the city. The clouds discharged ceaseless thunder and lightning, followed by a heavy downpour.

What could she do? Where could she find shelter? She saw a dim light through the darkness, and though she could barely see anything in the thick darkness and rain, she

remembered that this might be one of their serf's houses, as they lived somewhere at the edge of the Žaver valley.

Hope did not deceive her. Those were small houses that she saw. Nera turned her horse into a backyard, jumped off the saddle, ran up to a narrow window and struck it with a whip.

## Chapter 6: In the Midst of the Thunderstorm

Rain poured down as Nera waited for a response.

No one stirred inside the little house, however. Everything was quiet inside, and the pale light flickered like a candle in a crypt.

“Godly people, open up! Countess Ratkay is here,” Nera shouted.

In a moment a man’s frightened face appeared cautiously at the window.

“Miško, open the door. It is I, Contessa Nera!”

It seemed as if mute voices from within had been resurrected from the dead. The door to the house creaked, and the light of an oil lantern shone in someone’s hand. It illuminated about ten people.

“Miško, please take my horse to the stables, the hail will injure him.”

The old peasant quickly jumped into the downpour and took a deep bow. “Your highness, our mistress...”

“Never mind that, just hurry and take the horse to shelter!” Nera said, jumping over two steps to get into the house.

Shaggy heads rose up from all corners of the house. Pale faces stared at Nera with alarm.

No one dared say a word.

“You must be wondering how I got here?”

Thus reassured, a young peasant woman asked: “Alone, in this terrible storm?”

“I went out for a ride and got lost in the woods. This never happened to me before. I couldn’t tell left from right.”

The peasant women marveled at her story and surrounded their young mistress, who was soaking wet.

“Dear Lord, Your Highness, it was surely the witches who led you astray!”

“They can’t harm me!”

“Your Grace must be carrying some amulets?”

“Of course,” Nera replied.

“Oh, many times even the *škapular*<sup>103</sup> fails. Nothing helps at night.”

“What do you know?,” the old peasant woman said to her daughter-in-law from the corner. “Her Highness must have saints’ powers on her. Rich aristocrats are able to afford such things.”

“Don’t you have any sacred talismans?”

“Oh yes we do, Your Grace, but only the *jagnuše*—the old woman said and took out a small, longish object from her bosom.

Nera saw that it was a piece of wax with a cross imprint.

“And where did you get this from?”

“I bought it from the capuchins, and it was blessed on White Sunday, which makes it very expensive. But, truth be told, the witches could never harm me.”

At that moment the homeowner entered the room.

“Did you get wet, Miško?” Nera asked.

“Thank you for asking, Your Grace, I did, but Your Grace is completely soaked.”

“That’s all right. It’s warm here in your house.”

“If Your Grace wouldn’t mind, we would like to offer you some milk and cheese,” the

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<sup>103</sup> This amulet consists of two canvas paintings tied together with string, and pulled over the head so that one is positioned across the chest, and the other across the back.

peasant said. "That's all we have."

"That's a good idea, dear Miško. Warm milk is exactly what I'd like."

"You see, Jagice," the peasant chided his daughter in law, "you sit here chatting without considering that her Grace might be hungry or in need of a warm shawl."

"It's pouring so hard outside! I knew that my serfs would generously welcome me!" Nera smiled.

"How could we do otherwise when Your Grace is so kind to us. Far and wide other serfs have a harder time than we do. Nobody hits us, nobody torments us, we do everything willingly since you treat us with kindness. Just last year the hail ruined our crop, and the Countess forgave us our dues."

"So you have to tithe to our estate every year?"

"What can we do, such is life!"

Nera looked around. Black straw beds covered in worn out blankets lay directly on the dirt floor. In one corner stood a wooden table and several benches covered in blankets and pillows, on which the children apparently slept. Several shelves with ceramic plates, a whole horde of children, women and men filled out the small space under the low soot-covered ceiling, and their sunburnt, weary faces were dejected with mute devotion to work and want.

A vision of the glorious ballrooms in her grandmother's castle appeared before Nera's eyes, and she compared that grandeur to the poverty here. She felt anguished, and turned to the homeowner:

"Since you welcomed me so kindly into your home, I forgive your tithe for this year as well. You don't need to pay anything in livestock or laborers."

The old man looked at her for a few moments without saying a word, and then he took

hold of her hand and suddenly kissed it.

All the members of the household were beside themselves with wonder and joy, and Nera was pleased to see that she was the cause of it. In the meantime, the daughter-in-law came into the room and placed a clean cloth on the table, while another young peasant girl brought in milk and cornbread.

The Contessa ate with gusto, sitting under the soot-covered ceiling amongst the grubby children and the people worn out from work and from the sun, and she chatted with them about their farm, about nature and anything else that they might have found interesting.

The young Contessa's fresh, joyous, glad and intelligible words fell onto their tired souls like dewdrops on wilted leaves. They forgot all about the storm and the rain that showered the small windows, and the wind that blew against the straw roof of the little house.

Nera spoke with everyone, asked many questions, comforted and encouraged them while the rain poured down and the wind howled. Suddenly the lightning flashed and thunder boomed after it, like boulders crashing down.

Everyone was startled, the children began to cry and pressed against their mother, and the adults crossed themselves. Nera looked at the window. The lightning flashed again, and thunder boomed. Thunder rolled though Žaver valley as though a huge cannon had descended from the heavens onto the earth.

The village women fell to their knees, the children cried and the men kept crossing themselves, bending their heads. Nera arose, looked through the small window and came back.

Everyone in the room bent their heads; they were all afraid. Nera looked around and noticed someone lying on a straw bed in the corner, staring at her suspiciously.

A gust of wind whooshed over the rooftop as if a terrible beast had spread its wings over

them, and started to whistle. The wind blew down the chimney and into the fireplace, stirred up the ashes and folded them into a grey cloud, which it then lifted up to the ceiling, in a moment filling the whole room with smoke.

Screams of horror and terror filled the little peasant room. Everyone fell to their knees and cried out:

“Holy God, have mercy!”

“Mother of God, our mother, save us!”

Nera stared with surprise at these people who quivered with terror and called on God and the Holy Mother in screams of desperate fear, while a skeleton that lay on the straw bed in the corner folded its arms and stared, terrified, at the Contessa.

“Don’t be afraid,” Nera told the people, “It’s just the wind that blew down the chimney.”

The peasants made no reply. Wholeheartedly and fearfully they kept on praying as if the Contessa weren’t there.

The wind blew and whistled once more over the house so that the smoke from the ashes spread out, then the whistle of the wind sailed on the air, disappearing further under Mount Sljeme, where it died out and grew quiet.

The peasants still knelt and prayed, their faces quivering with fear, with tears in their eyes.

Slowly they started to stand up, crossing themselves. Old Miško reached into the bowl under the picture of the Holy Mother of God and sprinkled holy water over the fireplace and the four corners of the room.

They did not speak until they had all sprinkled themselves with holy water. Their voices were guttural and hoarse.



“Your Highness was not afraid,” Miško said to the Contessa, “because you have holy amulets.”

“I knew that the house was strong enough to withstand the wind.”

Nera noticed the eyes of the peasants watching her in bewilderment.

“The wind?” Miško said, as if beside himself. “Doesn’t Your Highness know what just happened?”

“The wind, the storm, what else?”

“Your ignorance spared you the horrors that pursued us,” the old man said. He came closer to Nera and whispered to her:

“It was the witches!”

The Contessa only now realized the terror that had gripped her serfs.

“Really?,” she asked, as if she did not understand.

“Yes, Contessa,” the old man said quietly. “They broke our fireplace and scattered the ashes—they were among us. This is a misfortune for us, Your Highness. This year will bring us evil tidings, great adversity. Either our barn will burn down, or our cattle will die.”

“Don’t speak this way, the witches don’t have such great powers.”

“But they do, Your Highness. Just look over there. That is my granddaughter. A year ago she was working in the fields, and a woman asked her for a sip of water. The child gave her some, and from that day on she’s been growing paler and steadily wasting away, and no one can help her. She was cursed by a witch!”

Nera now realized who the pale skeleton was. She approached the girl that lay on the straw bed. The girl stared at her with her dim white eyes without answering a single question. The Contessa remarked:

“Perhaps our doctor could help her.”

“No, Your Highness,” Miško replied. “No one can help her when all of our women, even the sexton, were unable to help. I took her to a Capuchin church, I paid good money to the sexton to let her kiss the holy amulets, but that did not help either. What could a doctor do?”

“That’s all right, I will try anyway. I will send our physician to see you.”

“Ah, Your Highness, there is nothing we can do once the witches get a hold of a person,” a young village man chimed in.

“Why are you talking about the witches?,” his wife snapped. “They might come back.”

Someone knocked at the window...

The peasants flinched in fear, and the frightened children huddled in the corner like a flock of frightened lambs.

“Dear Lord! They’ve come back!...”

It was still pouring rain outside, but the wind was subsiding. In a moment someone knocked again, much louder... The people froze and fell silent. Nera went to the window.

“In the name of Jesus’ five wounds, Your Highness, don’t do it,” Miško whispered.

“Open up!” someone shouted outside.

“I recognize that voice!” Nera said cheerfully.

At that moment the windowpane was broken, the wooden panels opened up, and the peasants stared in horror as the head of an older man peaked through the small window.

“Florian!,” Nera shouted when she saw her stableman’s face. “Miško, look, it’s our servant. Open the door!”

The old man was paralyzed with fear and wonder, so the Contessa went out and opened the front door herself. Instead of her servant, Baron Ivo Skerlec walked into the room.

”What happened to you, Nera?” he asked in a choked voice. The girl looked at his pale, worried face. The Baron took hold of Nera’s hands and drew them in as if he wished to embrace her.

“What have you done? Why did you give us such a scare?!” he scolded her, not letting go of her hands.

“I had a little accident. But how did you get here?”

“We went down the road and asked the serfs one by one if they saw you ride by, and we ended up here.”

“But how did you know I went for a ride?”

“Grandmother sent for me to find you. That’s when the townsfolk told me that you rode out toward Sljeme. Now let’s go, there’s a carriage waiting outside.”

The peasants finally recovered from their fear. Miško tried to close the broken window.

“Don’t be angry, Miško,” Nera said amiably. “I will have it all taken care of in the morning.”

She said her goodbyes and promised to come back as soon as possible. As she was leaving the room she could hear the voice of the pale little girl in the corner of the room, who stared at her in such a peculiar way as the peasants knelt and prayed.

“Mommy, didn’t you notice that she did not cross herself when the witches came through the house?”

The Contessa heard those words, smiled at the little girl’s innocence and left the house.

Baron Skerlec took his coat off and wrapped it around Nera, leading her through the courtyard onto the street. She made arrangements for her horse to be taken back to her castle, and settled into the covered coach. The Baron sat opposite her, and the coach raced off toward Grič.

“Are you warm enough?” the Baron asked Nera after a short silence.

“I’m quite warm and very comfortable.”

The Baron grew silent. He felt comfortable too, though it was not due to the coat warming his soaked body, but to the comfort of sitting in the coach with her, all alone in the darkness that was only intermittently broken by the rays of the lanterns mounted on either side of the coach.

“Nera, why didn’t you come for me, like you promised grandmamma?”

“Someone on your street told me that you had ridden out towards Sljeme, so I didn’t bother stopping by your house. I figured I would catch up with you.”

“Who could’ve told you that I rode off when I spent the entire day at home? Why do you insist on going out alone? At least take a servant along if you don’t want my company.”

She could feel that the Baron did not believe her made-up excuse, and that he chose these last words in order to reprimand her.

“Was grandmamma very worried? I’m fine, nothing happened.”

“But something could’ve happened to you. Especially now, at a time when witches are roaming under Sljeme.”

“But Ivo, you don’t believe in witches, do you?”

“Why shouldn’t I believe in them?”

“Did you come to the conclusion that witches exist by using your own brain and coming to your own conclusion?”

“When everyone in the world burns witches at the stake and when there is a law that demands their destruction then—there must be something out there.”

“Yes, there is something—but what?! That’s what I would like to find out.”

“But the matter is already settled!”

“How can you think that witches exist just because people say that they do? I think we should still consider whether or not these claims are true, and to what extent.”

“Very learned people all over the world have already thought about it a great deal, and they have established that witches exist. Even our Parliament passed a law on witches, and if they had any doubts the Parliament wouldn’t have done this. But tell me, Nera, why do you concern yourself with these matters so much?”

“They interest me.”

“Let it go. This isn’t something that you should meddle with. Krajačić and Dvojković already misunderstood you once. Why should you wrack your brains when the lawmakers, the scholars, and the rulers are not concerned with these matters? It’s the law, so let it be! Thank goodness, we won’t have anything to do with witches.”

“What if Krajačić were to reach into our circles and find a witch?”

“Then she would be lawfully punished, just like every other.”

“So you are absolutely convinced that witches exist?”

“Yes, every evil woman is already half a witch since she tries to harm others and doesn’t hesitate to use various means to do so—including submitting herself to the devil. But why are we discussing these things here? Don’t we have anything else to say to each other?”

“Was grandmamma very worried?”

“Who wouldn’t be worried and concerned? You could’ve had an accident and that would’ve been awful. I couldn’t go on if something had happened to you!”

In the shivering of his voice Nera could hear that he spoke sincerely, from the bottom of his soul, and she forgot all about his ideas on witches that made her so upset.

“Ivo, do you really love me so?”

“Why do you ask when you know that I’m miserable?”

“Why are you miserable? I haven’t given you an answer yet, and who knows how I will respond.”

“I can’t understand why you’re torturing me?”

“It would behoove you to be more patient. Give me some time to examine my feelings: whether or not the love I feel for you is the love of a wife or that of a sister.”

They didn’t say another word.

Ivo felt extremely dejected.

“It’s so nice in this coach right now,” Ivo thought. “The rain is drumming on the roof, the wind is whistling outside and here it is so cozy and warm. Nera sits across from me in the corner of the coach, deep in thought about who knows what—and here I am, in the corner opposite her, dying over her and longing for one single touch of her hand. It would be so lovely if she were to offer me her hand, invite me to sit next to her, if I could put my arm around her so that we might sit together, silent and happy. How pleasant it would be to listen to the pitter-patter of the rain on the leather roof of the coach! How pleasant it would be to listen to the whistling of the wind!”

The coach stopped in front of the Red Castle.

Nera quickly got out and went in with the Baron.

Grandmamma did not reprimand her—she was happy to have her home again! She didn’t ask many questions, let alone scold her.

When grandmother and granddaughter found themselves alone again, the old lady asked the girl why she went out riding on her own, and Nera told her the same story as she did Baron Skerlec. She neglected to tell her about what had happened at Žaver because she did not want to

upset her.

That evening Nera had a hard time falling asleep. She sat by the open window looking out into the garden. The rain had stopped long ago, the sky had cleared and the stars shone, and raindrops glistened in the semi-darkness of the clear night air.

Down in the garden a bush rustled here and there, and branches shook off fat raindrops that murmured as they cascaded from leaf to leaf. All of a sudden something flew in through the window.

Nera was startled. A wet bouquet of flowers lay on the rug. She picked it up and noticed a small leaflet tied to the bouquet. Nera opened it and read these few lines:

*“Have mercy! I broke into your garden in hopes of seeing you. Have mercy on the intruder. I am standing down here amidst the flowers, longing for you, and I leave only too happy to have seen you.*

*Vojkffy.”*

Nera thought for a moment, and then closed the window...

## Chapter 7: At Countess Čikulini's Palace

“You are my most devoted confidant and friend, are you not, Father Smole?,” Nera asked the Capuchin in a tête-à-tête when he came to pay a visit to the Countess.

“Yes, Contessa, and I will continue to be your friend as long as I live, even if you were to reject my friendship!,” said the Capuchin, looking at the Contessa with sincerity and warmth.

“I could never reject you, Father! I need you so! I love my grandmamma, as you know, but I am still unable to speak with her as frankly as I do with you. It's true, there are things I haven't even told you yet, but I will gradually share with you everything that is in my heart. Believe me, it's hard to let go of one's secrets even when one has a true friend such as yourself. You see, something happened to me yesterday that I didn't feel like I could tell you about and ask for advice at the time.”

“Speak, Contessa. I'll be happy to counsel you.”

“When I spoke with our Jelica yesterday I became desperate to find out if the witches really met at the crossroad by St. Žaver, and what it was that they did there. I was not afraid—you know I have no fear—so I decided to trick grandmamma and ride out to St. Žaver's on my own.”

“For goodness sakes, what an idea! So, you really went there?”

“Of course. But I was not alone.”

“What? Did someone see you?”

“Yes! Don't get upset, Father, hear me out.”



Nera truthfully told the Capuchin all about the incident at the crossing. His face grew more and more troubled, and when she finished the young priest stood up before her, looked her in the eyes and scolded her:

“Contessa, you’ve done such an imprudent thing that you would be lucky to escape grave consequences.”

“You look at me as if I’m already at the stake, Father,” she laughed. “What is so terrible about it?”

The Capuchin sighed, took hold of Nera’s hands and said quietly:

“I am horrified to think that you might be in danger. Can you understand that, my little friend? And this time the peril is greater than you might think. Do you remember the man’s face?”

“When the lightning flashed we saw each other clearly, and I would be able to recognize him among a hundred men.”

“That means he knows exactly what you look like, too. What was he wearing?”

“I didn’t pay attention to that in the dark. I was trying to watch out for his movements. But as far as I know, his suit was dark, he is not a serf and his hair was curly.”

“So he did not wear a wig! He may have been a townsman.”

“He spoke with wit, but his voice and behavior were brazen.”

“He can surely recognize you and reveal that he met you at the crossing, especially since you wounded him.”

“But he did let me go.”

“Who knows, maybe the only thing that prevented him from detaining you was the fact that he was wounded.”

“So I guess now I can't walk down the street without worrying that a man will run up to me and say: ‘I found this one at the crossing at night.’ What a predicament!”

“I advise you to confide in your grandmother.”

“I will think about it...”

“Do you know what just occurred to me? When Krajačić came to see us he said that he would bring a troop of the Slavonian battalion into Zagreb to search for the witches. Perhaps those men are already in Zagreb and he is one of them? That would be twice as dangerous. Because if that man was a robber he will keep quiet, but if he was a Trenk man, he will surely report you. And since you shot him, you won't be able to escape the consequences.”

“But I was defending myself!”

“Who's going to believe you? They found you at the crossing, and when he attempted to take you to Krajačić you shot at him, do you understand? This is how he can portray it, in which case you are lost. I beg you, tell your grandmother everything, pack up your suitcases right away, and leave Zagreb.”

The Capuchin's voice was hoarse, his face pale.

“But my dear Father, I'm a Contessa, and who would dare press charges against a member of the aristocracy?”

“We already had one noblewoman burned at the stake.”

“Why are you getting so upset, Father?”

“I'm frightened for you.”

“But why should you worry so much about me?” Nera asked warmly.

The Capuchin looked her in the eyes and said:

“Because I want only the best for you—and for you to always be happy and joyful.”

“You are so honest and good to me, Father! Thank you!”

“Then heed my advice”

“I will listen to you. Only I can't share this with grandmamma today. You know we have to go to the Countess Čikulini's party in a couple of hours. The young count visited us twice already, and we promised to come. I don't believe there's any danger until tomorrow. I need only to cross the street to get to Count Čikulini's, it will be dark and I will hide my face with a shawl. So my stranger from St. Žaver's can't find me today, and tomorrow I will confess everything to grandmamma.”

Nera said goodbye to the anxious Capuchin and went to her room, where everything shone with silks, silver, gold, and crystal chandeliers. She stopped to think:

“It really would not be pleasant to exchange this luxurious comfort for a tower prison cell.”

Nera chuckled out loud at the ludicrous nature of these thoughts, and then called the maid in to help her dress.

Still, she was unable to forget the Capuchin's warnings about the danger that hovered over her head now. And to think that yesterday, when she went to the crossing, she never suspected that her idea to wait for the witches could have such dangerous consequences.

It was dark outside by the time Nera finished her toilette. She looked at the windows across the street, where everything shone in a sea of light. Through the open windows she could see the ballrooms filling with elegant ladies and gentlemen.

As much as she tried to be cheerful she couldn't contain her nerves. She wasn't sure whether she felt this way because of the danger that so suddenly had befallen her, or if she was haunted by some unpleasant premonition. For the first time in her life she felt her blood course

vigorously through her veins, and her heart beat faster. But, attempting to free herself of the excitement, she lifted her head up high and followed her grandmother across the street to Count Čikulini's castle. The Čikulini castle's stairway was covered in carpets and rose garlands wreathed the bannisters all the way up to the large ballroom, the grandest of all in Zagreb.

Thousands of candles spread their magical light over the ballroom's gold-embroidered white silk tapestries and its furniture upholstered in green velvet. This was an enormous space set aside for dancing, and the young people who had decided to dance despite the heat were already gathered here.

Countess Čikulini, a beautiful lady about thirty years old, wearing a white silk gown and gold roses in her hair, received the guests with her stepson, Count Franjo Čikulini.

A smallish young man in a black French suit with a pretty blonde head, all gentle and agile, ran up to meet Countess Ratkay and her granddaughter, and wholeheartedly greeted them both.

The guests turned to look as young Čikulini greeted Nera, somewhat embarrassed, with his face completely flushed. It seemed as if he could hardly dare to look at the pretty girl's face. And yet he was totally enraptured when he saw her come in.

The guests greeted Countess Ratkay with great respect. Her beautiful, rich granddaughter was met with excitement when they saw her fairy-like in pink tulle. She had thrown a white lace shawl over the rosy silk dress. The strange tunic was trimmed with a real pearl fringe. Her head was adorned with a pink *parta* fringed with pearls and emeralds, and her hair was braided in two long braids that reached almost to her knees.

"Why is Contessa Nera the only girl wearing this type of hairdo?" Countess Erdody asked Terka Nadaždi quietly.

“I’m sure it’s because Countess Ratkay or Count Oršić insists on it.”

“Certainly!” Baroness Lina intervened. “I’m sure she braids it this way to show off the length of her hair.”

In the meantime the hostess approached Nera.

“Come, let me introduce you to the other gentlemen whom you haven’t met before. This is your evening, my child. I truly wanted to have my home be the first opportunity for you to meet our social circle outside of your own home.”

“Thank you, Your Grace, Madam Countess!,” the girl responded. “I’m so happy you honored me in this way.”

“I hope that we shall be great friends,” the Countess said, “regardless of the fact that you are still a child. But you are such an adorable, clever little thing that one must fall in love with you.”

“Your Grace is too kind!,” Nera responded. The Countess’ kindness pleasantly impressed her.

Countess Čikulini led Nera through all the rooms and introduced her to the numerous guests who filled the halls of the enormous palace. When they came across Count Oršić she said:

“I leave my new young friend in your charge so you can protect her from the pushy gentlemen. I must attend to my duties as a hostess.”

The Countess left Nera with Count Petar and proceeded to the dining room.

“You seem to be in a bad mood, Uncle Petar,” Nera noted.

“I’m always in a bad mood when I have to come here. I don’t like Countess Čikulini. I only came here today to honor you and your grandmother.”

Baron Skerlec approached them and kissed Nera’s hand.

“How are you feeling? Did you catch a cold?”

”No, I’m perfectly fine and well.”

“What are you two talking about?” Oršić asked, so Skerlec told him how Nera had ridden out alone and got caught in the storm. In the meantime, Nera’s young friends gathered around her, and several gentlemen escorted her to the great ballroom. Suddenly, Count Vojkffy appeared. When he saw that she was momentarily alone, he approached her.

“You won’t offer me your hand?” he asked, disappointed.

“I am upset with you.”

“If you only understood my longing, you would forgive me.”

“I hope that this was the last time I will see you in our gardens at night.”

“Since it upsets you so much, I would rather die than climb over your fence in the future. Don’t punish me. I suffered enough when you cruelly shut the window in my face.”

“Could you have expected me to do anything else?”

Vojkffy held her hand tight. Staring intensely into her eyes, he whispered:

“Whatever I did, I did because of the impatience of my heart. I love you, Contessa, and I will forever remain your slave. But I feel that you are rejecting me, so I will kill any man who dares to claim your heart.”

Nera fearfully looked at the Count’s inflamed face. A fire burned in his eyes that Nera had never seen in any other man’s gaze.

“Do you understand me, Contessa? Whoever wins your heart must die! I swear it on my mother’s grave...”

This man standing in front of her was swearing to kill whomever she loved! Did he truly love her so fiercely? It was hard for her to believe that anyone could love this intensely. Still, he swore on his mother's grave.

She was lost in thought for a few moments, but then she composed herself.

"What right do you have to prevent me from loving whomever I wish?" she asked, suddenly tearing her hand away from him.

"I am not preventing you from doing anything. You may choose according to your heart's desire, but I have the right to fight for your love. And if I can't have it, no other man will enjoy it, either. And I tell you once more—I will kill any man who is fortunate enough to have your love."

"And what if that man were... you?"

"Then I would be your slave."

"And what if I demanded that you fulfill your oath on yourself?"

"I would shoot myself in the head."

"I must admit, you're quite an unusual character, Count. But stay calm. There's no need for you to load your gun for any man just yet."

"Be that as it may, I have given the death sentence."

"Be careful, Count, this may come back to haunt you."

Vojkffy wanted to respond when a fan tapped him on the shoulder.

"Please, Count, don't detain the Contessa for so long."

It was the hostess, who took Nera by the hand:

“Contessa, let me introduce you to an interesting guest who has only been in our city for a few days. He just arrived.” The Countess turned around, and Nera saw a man standing behind her in an officer’s uniform.

“Captain Siniša, Commander of the Slavonian battalion,” Countess Čikulini introduced him. “He is a good friend of mine, and I am sure you will find his company delightful.”

Nera looked at the newcomer. All color left her face. She didn’t bow right away. She stared at him in astonishment without even offering her hand in greeting.

He bowed without saying a word.

Nera recognized the man from St. Žaver’s. He seemed to be startled and bewildered at the sight of her face.

“You see, Captain,” the Countess said, “This is the most beautiful girl in Grič. They fight over her as if she were the Roman Empire. Better watch out, you’re a Trenk man!”

“But the Contessa is a fortress that valiantly defends herself,” he said in a deep, resonant voice that immediately reminded Nera of the incident in the woods near Žaver.

“How would you know?”

“I can feel it in the prideful look in her eyes.”

“If you flatter me so much to my face, there’ll be nothing left to say behind my back,” Nera forced a joking reply.

“What a naughty girl you are!,” the Countess berated her. “To reprimand you I shall leave you with the Captain and take Vojkffy with me.”

And the Countess turned to Vojkffy, who stood nearby, and took him by the arm.



## Chapter 8: Revenge

When she was left alone with the young Captain, Nera's face grew pale and her eyes darkened. She was not afraid, but felt some strange excitement the likes of which she had never felt before. In front of her stood a man who could with one word accuse and destroy her. A man who had insulted her so gravely last night that she shot him. Even now his bandaged arm bore witness to the bullet wound from her pistol.

The young Captain stood before her calmly, as if nothing had happened. He was about a head taller than Nera. His soldier's uniform brought out his broad chest and strong shoulders; a sturdy neck carried his handsome and proud head covered with curly black hair. His manly face was olive-skinned, with a black mustache under a Greek nose, and two sharp dark eyes surveyed the world from under thick black eyebrows.

Nera looked at him with scorn. The Captain gave her an impudent smile.

"Isn't it a curious thing, Contessa, that we should meet here?"

His impertinence angered her even more, and she forgot that this man could ruin her at any moment by revealing last night's events. Nera felt her whole body shake with rage. She started toward the door without a word.

"We have plenty yet to discuss, Contessa!" he stopped her.

"I have nothing to say to you."

"We will see about that."

Nera stared at him with loathing and disgust.

“I still haven’t explained to you that I went there to wait for the witches!” the Captain laughed. “Of course, that’s not quite an honorable thing for a Trenk man to do, but since the Vice Governor desired it, I had to oblige. As misfortune would have it, instead of meeting old witches I found a beautiful young lady there.”

“And you think that the one that you found there was a witch?”

“Who can tell? I never even laid eyes on her and she managed to cast a spell on me. Isn’t that the kind of magic that only witches can do?”

“Then be my guest, do your duty and surrender the young lady to Krajačić. Here, Hon. Officer, take me to the Magistrate’s office straight away!”

The Captain grew silent. His facial muscles twitched. His face grew serious, but his voice sounded much gentler than before.

“Contessa, I would rather have both of my arms and legs bound than be in this awkward position, where I have to do today something that I’ve never done before anyone else in my life. Here, I beg you to excuse my rash youthful vigor. I am prepared to offer any explanation and satisfaction that I can.”

Not only did Nera fail to find his words moving: she was absolutely incensed by them.

“Satisfaction? Only knights can offer satisfaction.”

“Contessa,” the Captain protested passionately, his face darkened. “Even if what I did was madness, I did not cast a stain on my honor and I am warning you not to offend me but to listen.”

“No, Hon. Captain. I have no desire to do so.”

“I have the right to justify myself.”

“And I have the right not to hear you out.”

“Then you are obliged to request that I offer satisfaction to a male member of your family.”

“Knights defend a woman even when she is defenseless and alone. Is that what you did back there in the woods?”

His eyes leaped out from under his brows and stared at Nera like two daggers, his lips thinned out and he gritted his teeth. His dark face grew darker still, and his nostrils flared.

The girl was alarmed. She could tell that the young Captain was overcome with fury.

“Will you take back your words, Contessa?” he asked in a threatening tone.

“I will not!”

“Contessa, we shall meet again!”

That was a threat. The Captain turned his back to the girl and left the room. His threatening words kept ringing in the Contessa’s head.

“So, he will accuse me? He will report me to Krajačić? Why couldn’t I let him justify his actions? Why did I feel such unbridled rage, anger, hatred... whatever that was?”

She sat down in an armchair. Last night when she thought about everything that had happened near St. Žaver, she didn’t feel this much hatred towards the stranger who had attacked her. However today, when she saw him, her soul was all shaken, her blood wildly coursed through her veins, her throat was constricted by a feeling of rage and a desire to hit this man, tear the bandage from his wounded arm and shoot him once again, straight through the heart.

She could not understand why she was overcome with this feeling when she saw her stranger face-to-face, to the extent that she had to insult him and continued to do so despite his having the power to immediately surrender her to Krajačić. She wanted him to come back so that she could offend him again, and hurl the lowest, most humiliating insults at him.

A group of young people entered the salon, with Baron Skerlec, Count Vojkffy and the young Count Čikulini among them.

“It’s not nice of you to hide from us, Contessa,” said Vojkffy. “There’s a whole search party out to find you. The hostess sent us to escort you to dinner.”

“You must choose one of us,” Vojkffy announced, giving Nera a firm and knowing look. Everyone was quiet for a moment in expectation of Nera’s choice.

“Of course I will choose,” she said cheerfully. “Only the host can escort me to the dining table!” Vojkffy pressed his lips together, as if to say: you played me! Skerlec smiled, and the rest watched with pleasure as the pretty little Franjo Čikulini blushed and, though bewildered, gallantly offered his hand to the lovely guest.

None of the gentlemen were jealous of him. They followed the unusual pair, smiling. Likewise, everyone else who looked at him smiled and whispered:

“Watch the little page blush with joy to escort the princess!”

The hostess placed Countess Ratkay at the center of the table, since she was the aristocrat of highest repute. Skerlec was seated next to Countess Terka Nadaždi, the Governor’s daughter, and the hostess placed Captain Siniša across the table from her, sitting Nera down by her side.

“I wish to have you by my side at the table at least,” the Countess said. “The gentlemen will eventually swoop you away anyway. I hope this arrangement does not upset you?”

“On the contrary, Countess, I am very pleased with it.”

Count Vojkffy was seated to the right, and he made sure that Nera had everything she needed throughout the evening. He poured her drinks and held the serving dish for her, never forgetting to slyly monitor the handsome young Captain. But he never once looked at Nera.

Skerlec was somewhat peeved, but he attempted to entertain the beautiful raven haired Terka, whose eyes constantly moved around the faces of the young men.

Siniša was still pale. He noticed the looks of the young ladies that converged on his face. He was seated next to Countess Drašković and was tasked with entertaining her, which he did without fail.

They had only brought in two courses when Countess Čikulini's butler announced that Countess Auersperg and her brother, Count Karl Auersperg, had arrived by coach from Mokrice. The hostess frowned, and Nera noticed that she was not pleased with this visit. Nevertheless, she rose and went to greet her new guests.

In a few moments a tall, thin lady with a high coiffure of blonde, heavily powdered hair entered the room, wearing a violet silk dress that was cut very low around the chest and the shoulders. Strings of jewels hung on her head and neck, so that when she entered the room everything around the beautiful countess sparkled.

“What a beautiful lady!” Nera whispered to Count Vojkffy.

“She used to be beautiful,” he said, “she is the Queen's lady in waiting, and her beauty used to shine the same way her jewels do now.”

The newcomers greeted the guests, and everybody sat down again. Countess Auersperg sat by the hostess, and soon enough the guests engaged in pleasant, spontaneous chatter.

“What's that on your arm?” Countess Auersperg asked Captain Siniša.

“A mere trifle! A bullet tickled my muscles a bit.”

“But how were you wounded?” the Countess asked again.

“Well, that's a whole other story,” he replied loudly.

“Do tell,” Ženka Drašković requested with lively interest.

“I couldn’t possibly tell this story in the presence of such an innocent and gentle soul as yourself,” Siniša said loud enough for Nera to hear.

“Oh, so that means the story’s quite piquant,” the Countess interfered, “perhaps you could find a way to tell us without offending anyone’s sensitivities.”

“If the ladies will find it amusing, it will be my pleasure to tell the story.”

Nera covertly looked at the Captain. He took no notice of her. Those seated next to Siniša looked at him expectantly, and those further away started to beg him to tell them what happened.

“You all know that I have been given the honor to protect you and the honest Grič burghers from the witches. So yesterday, I went down to the St. Žaver crossroads, and I left my men at the camp under Sljeme.”

“You went to the crossroads?” the old Baroness Linčika asked admiringly.

“And you weren’t afraid of the witches?”

“Many a time one comes across witches at much nicer places than the crossroads, and thus gets accustomed to seeing them,” the Captain said ironically.

“So, did you see the witches?” the Countess asked.

“I only saw one single witch.”

“Really? Do tell us all about it.”

“She must’ve been a toothless hag?”

“On the contrary! She was young and beautiful.”

“And what was she doing there?”

“Waiting for her lover, and while she waited she performed various spells.”

“Really? And what did you do?”

“Nothing! I captured the beautiful witch and had some fun with her in the dark woods. She was especially kind to me.”

“Really?” Countess Čikulini said ironically.

“Her behavior finally persuaded me to be quite amiable myself.”

Everyone smiled, including Count Vojkffy. Only Nera was frozen, staring at the table in front of her and trying to feign indifference to the tale, but her heart beat fast and her blood raced through her veins.

“And then?” Countess Auersperg asked.

“What? You think I should tell you what happened after?”

The Captain glanced at Nera for a moment and laughed wickedly, enjoying the fact that her face clearly showed the torment his story was putting her through.

“Of course. You said you would tell us how you got that wound on your arm,” the impatient ladies requested that he continue.

“And also tell us the name of the beautiful witch,” Count Vojkffy encouraged him.

“She was a very elegant lady.”

“Elegant? What on earth are you talking about?” the Countess scolded him, and the others laughed.

“I give you my word, she was truly an elegant lady. You all know her very well...”

The gentleman looked at each other in shock. Nera grew pale and looked across the table at her grandmother.

“If only she knew,” she thought, frozen in her seat, waiting with horror in her soul for the terrible moment when the Captain would say her name and throw all of the glory, adoration

and love that she had claimed in this elegant society straight into dust. Still, not once did she attempt to interrupt the Captain's story.

"We want to know who the witch was," the guests insisted, particularly Judge Krajačić.

"Well, at first I didn't know who she was," Siniša continued, "she wouldn't tell me her name, and I couldn't see her face in the darkness. And then lightning flashed and I looked into her beautiful face! 'Ah!' I cried, 'Nothing can help you now. I know you: you are a famous beauty.'"

"I am lost," Nera breathed and closed her eyes to avoid seeing the looks that all of these gentlemen would give her, and the way in which Krajačić's beady eyes would bore into her. She could already feel the elegant ladies' malicious looks, hear her grandmother's scream and the cries of the surprised socialites, and she felt shame and humiliation raining down on her from all sides.

"Come, go on," the ladies insisted, "what did you say?"

"What famous beauty?"

"I said," the Captain continued, looking at the curious ladies, "I said this: 'I know you—it's true, you are a very elegant lady, but I can't help you. Why do you come to the crossing in the woods at this hour? If you are a witch, coming here will prove fatal, and if you are here to meet with your lover, then that will bring you great shame. You will not escape me, my beautiful little squirrel, because everyone knows who you are. You are...'"

"But do tell us already," the excited ladies demanded disgruntledly. "You are?"

"You are—Baroness..."

"A Baroness?! Which one, which one??"

Siniša looked at Nera vengefully.



“Baroness... And at that moment I felt a shooting pain in my arm, and—I woke up!”

The room was silent for a moment, and then disappointment set in. A whole host of admonishment poured onto the Captain out of the curious gentlemen’s handsome mouths.

“How terrible of you to use us in this way!”

“Mr. Captain, this is indeed very crude of you.”

“Hold on, hold on!” Countess Auersperg turned to the ladies. “If you only dreamt the whole thing, how could you feel the pain in your arm? How did you get wounded?”

“That is precisely it: my gun fired into my arm in my sleep.”

The Captain did not spare another moment to look at Nera, who sat there petrified. Everyone was busy listening to Siniša, so no one noticed how pale she was. When the Captain said “And I woke up,” her heart jolted as if she had been stabbed with a sharp sword. This sudden turn of events shook her just as much as the Captain’s tale itself. As everyone rushed to reprimand Siniša for the joke, Nera recovered and started chatting to Count Vojkffy. When the dinner was over, the company split up in groups. The young people started dancing wildly, despite the heat. When he noticed Nera alone for a moment, Captain Siniša approached her.

“May I have this dance please, Baroness.”

“I will not dance with you!”

“You’re quite ungrateful! But never mind that. You must dance with me.”

“I will not!”

“All right, but in that case you will not dance with anyone else either.”

“That is impudence. You have no right to talk to me this way. I will dance with whom I please.”

Nera looked him over angrily, turned away and emphatically went to the ballroom.

## Chapter 9: An Unexpected Engagement

Soon after, Siniša came into the room. Everyone was surprised when the Captain asked Countess Auersperg for a dance. All the ladies looked longingly at Siniša now that the Captain's handsome figure, his beautiful dark face and his strong shoulders were clearly apparent. He danced elegantly and passionately, and the whole time his deep dark eyes shone like torches. All the young ladies longed to dance with him. When they saw him take women one by one to the dance floor, they were beside themselves with joy. He even honored Baroness Linčika, and when he held her around the waist she almost melted with happy delight.

When the Captain had danced with all the ladies, he walked through the rooms as if looking for someone. He stopped at a window. A joyful noise came in from the gardens, and he immediately descended the stairs toward it. Several couples were dancing to the sounds of the music coming from the ballroom in the wide space under the crowns of the trees. Siniša noticed Nera dancing with Baron Skerlec. He approached them and asked them to stop.

"Pardon me, Hon. Baron," the Captain said calmly.

The Baron let go of his beautiful partner's waist and asked:

"What do you want, Hon. Captain?"

"I would like to kindly ask that you grant me a short dance with the Contessa."

Skerlec looked at the Captain with surprise, and Nera's eyes were filled with anger.

"What right do you have?" the Baron asked.

"I was the first to ask the Contessa for a dance, and I believe it is her duty to dance with me before engaging with others."

“Was the Captain truly the first to ask you for a dance?” Skerlec asked Nera.

“Yes,” Nera replied, “this is true. But, Hon. Captain,” Nera turned to Siniša, “I will not dance with you. Do you understand?”

“But I promise you: until you do your duty by me you will dance with no other man.”

The loud argument disturbed the other couples. They ran up to Nera and Skerlec to hear what had happened.

“Ivo, let’s keep dancing,” Nera said, shaking with rage.

At that point, to everyone’s great surprise, Siniša reached for his gun. Everyone turned to look at him incredulously. What was he planning to do?

Karlo Erdody approached the Captain and said quietly:

“Hon. Captain, you must be mad.”

“Are the people who defend their rights really deemed mad here?”

“Of course you are in the right, but I hope you won’t fire a gun in here.”

“I ask that you lay down your weapon until the ladies leave,” said Skerlec.

“Contessa Nera must stay here and fulfill her duty towards me.”

The gentlemen gathered around Skerlec and claimed that the Captain must be drunk and should be asked to leave. They tried to convince him to leave peacefully.

“No one dare lay a hand on a Queen’s officer,” Siniša warned them, “I will not leave this place until my rights and my honor are respected in the same way as those of any other man here.”

Siniša raised his gun and fired in the air, saying:

“I wish to give it a try.”

And then he continued:

“Hon. Baron, please go fetch your gun, and we will resolve the matter immediately!”

“Certainly,” Skerlec responded in a surprisingly cool manner, ordering a servant to retrieve his gun. Nera stood pale and immobile, her eyes gleaming with agitation. However, the gunshot had alarmed everyone in the house and they all rushed out into the garden. When the hostess discovered what the problem was, she shuddered and told the gentleman:

“For God’s sake, he will not give up his intentions. He has a wild temper.”

“A true Trenk officer,” Vojkffy added. “He came to the dance to fight and wreak havoc.”

“You must calm him down,” the hostess whispered to Countess Auersperg, “or we will have bloodshed on our hands.”

Countess Auersperg approached Siniša and said something to him quietly, but he shook his head in defiance. His eyes shone with fury. Countess Čikulini started to beg Nera:

“Contessa, you see that he is in the right. Why won’t you dance with him? Other ladies were happy that he wanted to dance with them. Can’t you see that Baron Skerlec could die? Siniša is a great shot and will surely kill him. I know what he is like; the Captain’s temper is terrible. My dear child, please do me this favor and dance with him.”

“You want me to humiliate myself and admit defeat? Never, Countess! I can’t do it, and I won’t do it even if everyone condemns me.”

Count Oršić came up to Nera too, and whispered:

“I also beg you to comply. This isn’t a man like any other; can’t you see a hundred bandits glaring in his eyes?”

But Nera clenched her fists and said:

“I can’t back down, even if I were to drop dead this instant!”

Countess Čikulini was beside herself. Count Oršić called for Countess Ratkay and the gentlemen hung around Baron Skerlec and Captain Siniša.

“I cannot leave this house until I have had my satisfaction,” Siniša said.

“He is right,” the young noblemen whispered, while the gentlemen stared at the Captain in awe as he stood there, angry and pale, holding a pistol in his hand. The countesses Auersperg and Čikulini were urgently discussing something, casting furious looks at Nera.

Finally, the servant who was sent to bring Skerlec’s gun returned. The Captain and Skerlec faced one another, and asked the ladies to keep their distance. The ladies stirred, and general confusion reigned. The tall, imposing figure of Countess Ratkay appeared. She came between Siniša and Skerlec.

“My child,” the Countess said to Nera, “you will not sadden the old days of your grandmother. It seems to me that you are more stubborn than the Captain himself. Even if his demeanor is strange, he is still in the right and you are not, and because you are wrong you must not allow a man to potentially lose his life here.”

Everyone stared at Nera tensely, awaiting her response.

“The Contessa is right,” Skerlec said with excitement, “and I take all the responsibility for her words.”

Nera looked at him with gratitude. He stood up for her, and at that moment a thought flashed through her mind that apparently gave her great joy. She cheered up and said, in a heightened tone of voice:

“Yes grandmamma, I am right. I have not danced with anyone but Baron Skerlec all evening. None of the gentleman may force me to dance with anyone but my fiancé!”

The company was dumbfounded. Everyone fell silent and was turned to stone, at a loss for words. Baron Skerlec almost lost consciousness, and approached the Captain as if in a daze:

“If my fiancé has offended you in any way, I am prepared to take full responsibility now and always for her actions.”

Siniša bowed coldly, stiffly:

“Of course, this is a different matter entirely. Since the Contessa never danced and won’t be dancing with anyone else but you, her fiancé, then the rest of us must be content with that. But we did not know the baroness was your fiancé. And now, I wish you all the happiness in the world, Hon. Baron. We shall save the guns for another time.”

At that moment Countess Čikulini staggered and fainted. Her friend, Countess Auersperg, turned abruptly to the Countess and whispered:

“For God’s sake, Julija, control yourself! What will they think!”

The ladies swarmed around her, attempting to revive her. The gentlemen watched, not knowing what to do, while the servants ran to fetch a physician. Skerlec stood off to the side with Nera. His face was pale, his eyes moist as if filled with tears. He grabbed Nera’s hands and kissed them, whispering:

“My sweet, my beautiful! I am drunk with unexpected happiness, I don’t even know what I’m saying or doing!”

Vojkffy appeared behind Skerlec’s back like an evil spirit.

“Go, call grandmamma,” Nera whispered to Skerlec so that Vojkffy would hear. “The three of us should go home now.”

The Baron heeded her request and went to get the Countess, his face glowing with happiness.

Count Vojkffy approached Nera. He was calm, cold and menacing.

“Contessa, don’t you remember our conversation before dinner?” he asked pointedly.

“I do.”

“You are aware that I promised to kill any man you chose to love?”

“I am.”

“I beg you not to forget it.”

“I won’t,” Nera answered coldly.

The Count turned and left Nera alone.

In half an hour Countess Ratkay, Baron Skerlec and Nera headed toward the ‘Red Castle.’ The faces of the old Countess and the young Baron shone with happiness and pleasure. Nera kept smiling, but a secret unrest was hidden behind her smile...

## Chapter 10: The Lucifers

It was a dark and cloudy night. The wind howled in the woods, tearing through the branches. In this deep darkness, a man walked under the thicket. His face and his clothes were unrecognizable; he was like a black apparition, and only his footsteps revealed that he was a man. He rushed through the woods, clearing his way through the dense brush. When he finally emerged from the woods, a hill rose ahead of him, under Mesnička Street. The tops of Mesnička tower were black in the night. He approached it quickly, speeding up his steps. Suddenly, down under the tower, right at Zvezdišće, a light hit his face. The man stopped...

Fiery flames licked the air under the tower at Zvezdišće. The rosy light illuminated several trees surrounding the fire. A man wrapped in a cape came out from behind one of the trees. In the light of the fire he seemed to be wearing a red costume. The man threw something into the fire when another apparition appeared, dressed the same way. They both sat down to warm themselves by the fire.

The man who hid in the darkness lay down in the tall grass and started to crawl in the dirt like a snake. He slowly pulled himself forward, careful and quiet. The night and the thick grasses hid his body. Suddenly a strange voice sounded from under the hill, like some sort of a shattered flute. It was heard under Mesnička tower once, and then a second time, very softly and briefly.

The red apparitions seated by the fire abruptly stood and threw something into the flames. The flames burst into the air as if hell itself had opened up. Two new silhouettes appeared in the fiery light, also wrapped in capes. One could clearly tell now that they had thrown hoods over



their heads and faces, and that two pointed, long horns stuck out from the back of their heads resembling those of the devil. In a similar way, their pointed fingers protruded in the air.

In the fire's red light they looked like devils. While the first two men worked hard to keep the fire going, moving around it like phantoms, the other two sprang from under the hill as if they had fallen from the tower.

They were dragging something behind them. The man in the grass lifted his head to better see what it was. He realized that it was a woman's body, tied up in ropes, her clothes torn from being dragged on the ground. Her hair was disheveled and blood dripped from the poor woman's legs and her whole body, which had been slashed by thorns and branches, battered by sharp rocks and banged against tree trunks on the way. Her terribly tortured body was brought up to the fire. She was obviously unconscious. Her face was unrecognizable because of the gag that covered her mouth. One of the men who tended the fire poured some liquid over the woman as soon as they brought her up, and then the four of them grabbed her and threw her into the flames in one fell swoop.

The woman twitched and held out her hands, but two of the red figures used iron bars to push her back into the flames. Her body writhed like a snake's, but she soon sank back into the awful embers.

The flames raged and surged and the body of the woman kept disappearing. The red silhouettes lifted their arms in the air towards the flames and one of them started to speak:

“Black comrades of fiery hell! Accept this sacrifice of a beautiful sinner who has repented, and may she give you the same pleasure and enjoyment as she did to us! May her soul burn in eternal flames, as punishment for wishing to betray and defame your faithful followers

on Earth. May the wind scatter her ashes and may no one alive remember that she ever walked among us!”

“To her eternal death and ruin!”

“Amen!” the other three replied.

The flames devoured the final remnants of the woman’s body before dying out. Embers glowed at the site of the fire like the last testimonial to a fiery grave. The four devils were left in the dark.

“And now, brother Lucifers, let’s head to the masquerade ball.”

“Will fresh little souls be served at our demonic table today?”

“Tuesday is hag’s day, so old Urša has fresh doves for sale today.”

“To fry or to bake?”

“Both.”

“And what about our beauty, Nera?”

“Things are worse now than ever. She got engaged.”

“To that gnat Skerlec?”

“Let’s roast him!”

“He’s not a problem. But the old woman is there!”

“That matron is a seven-headed dragon.”

“If you’re so valiant—cut off the seven heads.”

“Don’t you worry! I came up with a plan that a hundred devils wouldn’t be able to crack! Nera will be ours.”

“Quiet. Hold up. I think I heard something.”

“Matiček, you’re a coward!”

“I heard something rustle nearby.”

“The leaves are rustling in the wind, and you’re dreaming of petticoats!”

“Brother Lucifers, this is no joke.”

“I’m thirsty. Look, the embers have already burned out.”

“But I did hear something.”

“Perhaps it was the beautiful Jelica’s ghost?”

“Filip is always joking. Don’t you think someone from the city might have noticed the fire?”

“Of course! If there are Lucifers there who reign under the Mesnička tower at night, then they must have seen the fire.”

“But who would dare come here? Ha-ha! I really wish someone would catch us here sometime.”

“I carry a pistol in each pocket just to pour some gunpowder into their eyes.”

“We wouldn’t need to waste gunpowder. The sad wretch would die of fright just looking at us.”

“Do you hear it? It’s the night watch!”

“His trumpet quivers. I guess he noticed the flames and will tell the burghers tomorrow how he saw the witches burning fires at Zvezdišće!...”

“And Krajačić will call in the Slavonian battalion.”

“Enough with the chatter! Let’s go. I am curious about our celebration tonight and the new guests we will meet. Urša promised me that beautiful widow from the Stone Gate.”

“The Cindek widow? My dear Mefisto, you have such a bourgeois taste in women.”

Devilish laughter came from under their hoods, and their steps rustled in the grass. They moved away among the branches, and then they disappeared as if the underworld had truly swallowed them.

The man in the grass did not move an inch. It was as if he had died of fright, just as the devils said. He lay there immobile, dead. Half an hour went by. The wind bent the branches and whistled eerily through the night, like night spirits calling to each other. A procession of shadows came down from Mesnička Gate to Zvezdišće. It was too dark to tell how many there were. Were they ghosts? No, they couldn't be because their footsteps rustled in the leaves. The man in the grass lifted his head just a bit. The shadows approached him. He could only tell that these were people wrapped in dark cloaks that reached all the way down to their feet. They were blindfolded and walked one behind the other, circling around the bushes and the trees, as if under a witch's enchantment, winding around the dark thicket. Someone concealed by a cape and hood was leading them. Once they had circled the bushes and the trees several times, they disappeared all of a sudden under the hill below the tower, as if the earth itself had swallowed them. The world was silent, except for the wind that bent the branches and susurrated through the leaves. The man who had been hiding in the grass got up slowly, looked all around and then started to sneak carefully towards Mesnička Gate.

The wind roared over Grič, and the rain poured on the windows of the Capuchin monastery. The Capuchins were fast asleep when a bell sounded in the gatehouse. The old gatekeeper woke up and jumped out of bed.

“Who could be ringing the bell at this time of night?” he muttered. He put on his capuchin robe quickly and came out into the hallway. When he opened the peephole he asked in a half whisper:

“Who in God’s name is it?”

“It is I, the night watchman. Please send father Smole down immediately. This is an urgent matter: a man is on his death bed and begging for a final confession.”

“Right away,” the friar said as he went up to the first floor, knocked on the Capuchin’s door and told him what had happened.

“I will be right down,” he heard Father Smole’s voice. Within a few minutes, and came out of his cell fully dressed.

“What an ill-timed request,” the gatekeeper said.

“One can’t deny a dying man’s wish for a confession, even if stones were to rain down on us from the skies.”

Father Smole went downstairs. A key screeched in the lock.

“Father, give me your key,” Smole said, “so I don’t have to wake you upon my return.”

“Here, here. You are always so considerate of me, my young brother.”

The old man was pleased, and gave the young capuchin the key. Smole went out. The wind and the rain blew in his face. He looked around and saw a man wearing a long leather raincoat standing under the stairs.

“Here I am, watchman. Where is the poor man?”

“Here he is,” the watchman said, pointing at the black coffin that lay on the ground. Two men in dark capes stood next to it, with leather hoods protecting their heads from the rain.

“What? Is the man dead?”

“Yes,” one of the two men said quietly. “We did not wish to disturb the whole monastery, so we summoned you out under the pretense of a confession. We beg you father Smole, open the church so we can place the corpse inside.”

“And who is this poor man?”

“You shall see. He is a good friend of yours. Please do us this last favor.”

The Capuchin did not think for long. He opened the monastery gate, and the two men grabbed hold of the coffin and carried it in while the watchman stayed outside. Father Smole lit the candle in the sanctuary lamp and went forward. The two men carried the coffin behind him. They walked quietly under the dark arches of the corridor, then turned a corner and went down another hallway where father Smole opened a small iron door. He walked ahead holding the candle in his hand. The strange night apparitions walked slowly, carrying the black coffin.

“A dead body is heavy, Father,” one of them said.

Finally they brought the coffin into the church and laid it on the ground. Smole attempted to look the strangers in the eyes, but they remained in the darkness, and the light of the candle was too dim to be effective in the church.

“Who died?” Smole asked.

“Countess Suzana Ratkay.”

Smole faltered. The candle fell out of his hands and went out, and turned the church as dark as a tomb. Smole could not see anyone; he could only hear the strangers’ breathing.

“For God’s sake,” the Capuchin breathed, “what happened to her?”

“As you know, she went to her estate after Countess Čikulini’s party. She was murdered there.”

“Dear Lord! Who would kill her?”

“Her own serfs.”

“That is impossible! She was kind to everyone.”

“We don’t know about that, nor is it any of our business, but we do have to surrender the Countess to the Contessa. Please carefully inform her of these events. Have her come here so that she can see the Countess and hear the details regarding her grandmother’s death.”

“No, no, I will let her sleep peacefully through one more night.”

“Father, we have to leave. We are from the Malakoczy estate, and we need to go back. Please read this letter.”

The stranger handed the friar a letter that said:

*“Holy father,*

*Knowing that you are house Ratkay’s friend, I send you the dead body of the ill-fated Countess. We beg you to allow my men to personally surrender the body to the Contessa, and let them inform her of the course of events that led to the Countess’ death. Then send them back to me; we need them to search for the villains.*

*M. the nobleman Malakoczy.”*

“If that is the case then I must wake her up. My God why did you punish that good, beautiful child so harshly,” the Capuchin sighed to himself, climbing the steps as if in a dizzy spell. Both strangers marched after the Capuchin. Their black leather coats rustled noisily with each step.

“Would you like to wait here?” Smole asked the strangers.

“That’s all right. We will wait outside, we are accustomed to the rain.”

Smole went out into the street with them and left them waiting as he proceeded to the Red Castle. His heart cried as he pulled on the castle’s bell.

“My God, what terrible news I bring,” the young Capuchin mourned in his soul. A dumbfounded doorman opened the door. The Capuchin entered and had them wake the maid. He

told her that he must immediately speak with the Contessa. In about a quarter of an hour Nera came down, wrapped in a long robe.

“Some important business must bring you here at this hour!”

“Very important, Contessa!”

“I can guess it already. Krajačić knows we are hiding Kušenka.”

“It’s even worse than that.”

Nera looked at the Capuchin with alarm. His face had a greenish cast, and his voice shook.

“For God’s sake, what is it?”

“Come with me, Contessa. Put on some clothes.”

Nera ran up to her room without delay and hurriedly threw on a dress and a raincoat.

“Won’t you tell me what has happened?”

“I will tell you along the way.”

“And where are we going?”

“To our church. Someone you know well has died and is resting there.”

“Skerlec!” Nera muttered under her breath, remembering Vojkffy’s threat. “Yes, yes he carried out his threat.”

“It is not Skerlec. Come!”

The doorman shut the door behind them, and they walked toward the Capuchin monastery. Two men stood on the steps and greeted Nera. The night watchman paced in front of the church. Smole entered first, followed by Nera and then the other two. The watchman came in behind them without Father Smole’s notice. Everyone entered the church. Suddenly Smole felt



someone hit the arm in which he carried the candle, snuffing out the flame. Darkness ensued in which Smole could tell someone was wrestling behind him.

“Contessa,” Smole called. But the last sound died out on his lips as a strong hand covered his mouth and held him tight. He heard a rustling and a smothered voice behind his back, and then the clank of something wooden falling, after which a light flamed up again. The two men stood by the coffin, holding a candle. Only now did Smole notice that the men wore black masks under their leather hoods.

“My God,” he thought to himself, “did I fall victim to swindlers or bandits? And where is the Contessa?”

He looked around the illuminated space, but the squeezing Contessa was nowhere to be seen. The third man in a leather coat stood by him, holding his mouth shut. “For Christ’s sake, that’s the watchman!” the friar thought to himself. He wore the watchman’s cloak, but a mask hid his face as well. One of the two men by the coffin drew two pistols. “Dear God, receive my soul,” the Capuchin prayed when he saw them both pointed at him.

“Do you see this, friar?” the masked man asked. “You will now follow us wherever we wish. If you make a sound I will blow your brains out, or stab you in the ribs with this dagger. Let’s go!”

The masked men lifted the coffin.

“I beg you, people, tell me what you have done with the Contessa?”

“That is none of your concern!”

“What did you do to her?” the Capuchin persisted.

“Move!” the brash voice commanded, pointing the pistol at him. “If we come across anyone, you will say we are carrying a witch in this coffin who died in the tower tonight, and that you are escorting her to Zvezdišće.”

They left the monastery without making a sound. The doorman was asleep.

The Capuchin walked ahead, flanked by the masked man with a dagger in one hand and a pistol in the other. The other two followed, carrying the coffin. Father Smole was staggering and his head was spinning. He was too weak to bear the great agitation that took hold of his entire body; every blood vessel in him trembled.

“Where is the Contessa? How did she disappear from the church?”

This question took over his entire soul, so that he wished these men would kill him just so that he wouldn't have to live through this awful uncertainty and terrible fear. He tried to remember everything that had happened in the church. It had all been over in a few moments. So where could they have taken her? How could she have disappeared so quickly? Maybe she was still lying there, tied up in the dark? Or maybe they killed her? When that thought crossed his mind, he jolted as if hit by lightning. His forehead was beaded with sweat, and his body shook like that of a frightened child. Then he thought of something:

“Where are they carrying that coffin? Why are they carrying it? Was the noble Malakoczy's letter counterfeited? Was someone stalking the Countess and her granddaughter? But where is she? Where is she?” These thoughts kept making the Capuchin linger because his knees buckled.

“Your legs are weak, aren't they? Hold on, we have a long way to go.”

The Capuchin kept quiet. The procession eventually arrived in Mesnička Street, and Smole saw a pool of light and heard the muffled sounds of an instrument in the house of one of the most respected butchers, Blaž Cestar.

“Watch out, friar,” his chaperone said, “people are awake here. If you make a sound, look, this is the dagger that will finish you off!”

Father Smole understood that threat. He had never been a brave and resourceful man, but in this moment when he thought everything was lost, he suddenly had an idea. He kept tripping over rocks that littered the street. He looked sideways to his escort to the right, but darkness concealed him and he was sure that the man couldn't see what he was doing. All of a sudden, the Capuchin purposely tripped over a rock on and fell to his knees. He grabbed a pebble off the ground and threw it at the window of the lit house. The pebble hit the front door.

“What's that?” the masked man said quietly.

The Capuchin got off the ground and started to walk as if he heard nothing.

## Chapter 11: A Curious Event

The group at the butcher Cestar's house was alarmed by the sound of the pebble hitting the door. People looked out the windows in their festive attire adorned with rosemary sprigs.

"Who's outside?" several voices asked.

"Did you knock on our door? What do you want?" the fat butcher asked.

"We never came near your house," the Capuchin's escort said, without turning his masked face towards the lit house, retreating into the darkness instead.

"That's not true," yelled the butcher, whose face showed signs of having had a bit too much to drink. "Hold on—you banged at our door! I'll show you, disturbing honest burghers in the middle of the night! Do you think we're some sort of drunken skunks who spend their nights getting sauced?"

The butcher darted to his front door and opened it, and the rest ran after him, fearing a fight was about to erupt. But the butcher was not to be stopped. He grabbed a lantern in the hallway and went outside, followed by the whole company. Smole realized with secret joy that these people were wedding guests, and considered himself saved.

The butcher lifted his lantern and illuminated two men who carried the black coffin on their shoulders, hiding their heads behind it to prevent the people from seeing their masks. The Capuchin's escort stood by the coffin, leaving the Capuchin in the pool of the lantern's light.

"For God's sake, it's Father Smole!" cried burgher woman Bara Cindek, who stood a little ways away from the butcher, wearing wedding attire.

"Where are you going, Holy Father?" the burghers asked.

The masked man who followed the Capuchin turned around so as to keep his face in the shadow and said:

“The devil strangled a witch in the tower tonight, and we are carrying her to Zvezdišće.”

The faces of the wedding party reflected the fear and anxiety that these words triggered. Everyone thought the same thing but the butcher, who was too drunk, dared to say it out loud:

“Now we know why you’re banging on doors.”

The Capuchin’s chaperone pulled him by the robe, but he tried to get away, screaming:

“It’s not true, get them, they’re criminals!”

The Capuchin felt a dagger through his ribs, and collapsed in the street.

The wedding party started to scream. The women ran, the men were astounded, and no one noticed that the masked man had thrust a dagger into the Capuchin, nor did they know why he fell down. The two men who carried the coffin threw their burden onto the street and started to run.

“Damned cowards,” the third one muttered, and ran after them.

Only now did the people understand what had happened. The button-seller Adam, who stood next to Ms. Cindek, came up to the Capuchin.

“They must be thieves,” he said.

Father Smole lay still on the ground. The button-seller lifted his head up a bit and noticed a pool of blood underneath him.

“For God’s sake, blood! This is some sort of a plot! Let’s go after them, does anyone have a pistol or a gun?!”

Two young men jumped and rushed into the house, grabbing all the weapons they could find at the butcher’s. They started running down the dark street in pursuit of the fugitives.

“Hold on,” the button-seller said, “Let’s listen, perhaps we will hear which direction they’re running.”

The three men halted. They neither saw nor heard anything.

“Perhaps they are hiding somewhere?” one lad whispered.

“That’s very probable. Or they jumped into someone’s garden and are waiting there for us to pass. If they ran up the street we would still be able to hear their footsteps. Only a bat can fly up Mesnička Street that quickly.”

“You’re right, Master.”

“It would be best for us to stay here and wait for them to stir.”

“What if they ran to the hills?”

“Dammit!” the button-seller shouted angrily.

“What is it, for God’s sake?”

The button-seller felt a bullet fly by his ear. Two bangs echoed in the dark night.

“Boys, get on the ground, we are sitting ducks here.”

In a second the three of them were on the ground. They opened fire in the direction of the bullets.

“They are running up above Mesnička Street.”

They got up and started up the street toward the crowd of people gathered in front of the butcher’s house. When they saw the button-seller and his friends, they accosted them with questions:

“Was that them shooting or you?”

“Both sides fired, but we were not harmed. I can’t tell whether we hit anyone. It’s too dark outside, we can’t go after them!”

“What about the Capuchin?”

“He’s not moving. He is dead!”

Several half-dressed people came out of the little house next door, wakened by the gunshots.

“Get the Capuchin inside,” the button-seller said. “We can’t leave him here.”

“What about the coffin? We should take it to the Magistrate’s office.”

“Let them carry it themselves.”

“Look, the Council Commissioner and Count Vojkffy were also wakened by the gunshots.”

Dvojković and Count Vojkffy walked down the street toward them, wearing robes that barely covered their nightshirts.

“What happened? Who was shooting?” the Council Commissioner asked.

“Who killed the Capuchin?” Vojkffy asked, noticing the friar on the ground.

The people told them what had happened and showed them the coffin that lay the darkness in the middle of the road.

“What did the people who carried the coffin look like?”

“We couldn’t see their faces. It was too dark.”

“Have one of your boys go up to the Magistrate’s office and wake our men to fetch the coffin.”

“Look, there’s a dagger in his body,” Vojkffy noted as he looked over the Capuchin. “We should call the medic, perhaps he is not dead yet.”

Two men went to the Magistrate’s office, and one went to get the medic.

“We can’t take the Capuchin to the monastery, it is too far. Come on men, let’s take him to my house,” the City Commissioner said.

“No, Mr. City Commissioner,” the butcher said determinedly. “I will give shelter to the man who was murdered in front of my home.”

And so he started lifting the Capuchin on his own, when Count Vojkffy jumped up to help bring him inside. While the burghers who gathered there talked and tried to guess what had happened, the City Commissioner frowned:

“We know that the people who carried the coffin were not sent by the Magistrate’s office. Why would they kill the Capuchin? Why would they run?”

“This is truly unbelievable,” Vojkffy said. The others supported Dvojković’s opinion.

“I have a feeling those men were the witches’ partners in crime.”

“Well then why carry a dead witch up to Zvezdišće?” the Count said. “Perhaps they wanted to steal the dead hag to prevent us from burning her body.”

“That must be it, sir,” the butcher said. “Surely her partners wanted to snatch her away.”

“Or the devil himself,” the old Palčić woman noted, “they were as dark as the devils, and they kept their faces hidden.”

“That is ridiculous,” the button-seller said, dismissing her with a wave of his hand. “Old womenfolk see the devil in everything.”

Mrs. Palčić looked furiously at the young button-seller and confronted him:

“I see the devil whenever I look at you.”

The old woman would have insulted him further, but the medic came and requested everyone to keep their distance so that he could examine the Capuchin. Two city policemen arrived at the same time. Dvojković asked them:



“Which of our men were ordered to carry a witch’s body up to Zvezdišće?”

“We don’t know, sir. Two men are standing guard at the tower, and we were at the Magistrate’s office.”

“All right, take this coffin and bring it up to Zvezdišće. Someone wanted to steal a witch’s body.”

“But what did father Smole have to do with it?”

“He did not go with them voluntarily,” said the button-seller, “because right before he fell he shouted: ‘Get them, they’re criminals.’”

“That means they forced him to come along,” the Council Commissioner interrupted him.

“I have no doubt that I’m right. If only the Capuchin would come to, we could learn what happened.”

The two policemen still stood on the street.

“What are you standing there for?” the council commissioner yelled. “Carry the coffin away.”

“We beg your pardon, honorable Council Commissioner,” one of the policemen said, “but who would dare go to Zvezdišće at this time of night, and on a Tuesday!”

“You will take this coffin and watchman it at Zvezdišće or I will kick you out of service immediately.”

The policemen submissively picked up the coffin and started down the street. The host invited the gentleman into the house. Everyone gathered in Cestar’s great room where wedding songs were being sung just an hour earlier. Now the people looked dejected and worried. They impatiently awaited news about the Capuchin. The Council Commissioner sent for Dr. Stiller to examine the friar as well, and sent out a search party after the criminals. When the doctor

arrived, Count Vojkffy and the Council Commissioner were still talking to the policemen. The three of them entered the little room where the medic attempted to bring the Capuchin to. He drew the dagger from the wound and bandaged it.

“His heart is still beating,” the doctor said, “but very faintly. It does not seem to me that this man will ever take another witch’s confession.”

The doctor was about to leave, but the Capuchin started to show signs of life.

“I guess we shall stay here,” the Council Commissioner said. “Perhaps he will come to and I will be able to hear him out. And you, hon. Count,” he said to Vojkffy, “are free to go home and sleep. Why should you sit here when we don’t need your help anymore? I am bound by duty to stay, so I won’t be returning until I complete this task.”

## Chapter 12: The Lost Coffin

Bara Cindek was dejected, just like the rest of the household.

“The poor friar,” she sighed, “he was so kind!”

“What will the Countess say?” the button-seller remarked.

“Good Lord, she doesn’t even know. Someone should tell her.”

“The Countess is at her estate.”

“But the Contessa is at home. She would be upset if I did not let her know.”

“I will come with you, mistress,” the button-seller offered, “it’s getting lighter out and daylight is approaching, but you still shouldn’t walk around on your own.

The two of them quickly left the house.

“Ha-ha,” Mrs. Palčić remarked maliciously, “I would bet my life that she does not care one bit about the Contessa.”

“Don’t say such things, neighbor,” the butcher reprimanded her. “There’s a dying man in there.”

Meanwhile, Adam and Barica hurried to Grič. They climbed up to Countess Ratkay’s castle in silence, and the widow rang the doorbell. The doorman’s hurried steps echoed inside.

“Look at that, the doorman is up,” Barica noted with surprise.

Bara and the button-seller entered the castle.

“Please wake the Contessa right away,” Bara said. “There was an accident and we have to inform her of it immediately.”

“The Capuchin must’ve told her already. He came here to get the Contessa and took her with him.”

“Are you drunk? Which Capuchin?”

“You must be the ones who are drunk, not me. Capuchin Smole took her away in the middle of the night, so I stayed up waiting for their return.”

Bara folded her hands in bewilderment.

“Do you hear this, Adam? Something happened here.”

Having said that Bara ran out of the castle without worrying about the doorman's questions, and raced down Capuchin Square.

“Quickly—to Plebanuška Street,” Bara said to the button-seller breathlessly. They pulled on their doorbell of a palace. The doorman did not receive them kindly, but Barica said energetically:

“Wake the young Baron quickly. Have him come to Countess Ratkay’s castle right away.”

The doorman did not ask any questions but ran upstairs instead, while Bara and Adam returned to the castle to wait for the young Baron. He came quickly and was surprised to see the baker and the button-seller standing in front of the castle’s garden gate.

“Hon. Baron, I thought that you were the only person I could call upon in this misfortune. Something strange has happened. The Contessa was at home last night,” Barica started to tell him.

“Where is the Contessa?” the Baron interrupted her, looking at the doorman.

“If you please, Your Highness,” the doorman explained, “Capuchin Smole rang the doorbell around midnight and had us wake the Contessa. They spoke briefly, and then the

Contessa got dressed and left with the Capuchin without saying a word to me about where she was going.”

“Did she go with the Capuchin on her own?”

“Yes, she was alone.”

“But here is the terrible thing, Hon. Baron,” Barica said. “I just came to fetch the Contessa because the Capuchin s lying down at the butcher Cestar’s, half dead. They pulled a foot-long dagger out of his back.”

“And the Contessa, where is the Contessa?”

“We did not see her anywhere, and since she is not here either I went to get you.”

“Where is this butcher? Take me to him,” the Baron said abruptly.

Skerlec, the button-seller and Bara went down to Mesnička Street. On the way Barica told him in detail everything that had happened with the Capuchin. When the Baron entered the room where the Capuchin lay, he saw the Council Commissioner, the doctor and the medic reading a letter.

“You are here, Hon. Baron?” said Dvojković in surprise.

“Yes, they told me what happened. Is Smole alive?”

“Yes, but he is hallucinating,” Dr. Stiller replied. “We shall see, perhaps he will survive, but the wound is very deep. However, I must give you much more unpleasant news than this.”

Skerlec turned pale.

“Your Highness,” the doctor proceeded with a humble voice that he always used to speak with aristocrats, “as I was examining the Capuchin’s clothing to trace the path of the dagger through his robe, I found this. It is a letter addressed to the Capuchin.”

The doctor gave the Baron the letter, in which the nobleman Malakoczy informed him that he was sending him the body of the murdered Countess Ratkay. The letter shook in Skerlec's hands. A wave of panic swept over him so that he could hardly contain himself.

"And where is the coffin with the Countess?" the Baron asked.

"We don't know," the doctor replied.

"Hon. Doctor," the Baron addressed Stiller, who was on his way out. "Please stay at the Capuchin's side. If he regains consciousness I beg you to question him about everything that has happened, and to tell him that I wish to know the details. Please do everything you can to help him regain consciousness, so that we may at least speak with him. Your effort and knowledge will be richly rewarded."

Stiller took off his hat, put down his medicine bag and sat by the Capuchin. His pleased face showed how honored he was by Skerlec's request. In the meantime, the Baron went out into the street with Dvojković and told him everything he had learned about Nera.

"That would be just terrible, hon. Baron, but I don't think the Contessa was harmed," Dvojković said.

"First we shall go see the capuchins. Perhaps the Contessa is there by her grandmother's coffin."

When they came to the monastery, they asked the doorman whether Contessa Nera was there. The doorman knew nothing of her or of any coffin. They searched the church and the graveyard. The Council commissioner himself looked in all the corners in vain. There were no traces of the Contessa or Countess Ratkay's coffin.

Dvojković and Skerlec went to the city captain Ladislav Sale to inform him about what had happened. Sale immediately got up and promised Skerlec to lead an investigation into the

events, and to do everything in his power to learn Nera's whereabouts. He immediately went with the Baron to determine what would be necessary to start the search. On their way they met Krajačić, who was coming from the tower at the Stone Gate. They greeted each other and Dvojković asked the Judge:

“Why are you out so early?”

“I was in the tower supervising the torture from three in the morning until now.”

“Please Hon. Judge,” Skerlec interfered. “Tell me, did a witch die in the tower tonight?”

“No, not tonight, nor the night before, and not this month either.”

Skerlec looked at the Council Commissioner and the City Captain:

“What do you say to that? So, there was no witch in that coffin!”

“That means the criminals were carrying Countess Ratkay in it,” Sale said.

“Who knows if those were the killers themselves trying to get rid of the body?”

The Judge was baffled by their conversation. He was even more shocked when he learned what had happened.

“Where is the coffin that the police took away?” Skerlec asked.

“I sent it to Zvezdišće. I figured that a witch had died,” Dvojković replied.

“Why didn't you have them open the coffin?” Skerlec asked.

“Only the city Judge has the right to do that before they burn the corpse. I truly thought it was a dead witch, and that I had no right to meddle.”

“Let's head to Zvezdišće,” Sale said. Judge Krajačić came along. When they got there they were extremely surprised to see that the coffin was nowhere to be found. A small storage shed stood next to the usual place of the pyre, but there was no coffin. They noticed fresh hoof prints on the top of the hill where the pyres were usually lighted.

“What is this? These are fresh tracks, as if they had just been left in the clay soil.”

“As if someone rode through here a short while ago,” Sale said.

“Forgive me, sir, but there is no way a horse could leave so many tracks on this slippery hill top, which is barely six feet wide. This looks as if ten horses trod here. Look at this,” Sale warned.

Krajačić bent to the ground, looked at the tracks, frowned and said:

“This does look suspicious! It is clear that ten horses could not have stood here, but these are still hoof prints. Besides, the hoof-prints are so shallow that these horses must not have weighed more than twenty pounds. Something mysterious happened here. You know that this is where we burn the witches who were possessed by the devil. Perhaps the devils took the dead body away and then danced around at Zvezdišće.”

“Do the devils have horses’ hooves?” Skerlec asked.

“Didn’t you know that?” the Judge wondered.

“So, the coffin is not here?” Sale said.

“But I sent two policemen here with it, and I told them to guard it.”

“So let’s go up and hear what these policemen have to say,” the City Captain Sale suggested.

The sun was already high in the sky by the time they reached the magistrate. Captain Sale called in all of his policemen, but the two that had carried the witch’s coffin were not there. One of their friends told the Captain that he saw them at dawn at Mesnička Gate, leaving the city.

“Were they carrying a coffin?” Sale asked.



“No, they left without anything and they said to me: ‘Goodbye, Šimun, we won’t be back. The Council Commissioner wants us to carry coffins up to Zvezdišće and guard witches there. We’d rather quit.’”

“But where did they leave the coffin?”

“I can’t tell you, Your Highness. They said nothing about that.”

The City Captain commanded the policemen to look for the coffin everywhere. The policemen could only have hidden it in the bushes on the inner side of the city walls. While the policemen went out to carry out their chief’s order, Skerlec stayed behind with the city gentlemen. He sat on a chair, pale and exhausted. All he could think about was Nera. While the gentlemen kept worrying about their witch’s coffin, the young Baron was weighed down by heavy thoughts: where had Nera disappeared to?

He kept receiving word from the Countess Ratkay’s castle that she had not yet returned. This upset him every time. He could not think of anyone who would hurt Nera, nor of any place where she might be hidden. He had an even harder time figuring out why someone would murder Countess Ratkay. Then suddenly, a policeman very deferentially opened the door to someone entering the room.

### Chapter 13: An Unsolvable Plot

Before them stood Countess Ratkay, broken and pale. She sat down, collapsing wordlessly on the first available chair. The gentlemen could not tell whether she had found out what happened to Nera or if she had risen from the dead.

“You are shocked to see me,” the Countess finally said, “I must look terrible. But what happened to me is even worse.”

“What happened?” Skerlec asked, afraid to hear news of Nera.

“Last night I got ready to return to Grič at dawn. I wanted to retire early and went to my bedroom around nine o’clock, where I sat at my desk to look over the estate accounts that my manager had submitted for review. Suddenly, I heard something rustle behind me. At first I thought it was the wind rustling through the leaves of the ivy creeping up to my window. But then I heard someone breathing: I turned around and saw a masked man in a black cape lowering himself through the window into my bedroom. I jumped to the door but he caught up with me, grabbed me with iron hands and started choking me. Within a moment I found myself on the ground, not knowing what was happening. When I came to I lifted my head and looked around. I could hear men’s voices coming from the other room. Someone was opening the drawers and the cupboards and strewing things around the room. I heard men laughing and saying: ‘Take everything; the old woman won’t be in need of her things anymore in this world.’ Since I was lying by the door I managed to pull on the bell that led to my chambermaid’s room. It sounded through the house and alarmed everyone. When they heard footsteps approaching, the villains

jumped out the window. I lay on the floor without moving an inch until my servants arrived. The villains made off with a lot of money.”

“How many men were there?” the City Captain asked.

“I think there were four. I’m not sure.”

“What were they wearing?”

“They wore long black coats, and their faces were masked.”

“When did you return to Zagreb?” Skerlec asked, trying to ascertain whether the Countess knew about Nera’s disappearance.

“This morning. I just rode into the city and came straight to the Magistrate’s office to report this. I must go home now. Ivo, will you escort me? Nera will be so scared when she sees me this way.”

The gentlemen exchanged knowing glances. The Countess stood up as if to leave when Baron Skerlec stopped her:

“Aunt, wait. Something horrible happened here as well. Someone stabbed Father Smole in Mesnička Street.”

“What? Stabbed?”

“Yes, aunt. And then... there is something else. Nera is missing...”

The Countess grabbed her head and collapsed. The gentlemen ran to help her and sat her down on a chair.

“What did you say? What happened?” the old Countess whispered.

Skerlec told her everything he had heard from the doorman and Bara the baker, who had witnessed the stabbing. As the Countess listened with her head hung and her face glum, she appeared even more crushed than before.

“What do you make of everything that has happened?” Skerlec asked the gentlemen.

“They wanted to kill the Countess, that much is clear. We can’t know what their plans were with the Contessa, but there must be some connection,” Sale said.

“What about the nobleman Malakoczy’s letter?” asked Skerlec, showing it to the Countess.

“This is not his handwriting,” the old woman said.

“This letter must have been a ploy to trick Father Smole,” Skerlec warned. “Someone wanted to kill the Countess, and that same night Nera was to be targeted as well. But who, why and how does the kidnapping play into it?”

“Perhaps, honorable Baron, you have some enemies who might wish to harm you?” Sale asked.

“No, I have no enemies. I do not meddle in politics, intrigues, or anything of the sort.”

“Perhaps Your Highness has evoked jealousy over Contessa Nera?”

“I couldn’t tell you.”

“Who knows, maybe it’s a matter of unrequited love, and the stranger is either avenging himself or wants to take the girl by force.”

“I don’t know anything about this, either from my or the Contessa’s side.”

“But don’t forget,” warned Dvojković, “the criminals robbed the Countess. A man who is only interested in revenge would have killed the Countess and kidnapped the Contessa, but he would not rob them.”

Everyone thought Dvojković had a good point.

The Countess finally arose to go home. She was weak and Skerlec had to practically carry her into the coach. When she arrived at the castle and found her granddaughter’s rooms

empty, she started to tremble. She had Count Oršić called in. When he heard what had happened, his eyes filled with tears.

“Petar,” the Countess said, her voice shaking, “do you understand what this means? Isn’t this the exact same fate her mother suffered?”

“That would be terrible! God forbid!”

“Petar, this is too much—I will go mad with grief!”

“Calm down, dear Suzana. Perhaps everything is not lost yet,” Count Petar comforted her.

Night fell, and Countess Ratkay roamed her brightly lit rooms like a mad woman. She kept calling for her lost granddaughter with tears in her eyes. Count Oršić and Baron Skerlec were the only witnesses to her grief. No one else was allowed to see her, even though a crowd had gathered around her castle throughout the day, and friends and acquaintances had come to console her. But the Countess refused to see anyone. The clock struck midnight. Skerlec went home devastated, and the old lady continued to sit with Count Oršić in her bedroom. And she waited, and sighed, and wept.

## Chapter 14: The Masked Lady

Baba<sup>104</sup> Jana paced restlessly around her little house. A small lamp burned on the wooden table, partially illuminating the low wooden ceiling. The porch was covered in soot and the clay that covered the walls had blackened from the smoke coming out of the open fireplace; the fire had already been extinguished. The low dark space contained nothing but a bench, an old wooden bed and a chest. Pots were piled around the fire, as black as if they had been turned to coal. A petite old lady wearing a burgher's dress with a large kerchief on her had opened a small window.

Several lit windows shone on Grič, and down at Mesnička Gate a four-cornered lamp squinted through the night. Baba Jana stared for a while at these lights, and then retreated into the house and continued to pace around the cottage as if waiting for someone.

In a short while someone knocked at the door.

"Who in God's name is it?" the old lady asked, cheering up.

"Lovro," a youthful voice was heard from outside.

"You little louse, what took you so long? Where is Urša?"

"Baba Urša isn't home, she went up in the hills to pick herbs and won't be back for two days."

"Then we will get to work on our own."

"Will we really cut off the witch's hair and stab her heart?"

"You will see, come on. Take the candle and the knife, and put them in your pocket."

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<sup>104</sup> "Baba" literally means "grandmother," but is often used as a derogatory term for old women, with allusions to the infamous "Baba Roga" (or Baba Yaga), a witch-like being of Slavic folklore. As such, it is part of the name and non-translatable.

The old woman handed him a huge knife, and the boy pocketed it in his vest. When they were about to leave, someone knocked at the door again.

“Who is coming to see me at this hour?” the old woman twitched, and went to the door.

“Who is knocking?”

“The White Owl,” a soft voice sounded from the other side.

The old woman quickly opened the door. A woman in burgher dress, wrapped in a long cloak, entered the room. Her head was covered with a black lace kerchief, and her face was hidden behind a mask.

“What is it, Your Highness?” the old woman asked with reverence.

“Baba Urša is not home and I have a great need of her services. I must speak with her.”

“She went up in the hills to collect herbs, but I am her sister not only by blood but also by knowledge, Your Highness.”

“That is why I have come. Does Urša tell you about her business?”

“We each hold our own accounts, so we try not to interfere with each other’s work, but we frequently work together.”

“Yesterday the ‘blacks’ had an important job to do, but they failed. Urša gave them some instructions, but the matter did not turn out as it should have. Did she tell you anything about it?”

“No, but if you want my help, I might have even better herbs.”

“No, this is another matter entirely. Something should have been brought to a specific place, but it wasn’t. The thing disappeared, and now we find ourselves in great deal of trouble. They were extremely incompetent with the whole affair and now they don’t know where the coffin has got to.”

“What? A coffin? What coffin?”

The woman scolded herself:

“Dammit, I said too much. All day I have heard of nothing but the lost coffin.”

Baba Jana pressed her lips together, settled herself on the bench and made a very serious face, as if she was convinced that she would do the mysterious lady a favor.

‘Hmm, it is a shame, Your Highness, that you are not as truthful to me as you are to Urša. You say that a coffin has been lost?’

“Yes, a coffin”

“With a dead witch inside?”

“Yes, so they say. I suppose the earth didn’t swallow it. I am sure Urša could find it, she’s got a fine nose.”

“And what if I were to do that for you?!”

“You? Try, dear Jana, and if you find it there will be five ducats in it for you.”

“Five ducats?” the old woman’s narrow face widened with joy.

“The lost coffin must be somewhere inside the city walls. Two policemen carried it up Mesnička Street.”

“And they were met by a Baba who stopped them and asked: ‘What are you carrying?’” Jana interrupted, “‘A witch,’ they said, ‘but we won’t carry her far. Let her stay here in the bushes, and we will go with God’s grace.’” I was that Baba, and I told them: ‘Bring the coffin to me and I will give you each a škuda<sup>105</sup> for it.’ They did that happily, and they took it up to my house where I hid it well.”

“You hid it? You did? For God’s sake can this be true?” the mysterious lady shouted with joy. But she soon turned cold again and asked suspiciously:

“Did you look inside the coffin?”

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<sup>105</sup> “Škuda” is a gold or silver coin with a coat of arms relief.



“How would I look? You can only do that after midnight.”

“Show it to me.”

“Come with me,” the old woman said and winked for the boy to open the door. The three of them left the house, walking into the dense, dark night.

Everything around them was deserted. The little cottage stood on a hill some ways away from Mesnička tower. Baba Jana went forward and, after about thirty feet, warned the masked woman to watch her steps. They stood in front of a half-dilapidated house with some of its walls still intact, where Baba Jana stored her firewood and other items.

The boy was the first to go in.

“Now light the candle,” Jana told the boy quietly. “But turn it so that the light doesn’t shine through the cracks.”

The boy lit the candle, which revealed a narrow space full of rocks and overgrown with thorns, surrounded by walls about as high as a man.

Baba Jana went to the corner where the walls met, lifted some rags, and in the light of the candle revealed a wooden coffin.

“Yes, that’s the one,” the masked lady said. “What did you want with it?”

“I sent for Baba Urša to come see me so we can try something out, but since she’s not home I wanted to do it myself. If, after midnight, one were to cut seven hairs off a dead witch’s head and pull seven threads out of her shirt, she would gain seven great powers. And after a knife had stabbed the witch’s heart seven times, this knife would then become miraculous and is endowed with a power to cut anything one wishes to separate.”

“You will not do that this time, but will instead sell the coffin to me.”

“If that is what Your Highness wishes.”

“Quiet. Don’t call me ‘Your Highness,’ someone might hear you. You don’t even know who I am.”

“He—he, I don’t need to know that, but your dainty hands and your demeanor clearly show that you only wear burghers’ clothing when you do not wish to be recognized.”

“Never mind. Call me ‘White Owl,’ I prefer that. So, you will sell the coffin? Here is ten ducats for it.”

The old woman’s face shone with pleasure when the lady handed her the money.

“I will inform my people of the coffin’s whereabouts. They will be here within an hour, and you must surrender it to them.”

“Lovro, you will stay here and keep watch,” the old woman commanded. “When they arrive, hand over the coffin. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” the boy replied grumpily when he realized he wouldn’t be able to go to sleep.

“What is that light up on Grič?” the old woman noticed, looking at Grič through a wide crack.

“Countess Ratkay’s castle is awake.”

“Is it true that the Contessa has disappeared?” the old woman asked.

“It’s true,” the masked lady replied, “but they wait in vain. This is God’s punishment for the Countess’ rejection of her grandson.”

“Did her daughter bear a son as well?”

“A beautiful boy, but the Countess wouldn’t hear of him, so he is now a pauper, alone in the world. God has punished her now. But make sure Lovro keeps a close watch.”

“Good night” the old woman said to the lady who disappeared into the night.

“This lady must be rich,” Lovro said, “since she has so much money.”

“I don’t know who she is, and I don’t even think Urša knows. But what do I care. Every potion and every job pays well. You stay here and I’ll go home.”

The boy sat down on a big rock behind a tall bush. He snapped off a small branch and smelled it:

“Ow, grandma, this smells so strong!”

“Shoo, stupid, don’t smell that! That’s *sleepnic*, it will make you fall asleep, and then you’ll be in trouble.”

“Does this make people fall asleep?! You know so many things!”

“Don’t pull the herbs—they’re expensive. Make sure you don’t fall asleep.”

The old woman departed, and the boy was left alone with the coffin.

## Chapter 15: After Midnight

Lovro wasn't at all afraid. He was used to keeping watch over the dead at night in the villages for little money, he was used to masked men and the night, the silence, the wind and the witches. He sat down on the coffin and listened to the wind and the bats that took cover somewhere in the corners of the ruin.

He thought about the lady who gave grandma so much money. This witch lying in the coffin must've been pretty special for the foreign lady to pay for her in gold.

The boy stood up and looked at the coffin.

“They say that in death a witch turns into her younger self, and that the devil stamps her face with his seal. And whoever sees a dead witch around midnight will see an image of his future on her forehead! What if I were to see my future? I hope I won't stay grandma's servant forever, helping with her spells and guarding the village's dead. It's true that the devil himself will show these images, but why should I fear him? How many times have I heard grandma cast spells to summon demons, and nothing has ever happened to her. Why shouldn't I peek into the coffin? Perhaps I will see my future?”

The boy came out of the ruins to make sure that no one was around and that grandma had gone home. Then he approached the coffin and started to take the lid off. He grabbed a small axe that lay in grandma's toolbox, took out a nail that fastened the lid, and slowly lifted it.

A body lay in the coffin. He first saw the legs. He lifted the top further so that it slipped over the head and fell to the ground.

“It’s true,” the boy yelled, “witches really do grow younger. I have never seen a witch this young before. But why is she gagged with this greenery covering her mouth and nose?”

The boy took the rag off her face and some plants fell out onto her chest. He picked them up and smelled them. “What a strong scent! Why, it’s *sleepnec*! Grandma said it makes a person fall asleep. No, I will not smell it, but I will shine the light on the witch’s face and look at her forehead, even if I am to see the most terrible picture of my future. I want to see how it will appear.”

The boy came closer to the head of the corpse, lit up the dead face and looked into it, expecting to see an image of his future. He looked and stared for minutes on end, for almost half an hour, but the image never appeared. The longer he watched the more confident and earnest he was to see it.

“For God’s sake, what is this?” He thought he saw the dead witch open her eyes, move her lips and lift her head. Lovro leaped backwards and crossed himself in fear. He saw the witch sit up in the coffin and look at him strangely. The boy was about to scream, but he then saw a man standing in front of him with a long saber.

“It’s the devil,” thought the boy and his blood turned to ice in his veins. He wanted to cross himself but was petrified. His hand squeezed the candle so hard that it felt as if it were turned to stone.

“In the name of a hundred devils, Contessa, what are you doing here in this strange salon and in this deathbed?” a man’s deep voice said.

The boy saw that the woman in the coffin was filled with dread after seeing the man, and that she abruptly wanted to get up. But she couldn’t do it. Lovro wanted to scream, but something tightened his throat.

“Speak already, before I start believing that you are an apparition, Contessa Nera,” the man said crudely.

“So you came?” she said, sitting in the coffin as pale as marble. “You purchased me for ten ducats, honorable Captain!”

“Siniša, let her be,” another voice was heard from behind. “It seems as if the poor girl has lost her mind. I will hurry to report to the Countess, and you stay here,” the voice said, and the man who stood behind Siniša disappeared.

“Grandma, grandma,” Lovro started to shout, shivering with fear. When a hand grabbed hold of him from out of the coffin, he collapsed onto the ground. He had never been this terrified in his entire life.

“Don’t be scared,” Nera said.

The girl wanted to get up and Siniša stepped closer to help her.

“Go away!” she screamed. Her voice trembled as if drenched in bile made out of anger and hatred.

“If you please, I do not wish to intrude, but I would like to know why it is that you hold it against me that I accidentally stumbled upon you this way.”

“Accidentally? What nerve!”

“I will be considerate of the unfortunate situation you find yourself in at this time. As I was passing by with my officer, I saw a light peeping through the cracks of the ruin’s walls and I wanted to see what was going on.”

“You think I did not hear everything that the “White Owl” said? Even though I couldn’t move, I heard everything, every word of it, including how two men would come to take the coffin away. And here you and your friend are!”

“Dear Lord!,” Lovro cried while standing up, “So you’re not a dead witch? You were only sleeping, and I woke you? The *sleepnic* made you sleep? Baba Jana will beat me for waking you! God have mercy, grandma will kill me! She’ll kill me.”

“Shut up, stop yelling!,” Siniša commanded.

Lovro grew quiet, but he could not stop crying. Nera tried to get up again, and this time she succeeded in doing so. She was a wreck, but she took a quick step toward the ruin’s entrance. Siniša stood in her way.

“Wait for them to come get you, the officer went to fetch the Countess.”

“You’re lying,” Nera shouted and made to push the Captain away and clear her path by force. “You sent for your men to take me away again, just like you did at the church.”

“You make no sense, but this is irrelevant. You are not leaving this place on your own.”

Nera rose up. Fear gave her the strength to push through to the exit. But the Captain grabbed her shoulders with both hands, just as he had done at the St. Žaver woods, and said in that same tone of voice:

“Your attempts are in vain. You are staying here.”

“Bandit. Scoundrel,” Nera uttered, pale and exhausted.

“Let her go,” little Lovro shouted, approaching Siniša, “What has she done to you?”

The shouting alerted Baba Jana, who ran up to the ruin and was in shock, staring through the crack and listening to what was going-on. She couldn’t quite make out what had happened, but she saw the empty coffin and she realized that something had taken place that would snatch her ducats away from her. In any case, she could now see the light of torches in the distance, and heard people’s voices and fast approaching footsteps. The young officer was the first to arrive, and he announced:

“They are on their way, have no fear, Miss Contessa.”

Nera was petrified. She had expected masked men to come and shove her back into that terrible coffin. But she was wrong. Her own faithful servants showed up at the entrance to the ruin. Yes, she recognized them. But she could not say a word. She felt her heart turn to ice and her words stick in her throat. She walked down to Mesnička Street where Count Petar awaited in a carriage. He was much too fat to climb up the hill with any speed. Nera couldn't say a word, and he asked no questions. He held her close and hugged her tight. They sat this way in silence all the way to the castle, where all the windows were lit up in expectation of their arrival.

Countess Ratkay did not know what had happened. When the Slavonian officer came to report that they had found Nera, Oršić was seated by the Countess, who had fallen asleep. Without waking her, he called for the servants and the carriage to fetch the girl.

The Countess awoke in her armchair when the carriage entered the garden. She recognized the rolling of the wheels across gravel and the neighing of her horses, and she ran to the window. She thought she heard her dear granddaughter's voice and a sigh, shortly followed by slow and faltering steps.

Count Oršić opened the door and carried the pale, fatigued girl into the Countess' room.

“Nera, my child!” the grandmother cried, hugging her lost granddaughter.

“Grandmamma!” she sighed and collapsed.

“What have they done to you? You are so pale and worn out! Tell me what have they done!”

Grandmother and granddaughter hugged and cried as if they had been apart for a long time. After the initial pain and joy had passed, the Countess sat Nera down on the divan. She sat next to her and watched her face closely to try and determine all she had been through.



The door opened and the handsome, pale face of the young Baron appeared. He rushed to Nera's side with tears in his eyes, hugged her and kissed her hands and hair. This was their first engagement embrace.

"My poor, kind Ivo," Nera patted his hair. "You suffered so much."

The girl started telling them what had happened at the church, and how she had gone with Father Smole to see the person whom she loved so much who had died.

Count Oršić and the grandmother exchanged knowing glances. This meant that Nera had not heard about Malakoczy's letter yet. She further told them how they had tied some cold leaves over her mouth and nose, the strong smell of which made her faint. She felt them shove her into the coffin, where her whole body stiffened as if she were dead. She was unable to move a finger, but she remained aware of what she heard and felt around her.

"It was awful. I lay there like a dead person, and I couldn't move even though I wanted to. I was already starting to fear that this was perhaps a death, so terrible as to make a person hear and think about everything, but without the power to move according to one's will. I sensed that there was a small opening in the coffin, since a voice from the left clearly reached my ears, while the voice from the right was muffled. In this way I heard everything that happened around me.—And they stabbed Father Smole with a knife?"

"I even heard the policemen who were ordered by Dvojković to carry the coffin to Zvezdišće talk along the way about how they would shove the coffin in the bushes and run away. Suddenly I heard the voice of an old woman who stopped them, and convinced them to sell the coffin to her when she learned that they were carrying a witch in it. The policemen agreed, and I could tell that they lowered me onto the ground after a short while. Rocks scraped the underside of the coffin. This must have happened in the ruin where they found me. No one

came the whole day. I did not hear any living being, but by the whistling of the wind I could tell I was somewhere in the open air. I waited and waited to see if anyone would come, notice the coffin and try to look inside. I became convinced that the plant they tied to my mouth was something that made people fall into a stupor. I could smell the scent of the leaves, but it was as if I were dead.”

“I stayed this way for a long time until I heard two women talking. I found out that one of them was the coffin’s owner, and the other her visitor, and I heard the voice of a boy who must have been one of these women’s grandson.”

Now Nera told them about the conversation that Baba Jana had had with the mysterious lady whom she called “Your Highness.”

Countess Ratkay, the Baron and Count Peter were all very surprised by that. Who could that lady be? Who were these people who wished to assist her in kidnapping Nera?

“We should question the boy,” Count Oršćc said. “I took it upon myself to have the boy and the old woman escorted here, and I also sent for the City Captain. Those bastards must be found.”

A moment later they brought in a twelve-year-old boy who kept crying as if he were about to receive a death sentence.

“Don't cry,” Nera said to him gently, “You saved me and you will be rewarded for that. Just tell us who the lady was that came to see your grandma.”

“I don't know, Your Highness, may I go blind if I do. May I go dumb if I do.”

“Has she been to see your grandma before?”

“Yes. She came over to Baba Urša several times to pick up love potions.”

“But for whom?” Oršić asked.

“For some gentleman who is in love with another.”

“Perhaps you know the name of this gentleman?”

“I could not tell you, I only hear bits here and there. Your Highness, please don't hurt me,” the boy begged, “my grandma will break my bones anyway for ruining her plans with the coffin.”

Just as they called Baba Jana into the room, the City Captain walked in. He was in an extremely bad mood.

“Forgive us for waking you at this hour,” the Countess said.

Baba Jana stood calmly in front of the City Captain while the others briefed him about the situation. He questioned her sternly, but she kept insisting that she knew nothing about the situation or the lady. She only knew that she was a member of the aristocracy.

“And why does she call herself the ‘White Owl’?” Skerlec asked.

“I don't know. That's how she announces herself when she goes to see Baba Urša.”

Sale requested the Countess' permission for a private interview with Baba Jana, hoping she would be more easily coerced into telling the truth that way. The Countess offered them the use of the adjoining room. In the meantime, Nera richly rewarded little Lovro, whose superstition saved her. The boy accepted the gift, and she noticed him clutching another gold ducat in his other hand, which she had not given him.

“Who gave you this money?” Nera asked.

“That gentleman who grabbed your arms and was so rough with you,” Lovro responded.

“But why did he give it to you?”

“I don't know.”

Nera remembered how little Lovro stood up for her when Siniša kept her from escaping the ruins, and she felt a wave of gratitude toward the boy.

“If you are ever in trouble, just come and see me. I will always help you.”

The boy thanked her and left the room. A quarter of an hour later Sale returned from the adjoining room with Baba Jana and whispered to the Countess:

“Your Highness, she really is a medicine-woman, but she played no part in this scheme. However, I will get ahold of the other one, her sister, Baba Urša. She will surely know more about the mysterious event.”

Sale let Baba Jana go, then said his goodbyes and left as well.

## Chapter 16: The Secret of the Ratkay Name

The castle's servants were all up. The kitchen was busy preparing soup and mulling wine for the Contessa to recuperate after her ordeal. The Countess herself supervised them, while Oršić went to the Capuchin monastery to see how Smole was doing and if he had regained consciousness.

Nera and Skerlec were left alone.

"I am so happy that you are mine again!" he said warmly to the girl, "But you should not have gone out alone with the Capuchin."

"Who could have suspected this dreadful turn of events?"

"But it was not a good idea to walk out with him anyway: the servants saw you. You know how it is, people talk and are likely to make up stories of all sorts."

Nera looked at her intended with surprise.

"What on Earth are you thinking?"

"Both my mother and Countess Čikulini said that you should not leave the house at night with the Capuchin, who is still a young man."

"And that's where you get this from? You are embarrassing yourself!"

"You are too reckless. Do you remember that night when you rode out under Sljeme on your own? That was careless, too. But you won't be doing these kinds of things anymore, right? You are my fiancée now, and I will follow you wherever you go."

Nera's face darkened.

"Are you upset with me now?"

“No, but I’d like to talk to you about something much more important for us than the gossip that may result from my meeting with the Capuchin.”

Skerlec felt a bitterness in Nera’s words, but she did not give him time to respond to it and continued:

“Do you suspect anyone of being capable of kidnapping me this way?”

“No, not at all.”

“I think it was Captain Siniša!”

“The Captain? What are you thinking?! That is impossible. An officer is not capable of committing such an unworthy act. Can’t you see that your kidnapping is related to the attempted murder of the Countess? And why would Siniša rob you?”

“Don’t you think officers have committed crimes before? He is a Trenk man, and they are capable of all kinds of misdeeds.”

“Siniša had no reason to do it.”

“He hates me because I embarrassed him at the dance, so he might have wanted to avenge himself. Isn’t it a strange coincidence that he was the one who showed up with the officer at the exact moment when some men were supposed to come pick up the coffin?”

“But the officer was the first to run to the castle and give word of your rescue.”

“When they realized that they would not be able to get away with it, they wanted to hide their guilt and pretended instead to be my saviors.”

“Perhaps you are right, but you need proof for such allegations.”

“Listen to me, Ivo! Will you help me gather proof against the Captain?”

“Buy why, Nera, when we are happy again and you have been rescued? Let’s leave the Captain and his officer alone and be glad that you are safe.”

“Wouldn’t you want to take revenge against a man who possibly wanted to make me a victim of a horrible crime?”

“I see that you resent me as if I did not love you enough. So I have to be truthful. If it were anyone else but the Captain, I would have had the criminal eviscerated. But if it is Siniša, that can’t be done. You know that he has special privileges with the Queen. During the late Governor Trenk’s time, he proved himself to be quite a hero. He is so well connected at court that we would not be able to harm him, but would instead jeopardize our relationship with his protectors at court. And you know that I have a great diplomatic post awaiting me at court. You are to be a lady-in-waiting to the Queen. Why ruin our beautiful future over Siniša, who would never be justly punished anyway?”

Nera folded her hands in her lap and watched her intended, listening intently. Her face assumed a cold expression.

“You are right,” she said icily.

“I knew you were a reasonable girl,” Skerlec said, contentedly.

A servant entered the room carrying a tray with some soup. Nera soon ate surrounded by her grandmother, Count Oršić and her fiancé. Then the Count and Skerlec left the castle.

Grandmother and granddaughter were left alone. Nera watched her grandmother make her bed without the chambermaid’s help.

“What are you thinking about, my soul,” asked her grandmother, approaching the girl and taking her face in her hands.

“I’m thinking about how lovely it would be to have a brother to love me!”

The Countess frowned. Nera noticed the change and ran up to hug her grandmother:

“Grandmamma, why don’t you love my brother, why did you drive him away?”

“Who told you that?”

“That masked lady. I heard her say to Baba Jana: ‘The Countess lost her granddaughter as God’s punishment for not recognizing her grandson and casting him out to fend for himself like a pauper.’”

“Who is this woman? How does she know these things, and why did she tell this to Baba Jana? Perhaps she wishes to spread the word across the city? To shame me?” the Countess thought to herself, her face blushing with rage. But she turned pale again when she saw Nera:

“You were not supposed to know about this, Nera!”

“My dear grandmamma, is it possible that you hated my brother, a child of your beloved daughter and son-in-law?”

Her grandmother turned toward the window to hide the paleness of her face.

“Tell me, what did he do wrong for you to cast him out? It must have been something horrible! But perhaps you could forgive him? Tell me, is he younger or older than me? Where is he?”

“Where is he?” the old woman whispered, “Who knows!”

“And what does he look like?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him since he was a baby!”

“For God’s sake, he couldn’t have done something wrong if he was still a baby?”

“Nera, my dear, let this go! If you love me and you want your grandmother to live, then don’t ask. This is the secret of the Ratkay name, and I wish to be buried with it. You are Count Keglević’s daughter and you will be Baron Skerlec’s wife, and the dark secrets of my unfortunate name should not besmirch the name of your future family.”



“But grandmamma, isn’t my brother’s fate tied to my name?”

“No, it absolutely is not. I beg of you, Nera, don’t ask me about this anymore unless you wish to make your grandmother despair and ruin her life!”

A short while later the Contessa lay in her silk sheets, on her bed over which hung a blue silk canopy. After lying in that hard coffin, her bed filled with down, laces and silk seemed to her twice as soft, warm and dear. Still, she could not fall asleep.

She was preoccupied by two difficult thoughts. The conversations she had with Skerlec and her grandmother made a deep impression on her heart.

“It’s as though I’ve been resurrected from the dead,” she thought, “and Ivo? He is worrying about what people will say about my leaving the house alone with the Capuchin. And when I want to gather evidence against a man who, perhaps, plotted a horrible crime against me, he speaks up for him and absolves him of guilt out of fear for his honors and titles!... After all, why did I get engaged to this man? I, who had always dreamt of love, courage, the daring of wild sacrifices? I only got engaged so I wouldn’t have to dance with Captain Siniša! Ivo wanted to fight a duel over me then, but it was the Captain who called for it. I loved Ivo, he was good to me, and I felt sorry for his unrequited love for me. But this can’t be true love. Love must be grand, terrible, it must surely wreak havoc, avenge, murder. Vojkffy!... Yes, he did say he would kill anyone I dare to love. Perhaps this is love, then. No, no, I can’t love anyone, I won’t love anyone. My heart dreams of heroes, and all these men do is wait for honors and designations. If only I had my dear brother with me! He would not go to sleep now. He would walk out into the night to find my kidnapper, face him bravely, pull his sword and avenge me.

Why don’t I have a brother?...

Who knows who he is, and where in the world he has gone.”

Nera felt sad and dejected. For the first time in her life, she drenched her silken pillow with her tears...

## Chapter 17: The Conspirators

The sun awoke from the night's slumber, it smiled to the youthful dawn and enveloped her in its warm, golden rays. Flowers bloomed, and the dewy grass and the thick bushes held out their branches toward the golden warmth that spilled from the blue sky. The fresh morning air was intoxicating and invigorated the workers. The serfs rushed to answer the new call of the dawn. Around Bukovac and Remete flashed the white of men's shirts and the red of women's scarves. Their song mixed with those of the morning birds, and the first sounds of toil echoed through the hills and valleys, the fields and the meadows.

A noble white steed climbed proudly up the narrow trail to Remete. The serfs knew the horse as well as they knew his mistress, Nera, who sat calmly in her saddle enjoying the crisp, fragrant morning. Two riders appeared behind the Contessa: her servants were charged with keeping an eye on their mistress to ensure her safety. The old Countess had arranged the escort when she allowed Nera to ride to Bukovac to visit her friend Ženka Drašković.

Nera halted her horse at the top of the hill and looked down at the quaint valley of Remete, with its little white church and the monestary of the Remete Friars. Beside a small lake walked a procession of white friars, whispering their morning prayers.

Nera circled the small valley and turned to the opposite side of Bukovac. She rode down to the valley facing the slopes of Sljeme. A small hut stood there in the thicket, where hunters often stopped when returning from their Bukovac and Sljeme hunting trips.

Nera stopped not far from the hut and ordered her servant:

“Mark, hold the horse and wait for me. I will be back in half an hour.”

“As you wish, Your Highness.”

The Contessa gathered her long skirts and pinned them to her waist revealing her pretty yellow boots, and then climbed up to the gray hut. She stopped before the rickety door, knocked three times with her whip, and said:

“Vivant Remetins!”

As if on command, the rickety door swung open and Nera went in. The sun’s bright rays shone through small windows onto several young men who merrily greeted Nera.

They were all dressed in hunting gear and carried guns, but those were piled in the corner of the hut,

“It’s been such a long time!,” the Contessa said. “Your studies in Vienna have lasted so long, and the holidays are so short. Let me see if we’re missing anyone.”

“Here we all are!” the young Čikulini said. “Tito Krajačić, the famed son of the superstitious City Judge, Marcel Bogović, the meek grandson of the terrible senator, Mirko Malakoczy, Paskal Kukić, Vilim Stiller, Dragan Keglević. And these are our three new followers: Leo, Andro and Srećko Petrić, sons of the district secretary and nobleman Petrić. Now you see we weren’t just dilly-dallying in Vienna, but we made some new friends as well.”

Nera held out her hand and greeted each of them kindly. The young men gathered around her and showered her with questions about her ordeal and how she managed to escape the horrible plot against her. She told them the whole story, beginning with the night that the strangers had kidnapped her.

“And the villains have still not been caught?” asked Count Čikulini, who was the youngest in the group.

“Not a trace! I don’t know who the kidnappers are, but an elegant lady is in cahoots with them. So it’s likely that the kidnapers are members of the aristocracy,” Nera said.

“And that lady goes to see Baba Urša?” Čikulini asked. “We could look into that.”

“Yes, I decided to go see the Baba in disguise, pretending to need a potion. Perhaps a coin will jog her memory, and I might be able to trick her into revealing something about the lady.”

“No, you won’t be going to see Baba Urša. I know her, she’s a real bandit. If she is connected to the kidnappers, she would do her best to deliver you to that bunch. You can be sure that the villains are still watching you and following your every move. You must not expose yourself to danger, we will have none of that!” Tito Krajačić said, determinedly.

Everyone was quick to agree with him.

“Tito is right,” Čikulini said. “You must not come near that awful old woman; however, we will make her talk.”

“All right,” Nera said, “I won’t attempt anything without your assistance. But we must penetrate the secrets of that dark gang, so we shall plan something together. Everyone should think about the possibilities so that we can decide on a course of action when we reconvene tomorrow.”

“Brothers, I must, unfortunately, inform you at the very first of our holiday gatherings of a very unpleasant development,” Tito said. “They’ve found us out. Listen, yesterday my father surprised me with this conversation:

‘Tito,’ he said to me, ‘I’ve heard that there are some hotheads among the Vienna students who think they are smarter than our law and order. They are looking to undermine the holy laws about the burning of witches, which would endanger the lives and happiness of our civilians.’

‘Who told you this, father?’ I asked.

‘The Council Commissioner. He knows that these students talk of enlightenment as if the rest of us are not enlightened, and I warn you not to associate with these conspirators. Because if I catch them and prove that they have been seeking to work against our old laws, I will throw them in the dungeon.’”

The young people looked at Tito in astonishment.

“So, that means we’re conspirators?!” Kukić wondered.

“But how could they have found out about us?”

“This is how,” Franjo Čikulini said, “Paskal, do you remember the way we greeted each other on the street the other day? I said: ‘Vivant enlightened ones!’ At that moment I turned around and saw the Council Commissioner passing by. When we said our goodbyes, he approached me and asked: ‘Count, what does that greeting mean?’ I was so upset at being called out that way that I replied: ‘It means precisely what I said: ‘Vivant’ all who are enlightened, and I hope to see you among them as well.’ I admit this was not very clever of me, but I was thrown off guard when he accosted me that way.”

Everyone was quiet. The silence made the young Count uncomfortable and his pretty, gentle face turned to them with childlike sincerity and purity of soul.

“You’re angry with me?” he asked, timidly.

“We should be angry,” Tito said in his deep, determined voice, “because you blundered.”

“The situation is not so dire,” Nera said in Franjo’s defense, “It’s better if the old brutes realized that there are people out there whose minds are not rotten and who will watch them closely. Isn’t that right? Ultimately, what’s the worst that they can do to us? What have we done wrong? We merely refuse to believe in inanities!,” Nera said, and continued:

“And now I must inform you of something much more pleasant than Tito’s report. While you were away in Vienna, I discovered some like-minded people here. They don’t have a formal group or a secret code, but they are just as convinced as we are that the persecution and the burning of witches are the most heinous crimes that humankind has ever committed. The group consists of Count Petar Oršić, Father Smole and my grandmamma.”

“Ah!” the young people exclaimed with joy, “They have so much power!”

“This is worth more than having a hundred other supporters. Father Smole is the witches’ confessor, Count Oršić can influence the aristocracy and the Countess is in the Queen’s special good graces. Brothers, this is a great boon to our group. Let’s see the City Judge talk of conspirators now!”

“Did you speak to the Countess about us?” Tito asked.

“No. When last we met, we swore not to reveal our secret to anyone. And I kept my oath. I didn’t tell Father Smole about us either, even though he has always been my most trusted confidant. But with your permission I will confess everything to him and to grandmamma.”

“The Countess will surely be amenable to us, which will increase our female membership to three women.”

“Who is the third?” Nera was curious.

“My sister.” Tito replied. “She spent the whole year with me in Vienna where she had the opportunity to socialize with our members and became our ardent supporter. She will be here shortly with breakfast for the hunters! That’s how we arranged it in front of our father.”

“That makes me so happy!” Nera said, cheerfully. “Now I shall have a girlfriend who thinks the same way I do.”

The young people merrily enjoyed their time together in conversation, and they felt like members of a mysterious conspirators' club. This, in turn, made them feel especially honored and important.



## Chapter 18: The White Witch

Someone knocked at the door thrice. Franjo Čikulini opened it and a young man, as tall as Tito, as blonde as Čikulini, and as broad-shouldered as Malakoczy, entered the hut.

“Vivant Francesco!” the young people cried. “What took you so long?”

“I was waiting for Miss. Sanda.”

A young, gentle girl entered the hut. She had brown hair, big blue eyes and a pretty round head that rested cheekily and charmingly on her white neck. A mischievous smile lingered on her lips. When she saw Nera, she approached her straight away and said candidly:

“You are Contessa Nera. I know you very well already. If only you knew how much I cried when I heard of your kidnapping!”

Nera hugged her warmly and was moved to reply:

“I feel that you are honest with me, and I beg of you to be my friend.”

“Oh, Contessa, that makes me so happy. You don’t even realize how much I have loved you. My brother and the rest of your friends spoke about you often in Vienna.”

Nera was very pleased. She was charmed by the young girl’s pretty face, darling figure and her simple, delightful chatter.

“Brother hunters, here’s breakfast,” Francesco said. “Did the hunt tire you out? Where are your rabbits so we can roast them on the spit?”

Francesco was interrupted by mirthful laughter:

“There they are! But our business here is to hunt down the truth, and roast superstitions on the spit.”

“Just make sure the opposite doesn’t happen: don’t let them roast the truth on the spit,” Tito said.

“We are the only ones they can burn, but not even the City Judge with all his City Commissioners, inquisitors and torturers, can burn the truth at the stake,” Francesco said.

“Vivat! That’s the right word!” the young people cried, while Francesco took breakfast out of the basket and asked everyone to help.

“Brother conspirators, let’s engage in this sacrifice!”

The young people sat down for breakfast. They leaned their rifles on the door and hung a few rabbits over them.

“Is that your catch?” Nera asked.

“The game keeper shot them, and we brought them here as *corpus delicti* in case someone comes across the conspirators’ cave,” Tito said, looking worriedly at the door. “The only reason we’re having a ‘hunters’ breakfast’ is to cover up our meetings.”

They sat down to breakfast and gathered closely as if something important were about to happen. The hut was tense and silent.

“Dear sisters and brothers,” the young Tito Krajačić began, breaking the silence. “This is the first time we meet after the holidays and there are many more of us now than there were last year. But it also seems as though there is much more terrible superstition on Grič now than last year. What happened was that they found a murdered child. Now who could shout to the superstitious folk: ‘There are no witches, the women you burn are completely innocent.’ They have ‘proof’ and we are left empty-handed. So that means that there’s nothing we can do but be vigilant about monitoring the investigations and the persecution of witches so that we can gather

evidence that the woman never committed any of the deeds they confessed. Does anyone have anything to report in regards to this?"

"I do," said Nera in a low voice. "While you were away in Vienna I tried to keep track of everything that the court did and I spied on our clever gentleman wherever they went. One day I heard that they had tortured these so-called witches so much in the tower that some of them have gone insane. I wanted to hear it for myself, and one night I went down under the Stone Gate. However, the window was so high up that I couldn't hear anything but some sighs. Tell me, have you heard about the white witch at the Stone Gate yet?" she asked her comrades smiling slyly.

"Of course we have. My father and the Concil Commissioner can think of nothing else but getting their hands on her," Tito said.

"I was that 'white witch!'"

Everyone started, and Sanda and Tito exchanged glances.

"For God's sake, Contessa, you may not even know of all the crimes the 'white witch' is said to have committed!" Sanda said.

"No, I haven't heard about that."

"The Council Commissioner claims that the white apparition at the Stone Gate murdered that child that was found under the Holy Mother of God's painting."

Nera looked wide-eyed at her friends.

"So, that was me," she laughed. "I really had no idea! Well, don't look at me as if I were already at the stake! Who could know that it was me who was there? No one but you knows about this."

"Still, it is too daring of you to walk around under the witches' tower like that at night," Francesco said.

“Perhaps, but I am often compelled to decipher the secrets of the innocent women’s persecution, and I can’t stay at home. I see, you are as worried as if I were already in the merciless hands of our city gentlemen.”

“Just think, Nera,” Francesco said, “There has been an investigation into the identity of the white witch for two months now.”

“That’s true, and I was very clever to keep quiet about this. But if word got out, tell me, who could presume that I was the witch who murdered a child! Everyone would laugh at the notion.”

Nera turned to Sanda and said calmly:

“If your father found out that I was there, I don’t suppose he would think me a witch?”

“Oh, Contessa, he hates you with a passion.”

“I know, ever since my birthday. At one point I had a little argument with him and the Council Commissioner regarding witches, when he said that they were to blame for spilling some wine, and I laughed at him and gave him a deadly insult.”

“Can’t you, as his son, influence his superstition in any way?” Kukić asked Tito.

“I keep thinking that someone is fanning the flames of his superstition, though. It’s much worse this summer than it was last year.”

The dog that lay at Francesco’s feet started to bark and attempted to jump at the door.

“Someone who doesn’t like us is coming, Hector would not bark otherwise. “

They quickly started to eat and filled their glasses.

“Vivat, vivat!” a few of the youthful voices started to shout when someone attempted to open the door from the outside.

“What the hell, we left the door locked,” Tito said angrily as he jumped up to remove the lock.

Judge Krajačić appeared at the door. Everyone was still for a moment, then Čikulini composed himself first and cried excitedly:

“Long live City Judge Krajačić!”

“What kind of a hunting group locks themselves in?” the Judge asked.

“We wanted to keep out the village urchins who keep begging for money,” Nera said.

“You must have been deep in conversation since the hut was silent for so long?”

“Oh, Hon. Judge,” Nera laughed, “Hon. Tito was just showing us the tragedy of the shot rabbit. He was acting out his death scene, and we sat here watching him reverently. Tito is a born actor.”

“And what are you doing here, Sanda?” Krajačić asked his daughter, ignoring Nera.

“I brought them breakfast.”

“Wouldn’t you like to join us, Your Highness?” Nera asked accommodatingly.

“Thank you, but the Council Commissioner is waiting for me down there. We were on our way to see the friars when we saw the servants waiting for you. Goodbye, hon. law students.”

The young people sent the Judge off raucously, with cheers and toasts. The Council Commissioner stood waiting below the hut. The young people sent their regards to him as well before retreating inside. Everyone sat around the table, closed the door and looked at each other inquiringly. Everyone was thinking the same thing.

“Guys, this outing was meant for us, not the monestary,” Tito warned. “Didn’t I tell you he had his suspicions? My poor father, he is surrounded by superstition. And where’s Franjo?”

The little Count burst into the hut, his cheeks flushed.

“Brothers! I hid and watched to see whether they would turn toward the monestary. They did not go there! They returned to Grič.”

“Guys, we must be careful now,” Tito reminded them cautiously.

They continued their conversation. They were mostly concerned with Jelica Kušenka’s fate, because they knew the court was after her. Nera told her friends that Countess Ratkay protected the girl and that the poor thing almost lost her mind from fear of Krajačić.”

“So grandmamma thought of sending the girl off to the Grič convent where no one would look for her,” Nera said. “Kušenka is now the maiden Helena, and she’s been living there peacefully for two weeks, minding the convent’s flower gardens.”

“Do you see, brothers,” Tito said, “this is success! We already have people who dare to protect the poor woman. I hope we will find more like-minded people among the aristocracy, won’t we, Nera? You will inform us shortly of Baron Skerlec’s devotion to our cause. He must have the same viewpoints as his fiancé.”

“If he didn’t, I’m sure the Contessa would never agree to marry him,” Sanda said. Her eyes met those of the handsome Francesco.

“Yes, Sanda is right,” Nera said, rising to leave. “I must go now.”

The young people decided to escort Nera to Bukovac. They started their journey merrily, carrying their rifles and their supposed catch on their backs. Everyone walked.

Little Sanda and Nera walked hand in hand.

“Will you get married soon?” the pretty girl asked Nera curiously.

“I still have time.”

“It’s nice to be engaged, isn’t it?” Sanda said quietly.

“Are you engaged as well?” Nera asked.

“Yes, but in secret. It’s Francesco. We love each other so much. And do you know where we met? In Vienna, in our conspiracy group. We were brought together by our shared worldviews. It’s so nice to be in agreement with those we love!”

Nera felt an emptiness in her soul whenever someone mentioned Skerlec. And still, she was to be his wife! Why?, she asked herself. “Because I wanted to show Captain Siniša that I would not dance with him and that he was to surrender to my wishes without complaint?...”

## Chapter 19: Conspiracies

Mesnička Tower, which used to defend Grič city, was adjacent to the enormous, opulent palace of the Council Commissioner and nobleman Dvojković. This was a one-story building with three small towers. It was connected with Mesnička Tower to the left, and a beautiful, large park sloped down from it to the right. The grounds were walled in, and in the middle of the park there stood a famous greenhouse that was the talk of the town. A German man nursed Dvojković's flowers and tropical plants there in the winter, and in the summer it was turned into a party ballroom that the whole town marveled at.

A curious crowd had gathered at Grič today, too, and were looking over to where a red lantern was shining from the top of the turrets and beneath it, where the the park glittered in the magical light of colorful lamps on the Mesnička hill, while the greenhouse shone like a crystal palace. In the darkness of the night everything looked like an enchanted castle.

The Grič nobility buzzed around the gardens and the greenhouse, admiring the marvels conjured up by Dvojković's opulent aristocratic tastes. The palace dinner was already over and the young people had rushed to the greenhouse where musicians, dressed in fantastical red suits, were playing dance music.

Nera was walking through a deserted area of the park with her new friend Sanda, whom she had come to love from the day before.

"Have you told your grandmother about our meeting yesterday yet?" Krajačić's daughter asked Nera.

"I have not had the chance, but maybe I will tomorrow."



“All of our Remete friends are here. Can’t you see Francesco looking around? He’s looking for me. You won’t be upset if I join him?”

“Not at all. Just go, follow your heart.”

Sanda rushed to the young nobleman who kept looking around, searching for someone. When he noticed her, he quickly approached her and took hold of both her hands.

Nera saw his determined face become gentler, and his eyes lose themselves in hers. Touched by the sight, she retreated into a bower where the lamp had already burned out, so that she found herself in semi-darkness. The Contessa felt melancholy without knowing the cause. She felt utterly alone, and was envious of little Sanda’s happiness and love. She sat down on the bench, and noticed Count Vojkffy appear before her suddenly as if he had sprung from the ground.

“Are you hiding?” he asked.

“I want to rest.”

“I was stalking you to find you alone. We have not met ever since someone’s damned hand reached out to grab you.”

“What do you want from me, Count?”

“I wanted to warn you that this is God’s punishment. Do you remember the days when a man walked under your windows, filled with love and desire? Now that you are engaged, this man is no longer permitted to do so. And if you weren’t, he would spend every night in vigil by your house, and the hand of the criminals could not reach you. Now there is no one left to protect you.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

“Break the engagement: it does not come from your heart. How can you who are so brave, so intelligent, ever love a man with such a lukewarm soul and feelings?”

“I forbid you to speak this way about my fiancé.”

“Your reply is not persuasive, because you are yourself aware of the things that you forbid me to mention. You must not stay engaged to him! Didn’t I swear to kill anyone who dared to claim you?”

“Are you trying to force me to break the engagement?”

“I am only trying to save the life of that poor man whom you don’t love anyway. But if you are determined to stay with him, I will kill him this very night.”

Nera looked at the Count in shock. His voice sounded as determined as if he had already half completed the act.

“Even if you kill him, I will not be yours.”

“But you won’t be his, either!”

“What about the law? Don’t you know how murderers are punished?”

“But I won’t wait for that. Look! This is my law.”

The Count took an engraved silver pistol out of his fancy French coat.

“You will learn within an hour that Count Vojkffy has kept his promise.”

The girl pondered the situation. “Is this man standing before me truly ready to kill Skerlec and commit suicide? Why should he kill Ivo? That would be tragic. He is such a kind and honest young man.”

“Put away your pistol for today and tomorrow, Count,” the girl said.

“Give me two days’ time. I beg you,” she said gently, “Who knows, perhaps someone values your life?!”

Vojkffy fell to his knees in front of the girl, took hold of her hands and started kissing them with abandon.

“Nera, you feel the passionate love that courses through my veins, you must feel the fire in my heart.”

“Let go of me, Count!” the girl said sternly, “I have no patience for your feelings.”

“I won’t let go,” the Count whispered, as if mad, “You are mine, you are made for me—I will never let go again.”

“And what would your wife say to this, hon. Count?”

The words were spoken by a deep, imposing voice. A huge, strong figure appeared in front of them at the bower’s entrance. Nera looked up. She almost screamed... at the entrance stood Captain Siniša. He crossed his arms behind his back and stood proudly, as strong as a giant. An evil, ironic half-smile spread across his face.

Count Vojkffy bent his head as if hit by a bullet. He bent down and got up. Nera looked furiously at the Captain and asked sternly:

“Who gave you permission to protect me, sir? If I knew how to defend myself from the coarseness of the police, I can easily defend myself from a knight’s declarations of love.”

“A girl who wanders the woods at night will have an easier time protecting herself from policemen than from knightly adventurers in shiny palaces.”

“Is this the manner in which you seek to gain the Contessa’s affection?” Vojkffy asked.

The Captain laughed: “I leave the Contessa’s affection to you and to Skerlec and to anyone else who desires it, and am raising my voice here to protect a noble woman’s soul: namely, your wife’s.”

“Hon. Captain, I have no time to discuss this with you right now,” Vojkffy said.

“But I do.”

“That is impudence.”

“You think?” Siniša laughed, wickedly. “Then please, challenge me to a duel.”

“You are forgetting that we are standing in front of the Contessa and we have no business deciding such matters in her presence.”

“The Contessa would be well-advised to know that the cavalier who is asking her to marry him can’t possibly keep his word, since he is already married.”

“I did not ask you to interfere,” Nera shouted. “You are a brash boor!”

“Perhaps. It’s fine to cheat and to lie, but it’s vulgar to put an end to a deception. It’s a matter of personal taste. I feel it is my duty to remind the Hon. Count that his wife subsists on charity,” Siniša raised his voice.

“Who authorized you to get involved in this?”

“Your son, hon. Count.”

“My son is dead,” the Count murmured, defeated.

“No, Hon. Count—he lives. You were unsuccessful at getting him out of the way as you intended.”

Vojkffy retreated into the darkness under the dense trees.

“Just another moment, Count. Your son told me everything. Do you understand—everything. And he sends this message: if you refuse to repay the dowry you stole from his mother, he will come here, to Grič, and drag your name through so much mud from the past that no one will recognize you anymore.”

“That’s my son’s message? Where is my son? Tell me, where?”

“Ha-ha-ha! So you can get rid of him? No, I am too fond of him! He will come to Grič when you least expect it.”

“Let him come! He is a murderer and he will be hanged.”

“He no longer fears the gallows. The whole world will protect him, for what he did he did to defend his own mother. I call on you in his name: you must choose—either you return the dowry to his mother or shoot yourself with this gun you used to threaten the Contessa.”

“Captain, not another word,” the Count threatened, his voice trembling. “You presume the position of a Judge in this matter and I warn you to leave me alone.”

“I am not leaving, I need to speak with the Contessa.”

“No, I don’t want to hear another word. I want you to leave me with the Count.”

“I regret not being able to accommodate you. Count, please leave immediately, and the Contessa will hear me out because she must.”

“Is this behavior customary for policemen?” Nera screamed, shivering with rage.

“Please, hon. Captain, leave us alone,” Vojkffy jumped up, stepping between Siniša and Nera. Siniša mockingly looked at the Count and roared:

“Get out of my way!”

“Hon. Captain, you are out to provoke me.”

But Siniša did not wait for the Count to finish. He grabbed him by his chest, shook him and pushed the strong Count out of the bower with ease, as if he were throwing a man made of straw. He turned to Nera and said in a low voice:

“Contessa, when I found you in the coffin at the ruins of that old house, you accused me of being a criminal. You implied that I was responsible for the kidnapping.”

“Yes, you and no other!”

“Tis true you are very beautiful, but forgive me, trust me: I am sick of beautiful women and I would not reach out for you even if you were offered me. You think I tried to avenge myself over a rejected dance proposal?”

“I won’t hear another word,” she interrupted.

“You must hear me out. I have something to tell you that is of paramount importance to your safety and your life.”

“I won’t listen, even if I dropped dead this very instant,” Nera shouted, jumped over the bench and left Siniša, who was soon lost in the darkness of the vast gardens.

When Nera left him, she was shaking with agitation. Tito Krajačić found her in this mood.

“What’s wrong, Contessa?”

“I just confirmed my suspicion: Captain Siniša must be the only man capable of coming up with the devilish scheme to have his people shove me into a coffin and kidnap me.”

Tito was surprised at this claim, and promised to follow and watch the young Captain more carefully from then on. As they discussed Siniša, he stood in the corner of the park with the Queen’s lady-in-waiting Auersperg and Countess Čikulini.

“This is unheard of, Siniša,” the lady-in-waiting scolded him, “To embarrass the Count like this in front of the girl! Who is Countess Vojkffy to you for you to advocate for her this way?”

“And who’s Count Vojkffy to you?” Siniša replied coldly.

“You have gone wild lately. It’s time for you to leave this place!”

“Dear Alma, you must have forgotten that you are neither my wife nor my Queen. And I don’t obey anyone but the Queen.”

“Then she will command you to leave.”

“I know you are very influential at court, and if the Queen calls for me to leave Zagreb, I will bring you back with me. I will not have women tell me what to do, remember that.”

The lady-in-waiting bit her lip and looked at her friend.

“Why spoil Vojkffy’s happiness? Contessa Nera will fall in love with him and leave Skerlec.”

“And then you will marry him. Wouldn’t that be wonderful!”

“You’re crazy! You know I don’t love anyone but you.”

“Thank you! I neither love you nor any other woman. I’m not cut out to be a husband. I’ve told you this many times. I will never marry you. I have no reason to do so.”

The lady-in-waiting turned pale and looked at the Countess Čikulini, who remained silent.

“Do you hear this, Julija? He is incorrigible. He speaks as if he were still a Trenk officer.”

“Yes, I still haven’t taken up lying from you people.”

“Siniša, be sensible and leave the Count alone. You want to force him to fight you, and over some Countess Vojkffy.”

“I gave my friend, his son, my word, and I intend to keep it whether you like it or not.”

“But stop constantly causing scandals.”

“Spare me your lady-in-waiting moralities!”

And with that, the Captain took leave of both ladies. They continued their conversation excitedly. Siniša walked among the ladies and girls who watched him admiringly, secretly wishing he would near them. But he walked on, stood by his lieutenant, and whispered to him:

“Branko, come with me for a minute, I want to challenge Count Vojkffy to a duel. This very night! Immediately!”

“Has he offended you?”

“I offended him, but the scoundrel is trying to save his own skin. I’ll tickle his ribs anyway. Come, let’s follow him again and cause a scandal.”

In the meantime, Countess Čikulini and the lady-in-waiting took Nera by the hand and led her into the palace. They climbed up the marble stairs and the hostess, Dvojković’s sister, started to give the ladies a tour of the sixteen rooms, which had been freshly and royally redecorated. The hostess led Nera, who was a first-time visitor in the Council Commissioner’s home, while the two Countesses walked through the rooms on their own, having visited the palace often in the past.

When they entered the tower, the hostess faltered. Nera noticed her grab the wall, but before the girl could help her she fell to the floor. The Contessa jumped to her aid. The hostess lay unconscious on the floor. Nera did not see any servants or the two countesses near by, so she retraced her steps to call for help. She passed through the first room, met Count Vojkffy and said to him animatedly:

“Hon. Count, our hostess has fainted.”

“Don’t say anything to anyone,” the Count replied, “we don’t want the guests to worry. This is just an old ailment that she has. Come, let’s call for her maid, she will know what to do.”

The Count went with Nera, opened a small door and showed the Contessa into the hallway.

“For God’s sake, it’s dark in here” the Contessa said when she exited the ballroom.

“I don’t know why the lamps aren’t lit.”



Nera was caught off guard by the dark. Still, she took a few steps forward. Suddenly, she felt two strong arms grab her waist. She tried to pull herself out of the unexpected embrace, but the arms started to drag her down the hallway. Nera screamed as loudly as she could and a small light immediately appeared in the darkness.

“Who is there?” a deep voice roared through the dark hallway.

Nera recognized Siniša’s voice and saw him holding a small light at the end of the hallway, while lieutenant Branko stood next to him. At that moment, the door through which Nera left the ballroom opened. Vojkffy stood in the doorway holding a candelabra that lit up the entire hallway.

Everyone was surprised and stared silently at one other. There was no one near Nera. Siniša and his lieutenant were at the end of the hall; Vojkffy was at the door holding the candelabra. But she still felt the loathsome embrace and the attempt by someone to drag her off.

“Count, where were you?” Nera asked Vojkffy.

“I stopped to fetch the candelabra since you were afraid to walk in the dark.”

She couldn’t quite understand it. The Count was behind her back, but she felt it would be best if she left that place. The hostess was still unconscious and Nera felt it was her duty to call on someone to help her first. So she returned to the ballroom that she had left without further ado, leaving the gentlemen behind.

“This is indeed a tragic incident.” Captain Siniša laughed, “This is the second time, hon. Count, that I have spoiled your rendezvous!”

“You must be crazy! There was no rendezvous.”

“Don’t apologize, it makes no difference to me. I came here with my lieutenant looking for Your Grace, when we found ourselves suddenly in the dark.”

“You were looking for me? What do you want from me?”

“Please, follow us and I will tell you.”

The Count followed Siniša who went down the hallway, opened a door and entered a large room of the middle tower of the palace.

“As you can see, I am well acquainted with this space,” Siniša said. “We would be hard pressed to find a better room. Count, take off your precious coat and your collar and take my lieutenant’s sword. You called me an insulent copper, and I won’t wait even two hours for my satisfaction.”

“You intend to force me into a duel, even though you know it is forbidden?”

“This is no way for a nobleman and a knight to talk. Others fight, although duels are forbidden. If you don’t take the sword immediately, I will repeat publicly everything I said in front of the Contessa.”

“If I do as you wish, will you keep quiet about my affairs?”

“I give you my word as an officer.”

“Than hand over the saber.”

Lieutenant Branko handed his saber to Vojkffy.

“Call Dvojković,” Siniša said to the lieutenant, “so that the Count may have his witness as well.”

The lieutenant went to fetch the Council Commissioner, and the two adversaries were left alone.

“Who is it that you wish to fight me for?” the Count asked, “My wife, or Contessa Nera?”

“Neither one of them; I am fighting you for your son’s sake.”

“And what would you do if the Queen found out that you’re hiding my son, a murderer?”

“Your son did not murder an innocent man, but a hussy who was your lover and whom you wished to put in his mother’s place. He has by now repented for the crime he committed as an eighteen-year-old boy. You’ve gone through so many lovers since then that the poor man would have to kill half of the women in Vienna. And as for the Queen, you need not concern yourself about her. I will continue to keep your son’s whereabouts a secret, even if I am punished for it.”

Dvojković entered and tried in vain to persuade Siniša to postpone the duel and to dissuade him from spilling blood in his house. The Captain demanded that the Count fight immediately, and they began the duel.

Siniša attacked first and lightly wounded the Count’s shoulder. The Count fought back, but Siniša deflected his sword. With lightning speed he then slashed deeply into the Count’s shoulder. The Count dropped his saber and collapsed onto the floor nearly losing consciousness.

Lieutenant Branko and Dvojković ran to his aid and laid him on the chaise.

“I will call for Doctor Stiller,” Siniša said with derisive compassion, adding: “This is just your first punishment, Count. Our accounts are not yet settled!”

Siniša left the room, went down into the gardens and sent Stiller to the palace. And then he danced through the night as if nothing had happened.

None of the guests ever suspected that a seriously wounded Count Vojkffy lay in the Dvojković palace tower. And no one, not even he, suspected why Siniša insisted on fighting him that very night.

## Chapter 20: A Mysterious Love Letter

Nera woke up early the following morning. She couldn't sleep. The incident in Dvojković's hallway filled her with turmoil, and the insult that Siniša had hurled at her made her seethe. She, who was so universally adored, had had to endure that Captain's insults. He had said that she would give her affections to anyone who asked. That had hurt her so much that she almost cried.

When her grandmother woke up, Nera decided to confide in her about the meetings she went to in Remete. Her grandmother listened to her with astonishment, and after Nera told her that she had lurked around the Stone Gate tower at night the old lady shrieked with anguish:

“My child, what possessed you to do such unheard-of things? For God's sake, what came over you?”

“Grandmamma, don't be upset. I don't know why, but I feel this great secret force within me pushing me to search for something, to catch someone. This invisible force is leading me, telling me to unmask someone, to reveal a great injustice. Because something horrible is going on...”

The Countess' face changed. Her eyes bored into the girl as if she did not recognize her.

“What's the matter, grandmamma? Why are you looking at me in such a strange way?”

“Nera, you just follow that path. Listen to this strange force's voice, for it's coming from the grave.”

The girl was frightened by her grandmother's words. She started to ask her what they meant, but the old woman persisted in her silence, filling Nera with uncertain suspicions...

“It is not yet time for me to tell you everything,” her grandmother said. “I want you to enjoy untroubled happiness of your young life.”

When Nera saw that her grandmother wouldn't answer her questions, she left her and went to her room. The morning sun peered through the windows at the heavy rugs and the silk divans of the rich heiress, but it did not fill her with joy. She felt heaviness in her soul, like lead pressing against her breast. Warily she sat at her needlework stand and took the thread out of her little basket.

“What is this?” There was a letter under the needlepoint. It was written in red, and addressed to her. She had never seen this writing before. “Where did it come from? How did it get here?”

She scrutinized it for a long time before she broke the seal and opened it. The paper was covered with red letters. Apprehensively, she started reading it. The letter said:

“Nera!

Will you mock this white sheet of paper that mercifully accepted the whisper of a heart that you have enflamed by your sun-like blaze? Don't laugh, for the pale paper will shed invisible tears, and the blood in which the words are written, torn from a wounded soul, will fade away.

Nera, you know not who I am or where I am. The Earth and sky stand between us. The Sun is far away from you, but it embraces you in its golden warmth. The stars are distant, but they whisper to you with their tenuous twinkling in a silent, amorous night. I am even further away from you, and still—I wake you in the morning with the beating of my heart, and I put you to sleep at night with a whispered song about my buried love. Nera! As I sit alone in the dark of night, listening to the rustle of the leaves, I imagine it to be the rustling of your dress.

When I listen to the song of the woodland birds I imagine it to be the sound of your magical voice. When I watch the awakening of a sunny day, I feel like I am watching you! The blood of my right arm will deliver to you the song that my heart sings for you.

No, there is nothing more precious in the whole world than a white sheet of paper and the red blood flowing from my veins.

If I could find a sheet as big as the earth itself, and if I could spend my whole body's lifeblood on it, it would not suffice to show you the magnitude of the love that I feel for you. I know that you are faithful, I know that you are unattainable, but I am happy because my whole heart is filled with you...”

There was no signature.

She had never read a letter such as this before. Was it possible that someone loved her so passionately, and at the same time so silently, secretly, with so much self-sacrifice?

What kind of a man is this? Where is he? Why does he write that the sky and earth stand between them? Is he in Grič or somewhere else? All those questions ran through her mind. Then she called in her maid and the servants, the lackeys, all the help and everyone who was at the house at the time, and interrogated them about a letter that had been brought in to her. No one knew anything about a letter, or who could have brought it.

This made the young Contessa even more curious and she was compelled to sit down again and re-read the letter—twice, thrice, and again...

The letter excited her more than all the young cavaliers' wistful looks and declarations of love. In the afternoon Nera got ready to visit Jelica at the convent.

She was barely out the door when she ran into Countess Čikulini. The woman almost threw herself around Nera's neck and told her that she was on her way to visit her. Something terrible had happened! Count Vojkffy had fought a duel with Captain Siniša.

“But, there is something else,” the Countess said, in confidence. “The Count can't stop hallucinating about you and Skerlec. I went to see him and do you know what he said? He said he would love to see you before he died!”

“What an impertinent thought!”

“Of course, I told him this couldn't be arranged. However, he begged me to ensure that you not refuse this plea, assuring me that no one, not even Skerlec, need know about it.”

“The Count is clearly raving,” Nera said, “or he wouldn't think of suggesting such madness.”

“True, my child, and I only informed you in order to fulfill a dying man's last wish.”

Nera bid her farewell and went to the convent.

## Chapter 21: The Maiden Helena

The Contessa was well-known at the convent. Whenever she visited her protégée, the maiden Helena, they would allow her to speak with her in private as long as she wished. They did as much today, pointing the Contessa to the gardens where the young maiden always tended to the flowers. The Contessa walked through the enormous, beautiful garden.

“You see,” said the nun who guided the Contessa, “our garden has never looked this fine before. The plants are thriving, and the roses are extraordinarily vigorous, teeming with buds and flowers. Maiden Helena’s green thumb is responsible for the transformation.”

“I believe Helena’s mother was well versed at flower gardening, so her daughter learned the necessary skills.”

The nun took her leave, and Nera went to look for Kušenka. She found her amid the thick shrubbery, bending over the roses. She was tall, svelte, in a black dress with a white coif on her head. She was plucking the dry leaves and clearing the weeds from around the bush so carefully that she paid no attention to her surroundings. When Nera had come closer, she suddenly noticed a well-built man, obviously a gardener, prowling like a cat behind maiden Helena’s back. She decided to hide and investigate the meaning of this. When he came up to the girl, she lifted her head up and said:

“You see, this shrub won’t die on you either. It will soon be completely healed.”

“And what about me? Don’t you care if I live or die?”

“Please, have some sense. I’m going to become a nun, leave me be.”

The gardener’s face turned red and he stared passionately at Jelica:



“But you will sooner be mine, even if I have to go over the convent’s altars to get you. I will wait for you here at nine o’clock tonight. If you fail to show, I will report you to the nuns tomorrow and tell them you’ve been pursuing me like Potiphar’s wife.”

“You godless man! I won’t have anything to do with you.”

“Helena,” the gardener started to plead, “I can’t work, I keep thinking of you all day, and at night I dream of you incessantly. We could have such a wonderful time together, if only you agreed to it. The nuns would never find out about us.” He suddenly grabbed the maid around her waist.

“You are in my arms, and if you so much as make a sound I will say that you threw yourself on me...”

Nera hurried forward. When the gardener heard her steps, he let go of the maiden and ran away. Jelica was happy to see Nera. She told her all about the unwelcome advances of the convent’s gardener, and how she couldn’t find a way to avoid them. The Contessa immediately went to the Mother Superior and told her everything, after which the nun summoned the gardener and forbade him to do further work in the gardens; from that point on he was to work only in the convent vineyard.

Two days later, the City Judge was told that a man wished to have a private audience with him. It was the handsome convent gardener.

“I have gardened at the convent for two years now, and I was happy and content,” he started telling Krajačić. “Suddenly, about two months ago, a girl named Helena came to the convent. The nuns assigned her to work in the gardens. Ever since I have had not a moment of peace or calm. I am constantly bothered by something, I can’t work, I can’t sleep, I don’t enjoy food or drink. I dream about her all night. And when I offered her to leave the convent and be

mine, she looked at me so fiercely that I immediately got a headache... At night, when I fall asleep she comes to me half-dressed to torture, beat and brutalize me. And when I wake up I'm all worn-out, with sweat dripping off my whole body. I have suffered even more these past two days since the nuns sent me to work in the vineyard. Wherever I look, I see her, and then I get goose bumps, my head spins, my knees buckle and my temples throb. I am completely exhausted. Your Grace, save me from her. I can't even pray anymore, or work, I can't find rest or peace anywhere."

"Hm, hm! What you've told me indicates that this might be a witch. What else do you know about her?"

"I don't know anything, Your Grace, but I do know that you will save me from her. I went to the parish priest, and he sent me to see you, saying that the devil must have his hands in this," the gardener said, his eyes aflame.

"What kind of a woman is she? Is she joyful, calm?"

"She is always silent, she won't look a man in the eyes, she is pale but beautiful. She only looked at me a few times, but each time I felt like a veil covered my eyes and I got a chill in my bones."

"Hm, hm, this must undoubtedly be the witch's evil eye. And did you notice anything unusual in her work?"

"Yes, Your Grace. Yellow leaves turn green in her care, and thorns bloom. Ever since she came, the convent's gardens bloom like in paradise, while I worked in vain to coax a bloom out of that clay soil."

"What's your name and occupation?"

“My name is Pavao Galović. I am the convent’s tailor during the winter, and the gardener during the summer. Your Grace, I’ve never had such experiences before, until she came to live with us at the convent.”

“Go now,” Krajačić muttered and said: “I will call on you when the need arises.”

The City Judge immediately sent two police officers and his clerk Mikica to the convent, who delivered his letter to the Mother Superior with a request to surrender the maiden Helena to the policemen, since the court had been advised that she was a witch. The court wished to interrogate her. The nuns were taken aback by the Judge’s order, but they decided to acquiesce. The mother Superior instructed the maiden Helena to change back into the clothes she wore when she came to the convent, and informed her of the policemen’s visit. When Helena heard the news, she wanted to throw herself out of the second story window, but the nuns prevented her from doing so and surrendered her to the police.

Jelica threw herself on the ground and screamed that she wouldn’t go to the Magistrate’s office alive. This piqued Mikica’s interest.

“She must be guilty since she screams so much!” Mikica thought, extending his long, neck lined with folds of loose skin and bending his head the better to see her parched face. The policemen lifted her off the ground. She could barely walk, and her cries and screams drew a crowd. Clerk Mikica looked at maiden Helena’s face over and over again. And then he suddenly stood up straight, rushed to the Magistrate’s office and, having reached Krajačić’s office almost out of breath, he yelled:

“Your Grace, Kušenka is coming, it’s Kušenka!”

“Who? Where?” the Judge asked, his eyes gleaming.

“Here, this maiden, it’s Kušenka. I would recognize her in gypsy rags or in the robes of a queen.”

The door opened. The policemen dragged the girl into the room, where she threw herself on her knees with exhaustion and started to scream: “I am innocent! I did not do anything!”

Krajačić’s face lit up. He recognized his long sought-for witch in this girl.

“Are you Jelica Kušenka? Why did you change your name and your clothes?”

“The Countess wanted me to do it, it’s not my fault, I am innocent!”

“What Countess?” Krajačić asked, surprised.

“The young Countess Nera,” the girl replied feverishly, screaming: “Ask them, they will vouch for me, I have done nothing wrong, have mercy!”

Krajačić’s face turned red when he heard Contessa Nera’s name. So, she knew where Kušenka was? He had not expected such a discovery.

“I won’t harm you if you admit to where you have been while the court was searching for you. Why did you change your clothes and who told you to do it?”

The girl hoped that the Judge would fulfill his promise. She started to tell him about how Nera had hid her in her castle, and later in the convent. Krajačić recorded her testimony himself. And when she was through, he called the policemen and ordered them:

“Take her to the tower.”

A scream was torn from Jelica’s breast. She threw herself to the ground and grabbed hold of the City Judge’s desk. The policemen tore her away by force and dragged her to the street. A crowd gathered in an instant and watched as Jelica was escorted to the tower. Mikica marched after the policemen and bragged to the people:

“There, I caught her. It’s Kušenka. You wouldn’t have her if it weren’t for me!”

Revulsion toward the terrible witches stirred in people's hearts. So, this young girl who should have been innocent, clean and virtuous, was a witch too? This loathing soon turned to rage. The people started to shout, curse and damn the witch more and more. Vehemently, they pushed and helped the police drag her to the tower. Jelica fainted from fear and terror and collapsed on the ground. No one felt sorry for her. The policemen and those closest to her started to beat her and shriek:

“The devil put her to sleep! Look at the damned woman, she doesn't feel a thing now. The devil helped protect her from feeling our beating!”

So they started to beat her harder. Everyone attempted at the very least to kick her with a boot or beat her with a rod. The poor woman was finally awakened by the blows, at which point the policemen grabbed her and pulled her to the tower. The door opened, and a strong, brawny man stood there.

“Executioner, executioner,” the crowd shouted. “Let the executioner have her. He will chase the devil out of her bones!”

The city executioner Matija Puncer stood at the tower door, leaning against the wall. He was the head of the tower torture chambers. He stood up straight, his face beaming with pride and the knowledge that the crowds before him expected him to do something grand. He calmly watched the mass of people as they pushed a new victim into the executioner's hands.

The girl struggled, fought and resisted. The door that opened before her seemed to her a gateway to hell, an entrance to a tomb from which she would never again resurface. Her whole body shook with terror before the darkness that stared at her from that door, from the man who awaited her in that darkness.

“Drive nails into her devilish body!” the crowds shouted to Puncer, “so that the devil may find a way out.”

The policemen pushed her into the tower, and Puncer grabbed her by her hair and pulled her into the darkness. The iron door shut behind her. The crowd lingered in front of the tower. They gathered around clerk Mikica and started questioning him and discussing the terrible deeds committed by Kušenka.

“Just you wait,” Mikica spoke, “many deeds will be revealed in time. Your jaw will gape open like that lion’s at City Hall when you learn of the things I know. But now I must keep quiet until we finish the investigation.”

This excited the people even more so that they didn’t want to disperse. Some headed under the Stone Gate to Andrija Palčić’s shop, while others went to Barica Cindek who had filled her window display with fresh loaves. The crowd took up the space in front of the Stone Gate and discussed the events excitedly. Suddenly they heard the clapping of horses’ hooves. A band of young riders appeared at the gate. It was the Remetins, the conspirators making their way back from their meeting. Nera and Sanda rode in with them.

The young people were surprised at seeing such a crowd and they halted their horses. Mikica smiled evilly when he noticed Nera. He approached her horse.

“What’s going on?” the Contessa asked the people.

“They’ve locked Jelica Kušenka up in the tower,” Mikica replied maliciously.

The young riders exchanged mute glances, and Nera turned pale.

“Kušenka? Where did they find her?”

“With the nuns” Mikica replied. “The convent gardener found her.”

Nera looked at the people in the crowd, who were so agitated that they barely took any notice of the riders who stood under the roof of the Stone Gate. She caught sight of a man who was leaning against Barica Cindek's store. She immediately recognized the convent gardener. He was pale and his eyes flickered nervously. Nera got off her horse, handed her reins to Francesco who had been riding beside her and went up to the gardener:

“You accused the maiden Helena?” she asked in a half-whisper.

The gardener looked at her and frowned:

“Yes. Something always told me she wasn't an honest woman. But I never imagined that maiden to be the daughter of the witch Kušenka! Now I know why she wouldn't have me! She had a pact with the devil, so she loathed me. It's as clear as day!”

“Won't your conscience torment you for accusing her out of spite?”

“It wasn't out of spite. I was looking for help. I am already very ill—she tortured me night and day! I still can't find peace. Something keeps weighing down on me. Wherever I look, I see her and hear her being taken away to the tower. I don't know what to do with myself.”

As he spoke, Pavao Galović was pale, his brows quivered. Nera looked at his suffering face in disbelief. His mouth was dry, as with a fever, and his eyes were aflame.

“My dear fellow, you have lost your mind. You developed a crush on her, but how is this her fault?”

“Whose fault is it that she tortures me night and day? It isn't mine! Here, they gave me a prize at the Magistrate's office for having unwittingly discovered Kušenka. I'll drink my way through it to ease my soul.”

“You traded an honest girl for money.”

“Your Grace, how can you say that a witch is honest?”

“And what if it were revealed that she was not a witch, that she did you no harm and did not hate you, but was an honest girl who refused to be your lover?”

Pavao stared at Nera strangely and replied:

“In that case I would truly regret it. But why would I have suffered so from her presence? When the gentlemen at the Magistrate’s office say that she is a witch, then that’s like the ‘Amen’ in *Our Father!* Unlike me, these are learned gentlemen and they know what they are talking about.”

Nera noticed a man sneaking around them. She turned around and realized that Mikica had been eavesdropping on their conversation. She looked at him sternly:

“Who are you? What do you want here?”

“I come from the Magistrate’s office!”

“Get out of here!”

Mikica was caught off guard. No one had ever spoken to him this way before; after all, he was a man from the Magistrate’s office. He stood up straight and boasted:

“I can’t leave, Your Grace, because I work at the Magistrate’s office, and we are conducting an investigation, so I must keep an eye on the witness.” Mikica pointed to the convent gardener. Nera found Mikica repulsive so she walked back to her horse, mounted it and, worried, rode to her grandmother’s castle with her friends. While the crowd were still damning the witch and demanding a death sentence for Kušenka, a strange little group sat in Countess Ratkay’s drawing room. Countess Ratkay’s white head stood out among the young Remetins. They were joined by Father Smole, who had just barely recovered from his grave injury, and Count Oršić.



“My children, you will yet live to see this same crowd rebel against those who nowadays persecute innocent, unfortunate victims,” the old Countess said. “So I suggest that you hide no longer! Clearly and simply state your beliefs, and I will support you even if it requires going to see the Queen.”

“Here, now we have a chance to openly fight for truth and justice. We must destroy that damned criminal who is persecuting our innocent women.”

## Chapter 22: At Baba Urša's

A dense darkness covered the streets of Grič, and only a small house in Opatovina Street shone a pale light into the night. The Grič burghers know this house well; this is where Baba Urša waits to collect a groš, a florin<sup>106</sup> or even a gold ducat, and dispense some love potion or medicine.

Three people walked down the street, their figures hidden by the night and their long capes. They were silent, hurriedly marching forward as if they were pressed for time. They stopped under the lighted windowpane and softly tapped on the window. The round, curly head of a boy appeared, and asked:

“Who is it? Who are you looking for?”

“Baba Urša and her help.”

The window shut. Moments later, the gate in the wooden fence opened. The three figures entered the yard filled with dark potholes, ditches and rocks.

“This must be your first time here,” the boy said, briskly leading the way, “You are not familiar with this terrain.”

The strangers made no reply.

A wooden walkway stretched across the yard, as black as coal. The back door was open, and a pale light showed the strangers the way. They entered the room. The black ceiling pressed low over their heads. Black, dirty icons hung on the walls. The cabinets were filled with plates, urns and statues of saints, and embers smoldered in the fireplace, warming the room's moldy air.

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<sup>106</sup> The currency of the lands of the House of Habsburg between 1754 and 1892. *Florin* was used on Austrian coins and *Forint* on Hungarian coins.

A crowd of people stood in the middle of the room: women, girls and two men. The women hid their faces by pulling their kerchiefs up to their noses.

A woman of about fifty faced this horde. She was tall and wide. Her head was covered with a black kerchief, and beneath it a stern, wide, wrinkled face with a double chin could be seen. She winked with her left eye, and her right fluttered restlessly as she suspiciously surveyed her customers. This was Baba Urša, the most famous fortuneteller in Grič.

“So, your husband has been cheating on you?” the old lady addressed a woman, who was almost lost in her oversized cloak.

The old woman winked with her left eye, smacked her lips and said:

“Get a kitten that was born on the Great Sabbath, slay it and drain its blood, then take that blood and walk down the path that your husband takes to see his lover. Sprinkle the kitten’s blood over the path. When your husband goes to see his lover again, he won’t make it half the way there before turning around to come back home to you.”

“But where should I get the kitten and its blood?”

“A small bottle costs two new florins,” Baba Urša said.

The women reached into her pocket, and Baba Urša got a small bottle from the cabinet. She handed it to the poor woman.

“What do you want?” Baba asked an old man who was first in line.

“Moles have recently been destroying my whole field. I don’t know what to do. If there’s a remedy for that, I’ll give you a forint.”

“There’s a remedy, yes. You’re old, and poor; I’ll let you have it for a forint.”

The old man had the money at hand and gave it over immediately. When Baba put it away, she instructed him thus:

“At midnight, cook some noodles that a young bride made on her wedding night. Then put the noodles in a bowl, take them into the field and step into them with one foot. Do this on a Friday before Vespers.”

The old man left, thanking and blessing Urša.

“And what’s wrong with you?” Baba Urša asked a young man, who was hunched over as if he were sick.

“I’m suffering from jaundice, and if you can’t help me no one can.”

The young man started to tell her about his illness, but the old woman interrupted him and said:

“I’ve heard enough. Give me a forint.”

He handed her the money and she grabbed a small bottle from the cabinet:

“These are spleen roots: now pay attention! Focus on me and give me your hands.”

The young man held out his hands, as dry and yellow as beeswax. The old woman poured some liquid out of the bottle and started to rub his hands and temples, saying:

“Run away, run away you nasty jaundice, dry and raw, whatever you are, run away from this body!”

When she had repeated this three times, she shook her hands over the dirt floor. She instructed the young man to come see her every day after Vespers and to remember to bring a forint. He thanked her, picked up his waistcoat and left.

The old woman lifted her head. In the recesses of the room she noticed three new figures wrapped in black cloaks.

“We wish to speak with you alone,” a man said.

“Lovro,” the old woman turned to the boy who had been sitting in the corner and calmly dozing, uninterested in the goings-on, “come here.”

The boy hurried to Urša and she asked him a question under her breath.

“Two women and a man. They are high society. They wear silk suits under their clothes,” Lovro informed her quietly. Baba Urša winked at Lovro and he escorted the three black figures into the side chamber.

This was a small room with bare walls and covered with soot. A stool was set in the middle of the chamber with a round wooden bowl on it. There was a table overflowing with bottles and vials in the corner, and bags filled with various articles were hanging on the wall. A single bench was the only furniture. All three figures squeezed together onto that bench.

“You will have to wait a little while,” Lovro informed them as the window rattled again. Lovro ran out of the small room, through the first room and into the yard. When he opened the little door, a tall man wearing a mask entered the yard.

“Are you our customer?” Lovro asked.

“Yes. Tell me, lad, didn’t two women and a man just walk through here wearing black cloaks?”

“Yes. What of it?”

“I’d like to hear their conversation with Baba Urša. Look, here’s a gold ducat for you.”

The lad took the money and led the man into the yard.

“Tell Baba Urša,” the man whispered, “that I came here looking for her advice and that I wish to speak with her when the others leave. But watch out, I want to make sure to hear what the other three visitors have to say to her.”

“All right! Come with me.”

Lovro went ahead and opened the door, then lit an oil lamp and showed the way. The foul smelling little chamber served as storage for various greens and herbs. The soot-covered fireplace was crammed with pots.

“Go in there and sit in the corner. The three customers won’t see you there.”

The man crouched as if he were old and hunch-backed. He wrapped himself in his cape and entered the small chamber where the three people sat. The pale light of the oil lamp revealed the black masks that hid their faces. They were wrapped in cloaks from head to foot as well. The man in the red cape sat in the corner behind the open door, from where he could see the three of them without giving them a chance to notice his presence. Baba Urša came in shortly, squinted with her left eye suspiciously and asked the group:

‘What brings you to see me today?’

“Can you help a girl who is in love with a young knight who won’t return her love?” a woman’s voice asked.

“Yes I can,” the old woman said, smacking her lips. “But love is expensive, my dear!”

“Here’s a new coin,” the woman said, handing it to the hag, who took it and stashed it greedily between her breasts.

“So, you’re in love with a young man who doesn’t love you back? He must be an officer, and his name is Siniša. So many women and girls have already asked me for him that he would need to have a hundred hearts to be able to give one to each. But there is one potion I have not told anyone else about, because it is too expensive.”

“It’s not Siniša,” the woman replied.

“No? Then you must tell me who it is, or the potion won’t work.”

The masked woman was silent for a moment, and glanced several times questioningly at her friend, and then answered quietly:

“I’ll tell you, if I must. His name is Skerlec!”

“I only gave one other woman the potion to seduce him. This will make things easier.”

“Who did you sell it to?” the woman asked excitedly.

Baba smacked her lips and laughed:

“Do you think I can’t keep my mouth shut? If that’s why you’re here, I won’t have anything to do with you.”

“All right. I only ask that you help me.”

“That’s something else entirely. First of all, bring me a small piece of that young man’s shirt, then prick your left hand with a needle, let a few drops of blood fall into this vial and mix this into his drink. He should drink it, but make sure he does so on the first Friday of the month. This will make his love blaze up. Then bring me a piece of rope used to hang a man, and finally, a female pigeon’s heart.”

“Where should I get the rope?”

“You can buy it from me. Come see me tomorrow after Vespers and we will seal the deal.”

“And what are you seeking?” she asked the other woman.

“I am just here to escort my friend.”

The old woman frowned and squinted at the man seated by the two women.

“I hope you’re not just an escort too?”

“No. I’m suffering terribly. I am in love with a married woman.”

“Who is this lady? I have to know.”

“The White Owl.”

Baba Urša was so surprised that she cracked open her left eye and stared at the stranger.

“How do you know her?”

“I come from ‘Hell.’”

The old woman bared her two long, protruding teeth and replied with contempt:

“You aim too high! ‘The White Owl’ is not your kind of roast bird. But, hold on a second. If you’re really from ‘Hell,’ why do you come to see me wearing a mask?”

“Because I don’t want you to recognize me. I don’t want you and ‘The White Owl’ to mock me.”

The old woman squinted harder. She looked the masked stranger up and down suspiciously with her right eye, and then grabbed a mallet from the wall and pounded three times against the floorboards. The muffled noise filled the small chamber.

“For God’s sake, let’s go, I am scared,” the smaller lady whispered to her chaperone, “You’ve gone too far.”

“It’s too late now. It would be imprudent to run,” the other woman whispered.

They had barely exchanged those words when floorboards lifted up like doors. Black, horned heads appeared through them, as if coming from underground. Both women retreated to the window, and the man stood up. Two men climbed up a ladder from the cellar, wearing black hoods.

“What is it, Baba? Why won’t you let us rest?” the men asked.

“This man over here claims that he’s one of you.”

“Then let him say our password!” a dark, powerful voice demanded.

The stranger was silent.



“He doesn’t know it! I certainly have a good nose!” the old woman laughed. “Now you can deal with him as you see fit.”

“Get down there!” the first man’s robust voice commanded the stranger, pointing at the cellar ladder.

“All right. But before I do I must escort these two ladies out of the house.”

“Aha! Wouldn’t you like that? Don’t worry about them, you rascal,” the other man laughed. “Come here, little doves.”

At that moment the door at the far end of the chamber banged. A tall man in a red cloak and wearing a full-face mask appeared in the doorway.

“Who are you?” the old woman asked the newcomer. “How did you get here? Lovro, where are you?”

The boy ran up to her in an instant. His face was calm and carefree.

“Who is this man? How did he get in?” the old woman yelled at the boy.

“He must be our customer, he came with the others. He’s got a fistful of coins,” the boy whispered to the old woman. This altered her demeanor.

“Are you here for advice or medicine?” the old woman asked.

“Follow me to the other room.”

“I escorted my friends here,” the man said in a voice that was clearly altered.

“Off with the masks,” the man who came from the cellar demanded.

He had barely uttered the command when a shot was fired. The windowpane burst into small shards and the smell of gunpowder filled the room. The masked woman who stood by the window had fired a shot through the glass. In an instant, Tito Krajačić’s head appeared at the window, and men’s voices filled the yard. Both of the black-hooded men disappeared back into

the cellar as if the earth had summoned them. Floorboards closed behind them, and looked as if they were nailed to the floor. The man who had been standing at the far end of the chamber disappeared, and the Remetins burst into Baba Urša's house in their elegant attire, as if they had just come from a celebration.

Baba Urša turned pale, but she kept her calm, apart from the twitching of her left eye.

"Lift up that door," commanded the masked stranger who had escorted the women, taking off his mask. It was Francesco.

Two Remetins threw themselves onto the floor to lift the boards. It was in vain, the floor was level, and there was no lever that they could use to lift it up.

"Noble gentlemen," Baba Urša said, "who gave you permission to invade my honest home in this manner?"

"Stop playing around, Baba, no one will be able to help you now! Open this door, or we will summon the City Captain," Francesco threatened.

"You can summon all the city captains and all the city police if you wish. I am not afraid of anyone," the old woman said, and unconcernedly sat down on the stool.

The young man first took care to take both women out of the house. As they were crossing the yard, they saw the tall man in the red cape. He pulled Lovro to his side and whispered:

"Tell that tall lady not to come here again. She won't make it out of here next time."

Lovro was willing to do anything for money.

"Were you frightened, Nera?" Francesco asked.

"No, but Sanda is still shivering."

Lovro approached them and first tried to determine which was the taller lady. Then he quietly delivered the message from the man in the red cloak and Nera and Sanda went out into the street where Count Čikulini ran to meet them.

“Our men will stay in the fortune-teller’s house until Sale arrives with the policemen. You let us wait a long time for that signal.”

“The old woman had many customers,” Nera replied, “I realized we were in trouble as soon as the Count mentioned the ‘White Owl,’ but I did not want to fire the shot immediately because the old woman had her eye on me.”

“Baba suspected we were spies. The ‘White Owl’ must be an important member of this damned gang, since Baba got so upset.”

“And we still did not find out who she is,” Sanda said.

“Don’t worry, we’ll figure it out. We gained more information than we had hoped for. At least now we know where our enemies’ headquarters are,” Nera said.

Čikulini hurried ahead to inform Lacko Sale about the events, and Francesco, Nera and Sanda headed to the ‘Red Castle.’

“Francesco, didn’t you notice that that man in the red cape told Urša that he was there to help us? And now he sent word by Lovro that I should never return there, for I would not make it out again,” Nera noted.

“Contessa, that man must have recognized your voice, which means that he is an acquaintance of yours.”

“As I was watching him I felt that it was someone I knew under that cape. But I can’t think who it might be.”

They pressed on toward the castle, talking, when a man sprang up before them from round the corner of the street. Nera started and whispered to Francesco:

“That’s the same man. Yes, I recognize him. He went around us and took the shortcut.”

The man approached them. Sanda grew scared and uttered a muffled scream.

“Turn back,” the man whispered through his mask, “three suspicious men are waiting for you around the corner.”

Tito stopped and looked at the stranger. But the night was so dark he could not see a thing.

“Is this an ambush?” he asked the stranger. “I am not afraid of anyone.”

“Turn back and take another street!” the stranger said. “Do it for the ladies’ sake.”

At first he did not know what to do. He thought it likely that this man was truly looking out for them, but then again, if he was interested in helping them, why was he hiding behind a mask?

“Which way should we go?” he asked to see what he would say.

“Whichever, just not that way.”

“Let’s do as he says,” Nera whispered. “I believe he is telling the truth.”

So they turned toward Sv. Marko’s square.

The man stayed behind and leaned against the wall of a house. Three hooded men jumped out from a garden nearby:

“They went the other way,” one of them remarked and cursed. “Let’s keep going and meet them at Vojkffy’s palace.”

They had just started to leave when the man who had been leaning against the wall stepped away from it, stood in their path and asked boldly:

“Who are you? What are you doing here at this hour?”

“And who are you?” one of the three men responded in the same tone of voice.

“Get back!” the cloaked man commanded, drawing two pistols. “Not a step further!”

“Let’s get him, boys!”

Tito and Francesco heard two gunshots, a shout and some cursing, and then they heard someone start running. They hurried with the ladies and reached the castle unharmed, where they were met by the Countess who had been waiting for their return, regretful at having allowed Nera to leave the house at this time of night. The young people shared all that they had seen and heard. And then they spent a whole hour waiting impatiently for the Remetins who had stayed at Baba Urša’s to return. But the news didn’t cheer anyone up. Sale had brought in the policemen immediately to search through Baba Urša’s whole house, including the cellar, but they failed to find anyone there. They even lifted the trap door. Sale informed the young people that this was just a regular door leading down to the cellar. Baba Urša had it made so that she could access the provisions she kept in her cellar directly from her room during the winter.

Little Čikulini hurried to join them at last. He told them that some men had gotten into an armed altercation in front of Lacko Sale’s house, and that a tall man had wounded two others. But who the wounded men and the attacker were—no one knew.

The young people said their goodbyes and went home. Tito held his sister Sanda’s hand, and Francesco Malakoczy walked by them. He was happy to feel the ribbon from the girl’s hat flutter in the wind and touch his face from time to time.

## Chapter 23: New Surprises

When Nera went to her bedroom she took a candelabra to light her way through the dark corridor. Suddenly she thought she saw the door to her room close abruptly, and someone rush down the stairs.

“Who is there?” she asked loudly. But no one replied. The Contessa repeated her question. No one answered. The Countess heard Nera and opened the door to her room.

“Someone was here,” Nera said to the Countess.

The Countess rang, and a chambermaid came up with another housemaid. The Countess had all the servants summoned. They searched the stairs and all the rooms, looking for the intruder. But they found no one.

“Still, someone was here,” Nera claimed. “My ear did not deceive me.”

“I just remembered,” one of the servants said, “A moment ago our new servant came into our quarters. He always roams the house at night.”

The Countess immediately sent for him. A man of medium build, with ashen hair, closely shaved, with a strong chest and a pleasant face stood before Nera and the Countess. He was calm. His face was as hard as if it were carved from stone. He didn't bat an eyelash.

“Were you just upstairs in the hallway?!” Nera asked sharply.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“What were you doing there?”

“I was turning the lamps off in the dining room and putting away the silver.”

“And why did you run downstairs? Why didn't you answer me when I called?”

“I did not hear you, Your Grace. I must have already closed the downstairs door when Your Grace called.”

Both ladies felt it futile to question him further. His face struck them as so agreeable and honest, and his answers were given in such a calm manner that they had no doubt about their veracity.

When Nera entered her bedroom, she was sure that she had just imagined someone closing the door earlier. She sat in her armchair to ponder the events of the day. In her mind’s eye she could still see Baba Urša, the men who had jumped out of the cellar and that man in the red cape who seemed so familiar. Finally she decided to go to bed, but suddenly, she shuddered. There was a letter on the table, of the same kind that she had found in her room once before. It was addressed in red lettering just as before. She stared at it with surprise. She looked around the room as if searching for the invisible creature that had placed the letter on her table. She thought of the new servant, who had certainly been the person running down the stairs earlier. Could he have placed the letter there? Nera tore open the envelope and started to read:

“Nera!

I saw you today! And I will see you again tomorrow! Do you know those days when heavy clouds shut out the sun and the whole world is gray, hazy and sad? I do. Those are the days when I don’t get to see you. Nera! Why am I not the light of day that shines on you from morning to evening? Why am I not the dark night that lulls you to sleep from dusk till dawn? Nera, you walked down the street. If only I could have turned into the black dirt for you to touch me with your dainty silken shoe! I saw you, Nera, and my heart sings like a lark smitten by sunrise. You are beautiful, Nera, but the feelings that you have awakened in my heart are a hundred times more beautiful.

Your black eyes are like chasms; I have plummeted into them, and now I lie here with my chest torn open. Oh, that I could lie here forever, writing down my sighs with the blood that flows from my wounded heart.

Nera! Why am I not the sun that showers you with hot kisses? Why am I not the moon that caresses your dear face as you sleep? I am but a man, and both heaven and hell separate me from you...”

“Again with no signature!” Nera thought. Who is the man who keeps sending her these letters? Why does he write them when he knows that she’s betrothed to another? No—she would no longer read them. She must not read them. Ivo would surely be saddened if he knew.

Nera put the letter away, convinced that the new servant had planted it in her room at the request of some cavalier, and she decided to watch that man more carefully in the future.

She went to the window. The world outside was dark and deserted. Her eyes stopped at a black dot near the Capuchin monastery. She thought she saw someone standing there, under the branches of a chestnut tree. Yes, it was a man. He moved and retreated under the tree again. It seemed to her as if he could see her, that he was watching her.

“Who is that? What is he doing there, unmoving? If Vojkffy weren’t sick,” Nera thought to herself, “I would be convinced that he wrote the letter. As it is now, that is impossible.”

She stared into the darkness for a whole hour, but the man remained hidden under the tree and did not come out. Overcome with exhaustion, she finally lay down.

The following morning Nera waited for Baron Skerlec. She decided to tell him everything that had happened with Kušenka and to tell him about the secret meetings with the Remetins. Ivan was dejected and sad. Nera asked him several times to tell her what was bothering him. Finally, Skerlec confessed that he had heard that Vojkffy had fought with Siniša



over her, and that he had showered her with declarations of love. Nera frankly told him everything that had happened between herself and Vojkffy and between Vojkffy and Siniša, and then warned him about the threats that the Count had made on his life if she did not break the engagement.

“He won’t have time for that!” Skerlec said. “By the time he recovers, we will have gotten married and moved to Vienna. I am expecting the arrival of my appointment to position of the Lord Chamberlain position any day now.”

The Contessa was taken aback by this. They had not discussed the wedding yet.

“You have put my mind at ease by telling me yourself about the situation with Vojkffy,” he continued.

“Ivo, I hope that you would never believe any gossip about me?”

“How could I doubt you!” the Baron said.

“But who told you about the Count?”

“I got an anonymous letter telling me about it.”

The Count showed her a small letter written in a woman’s handwriting. He could not fathom whom it came from. The Contessa then started to tell Skerlec about everything that had happened with Kušenka; Skerlec listened, and his face grew darker by the minute. When she had finished her story, he was so incensed that he could barely contain himself.

“How could you have done such a terrible thing?” he asked sullenly. “Didn’t you consider the fact that sheltering a witch is a criminal offense?”

“But dear Ivo, she is not a witch. Common sense should tell us that the allegations against these women are false!”

“For God’s sake, Nera, you don’t mean to claim that the Judges put innocent women on trial?”

“Yes, Ivo, they do.”

Skerlec arose, extremely agitated by the conversation, but Nera did not notice it. On the contrary, she felt like this would be the right time to tell him that there was a whole group of likeminded young people who were her friends. However, Skerlec interrupted:

“I beg you, Nera, not to speak in this way about laws that no one dares to question, least of all the fiancée of the Lord Chamberlain, the future Protonotary<sup>107</sup>, and the future Queen’s Lady in Waiting.”

“You should be ashamed of yourself, Ivo! The Skerlec family never spoke in this way before!” Nera said sharply.

Skerlec did not have the chance to respond. Countess Ratkay stood at the door, eyeing her nephew indignantly.

“You talk like a puppet created and fashioned by the lackeys at court!” the old Countess said to him sternly. The Baron turned pale. He always backed down before this courageous, proud and dignified woman like a schoolboy before his teacher.

“I am convinced that you don’t mean what you say. We in the Skerlec family have never allowed our intellect to idle, and I would hope that you wouldn’t be the first to bring dishonor on our name. Do you think that high-ranking people don’t hold their own opinions about laws, even if those laws are bad? Please, Nera, go to the other room, I wish to speak with him privately.”

The Contessa arose and left the room, and the Countess looked at her nephew sternly and told him in an even more severe tone of voice:

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<sup>107</sup> “A priest of the chief college of the papal curia who keeps records of consistories and canonizations and signs papal bulls; *also* : an honorary member of this college.”

“I am afraid that your mother has influenced your views, and with all due respect, she has been educating herself in the fashion of Countess Auersperg and Countess Čikulini. I also know that your mother never liked me, and that therefore she most likely does not care for Nera. So I am warning you, Ivo: if I decide that I have been mistaken about you, I will openly advise Nera not to marry you.”

The Baron grew nervous, and his blue eyes filled with melancholy.

“Aunt,” he said, “I meant no harm. I was telling Nera this because I am worried that she will behave again like she did on the evening of her birthday, when you were forced to correct her statements about the existence of witches.”

“Times have changed. We will start resisting these medieval superstitions openly, so I expect you to not hinder us, even if you are not prepared to stand by us.”

“I will help you as much as I am able, but I did not come here to talk about this. I came here to discuss a much pleasanter matter, but you interrupted me. Aunt, I am off to Vienna in a month. They are summoning me to court. My father will remain Protonotary, and I will be named Lord Chamberlain.”

“Is that so? I had not hoped that this would happen so soon.”

“They changed their minds in Vienna. But I won’t leave Nera here. Please, aunt, arrange our wedding for a month from today.”

The Countess was even more surprised.

“But what about me? Shall I lose her so soon? Ivo, you demand too much of me.”

“You will come with us, aunt—you will not lose her.”

The Countess thought about this for a while, and then said:

“I will speak with her.”

After the Baron had taken his leave, grandmother and granddaughter discussed Skerlec's suggestion at length. Finally the Countess said:

“Mark my words. Ivo will be a perfect man if he falls into good hands. He lacks the Skerlec determination, but he has a kind temperament. Just think about it, Nera—if we commence our battle against the burning of the witches from the Queen's court itself, we will succeed. The Queen is an intelligent woman, and you will attempt to get into her good graces.”

Nera did not have time to respond. At that moment, a servant came into the room informing the Countess that she had received a letter from Judge Krajačić. The Countess opened the letter; Krajačić civilly requested that she and Nera come to the City Hall as soon as possible to discuss an important matter. The Countess and Nera looked at each other.

“This must be about Kušenka. Let's go straight away,” the Countess said.

## Chapter 24: Before the City Judge

City Judge Krajačić and Council Commissioner Dvojković were sitting in a City Hall chamber when the arrival of Countess Ratkay and her granddaughter was announced. Dvojković remained in the room to witness the hearing. The Judge first asked the Countess to enter alone, while Nera waited in the adjoining room.

The gray-haired old lady walked in, wearing a black silk dress and a black hat on her white head. She approached the Judge proudly and assuredly, and he bowed in the same manner.

“I was forced to request Your Grace’s presence at the City Hall,” the City Judge said. “A couple of days ago a so-called maiden Helena was apprehended and placed in the tower because it was revealed that she was in fact the sought-after witch Jelica Kušenka. She mentioned Your Grace in her testimony, as well as the Contessa, and she claimed that she had been at your house and that you had sent her to the convent.”

“Yes, this is true,” the Countess said tersely.

“I am half-convinced that Your Grace had no idea who it was that you were hiding in your home.”

“To the contrary, I was very much aware that this girl was the daughter of Margareta Kušenka, who had been burned at the stake, which is why I offered her shelter in my home.”

The Judge and the Council Commissioner looked at the Countess in shock.

“I don’t know what to make of this. Your Grace knew that we suspected that Kušenka was a witch. How is it possible that Your Grace nonetheless took her in?”

“Yes, I did shelter her, and I had her taken to the convent in order to protect her better.”

“I don’t believe I need to explain to Your Grace the consequences you would face for this act unless you were to immediately revoke your testimony or explain to the court that you were ignorant...”

“I will not revoke a thing, nor will I apologize. Feel free to deliver your verdict, Hon. Judge,” the Countess said with irony.

“Your Grace will be able to avoid all punishment by giving us a deposition against Kušenka,” the Judge said in milder tone of voice.

“Sir, I find your offer offensive. I will admit loud and clear to attempting to save Kušenka from your judgment, because Kušenka is not a witch, and if you were to punish her you would be committing a crime.”

Krajačić arose and grew more serious.

“I beg Your Grace not to speak this way for your own good, and not to forget that you are standing here before the court.”

“If I am standing before a just court then my words should not cause it any offense. In fact, Hon. Judge, let me add this: not only is Kušenka not a witch, but neither were all the innocent women you have burned to death.”

The Judge turned red with rage.

“I would venture to counsel Your Grace to revoke your claims,” the City Judge said.

“I never revoke my words. I believe we are done here.”

“Yes, Madam Countess!” the Judge said.

When the Countess left, Contessa Nera stepped determinedly into the room. Her red dress made out of lustrous silk rustled about her, and her beautiful head was held high, just like her grandmother’s.

“Contessa, if you please, tell me how Jelica Kušenka came to stay at your home?”

“When she heard that the court was looking for her, she came to me for help.”

“Why did she have so much faith in you in particular?”

“I suppose she didn’t feel comfortable asking you for help,” Nera said ironically.

“You knew about the punishment we declared for all who would conceal Kušenka’s whereabouts, and yet you continued to shelter her?”

“Of course I did, and I would do it again for any woman whom you declare a witch.”

“Don’t you know, Contessa, that those who hide witches are considered to be their partners in crime?”

“I am familiar with all the ridiculous nonsense you use to manipulate the public.”

“Contessa, you are in contempt of court,” Krajačić said harshly.

“And you are in contempt of common sense. Kušenka is just as much a witch as Hon. Judge or the Council Commissioner.”

“Watch your words. Kušenka’s own mother betrayed her.”

“Of course she did. She would have confessed to anything while being tortured, just to make the pain subside.”

“What do you know of torture?!”

“You are mistaken if you think I don’t know. I often went near the tower at the Stone Gate and I heard those poor women moan.”

The Judge gave the Council Commissioner a meaningful look.

“When did you go to the city tower?”

“I go there very often. I pass it when I go out for a ride,” Nera said. She realized it would have been a bad idea to tell Krajačić about her night excursion to the Stone Gate.

“And do you, Contessa, even know what witches are?”

“They are fairytales designed for stupid and superstitious folk.”

Krajačić was so flabbergasted he almost fell off his chair. The Council Commissioner arose, approached the Contessa with disapproval, but said to her in a conciliatory tone:

“You are clearly joking. Think about what you are saying.”

“Do you speak with others this way?” Krajačić asked.

“Yes, Hon. Judge.”

“Do you realize this constitutes a rebellion against the law?”

“This constitutes an allegiance to the voice of enlightened intellect, and believe me, there are more in this town who feel the same way.”

“Then it was you who led them astray; you rallied them to support these ideas. Even on the very day of your society debut you stated that you didn’t believe in witches and you mocked me, a guardian of the law. But now I expect you to tell me the names of each of the people who spurn the law as you do.”

“They will come forward on their own accord,” Nera smiled meaningfully. “It won’t be necessary for me to reveal their identities.”

At that moment a policemen entered the room to inform the City Judge that his eminence the Vice-Governor wanted to see him.

Krajačić interrupted the investigation and left the room, and the Council Commissioner whispered to Nera:

“Why have you incriminated yourself so recklessly, Contessa, when you know that



Krajačić bears no good will toward you. It seems to me that you have no idea that this could have serious consequences for your grandmother and yourself.”

“Why shouldn’t I tell the truth?”

“I am very sorry to see this turn of events, because I am sincerely devoted to you.”

“Hon. Solicitor, we are not afraid.”

“I know that your grandmother has a powerful protector in the Queen, but I beg you once more not to further incense Krajačić. The Queen will never meddle in the law.”

Dvojković escorted Nera to the Countess who was waiting in the adjoining room, then took his leave and went to his chamber. Once there, he closed the door with care, and pulled the woman’s red silk belt, embroidered with jewels, out of his desk. It was the same belt he had found at the Stone Gate the night he saw the white witch. He mentally compared Nera’s silk dress and the red belt he held in his hands. A satisfied smile flashed across his face.

## Chapter 25: The Love Potion

It was the evening of a great celebration at Ivan Drašković's palace in Plebanuška Street; the twentieth anniversary of Count Drašković's marriage to his wife, Countess Drašković, née Suzana Malatinski. They lived in Varaždin, but since their daughter resided in Zagreb with her aunt, Countess Čikulini, the Countess decided to celebrate their anniversary there.

The beautiful palace that was situated by the City Hall was alight with thousands of lamps and candles that illuminated the opulent glow and intrusive excess with which Count Drašković had decorated it. All the nobility from Grič and the surrounding areas were invited. Heavy silks rustled everywhere, heirloom gems sparkled. The gentlemen in colorful aristocratic suits with gold tassels sharply contrasted with those who dressed in French tailcoats of variously colored velvet, in short trousers, tall stockings and cutout shoes.

Before dinner the guests gathered in groups and awaited the couple being celebrated. Captain Siniša was the last to enter the ballroom, wearing the dress uniform of a Slavonian Battalion Captain suit. When he approached the gentlemen to greet them, the ladies noticed that he was taller, with broader shoulders than any of the skinny cavaliers, and that he looked like a giant among them. Nera stood at the far end of the ballroom with her fiancé and the Remetins. Siniša greeted her curtly and moved on.

"Look, Governor Nadaždi came from Varaždin, too," Siniša whispered to lieutenant Branko, his constant companion.

"Well of course he has come; Countess Drašković is here."

Count Nadaždi approached Siniša and said:

“You must be Captain Siniša? I thought as much. The ladies have told me so much about you. But they did not exaggerate. Nevertheless, I must call on you to explain yourself.”

The Governor walked with him across the ballroom, and Siniša asked:

“Why, Your Highness?”

“Because you have disturbed my daughter Terka’s heart.”

“You must be mistaken. I would not dare court her.”

“I know, you are not an aristocrat by birth,” the Governor interrupted him, “but that honor could be arranged.”

“My honor is my nobility, and my saber is my wife.”

“I might have expected such an answer from you. But tell me, why does everyone only call you Captain Siniša, as if they didn’t know your last name?”

“Your Excellency, a soldier needs no name. He only needs his courage and a sharp saber to vouch for him.”

“I won’t ask any more questions. It looks like you have conquered the hearts of our women and girls even without your aristocratic seal. The men will rebel if you don’t hurry and take shelter in the fortress of marriage. Terka is coming over. It would please me very much if you were to take a liking to her.”

A pretty girl with fiery black eyes approached Siniša, took him by the hand and walked around the room with him twice, then led him into a small salon. Two champagne bottles and two flutes stood on a small table.

“Look, this is just what I was looking for. I am terribly thirsty,” she said and poured herself a glass out of the bottle to the left, drank it, and then poured another glass out of the bottle to the right. Siniša watched the girl carefully. When she offered him the champagne, he surprised

her by throwing the glass to the floor and taking her flute instead, filling it with the champagne from the bottle to the left that she had drunk from before.

“I want to drink out of your glass!” he said, draining the flute.

Terka was both disappointed and happily excited at the same time. She sat down and offered Siniša the armchair.

“Tell me, Contessa, why did you bring me here?” Siniša asked the girl.

Terka blushed to her temples.

“That is a rather ugly question,” she berated him.

“Would you prefer it if I toyed with you as though I never intend to get married? I told you this before.”

“Then I will marry someone else,” the girl shrieked passionately.

“I would certainly prefer that.”

But it was as if Terka had not heard a word he said. She was completely overcome at being in the vicinity of the young officer. She arose, looked at him longingly and started to say:

“Do you hear me, Siniša? I will marry for your sake, I will cheat on the husband I choose for your sake. I will betray a hundred husbands for you, Siniša, do you understand me?”

“I am truly sorry for the poor fool who will marry you.”

“Don’t be sorry! You’re the only one I love. And since you won’t be persuaded into the shackles of marriage, I shall accept that—but I want you to be mine. I thought I would leave this room as your fiancée, but even now—I am your fiancée. Do you understand? Another will get the engagement ring, and you will get me! I won’t stay alone with you here any longer to avoid suspicion. Goodbye!” she whispered passionately and left.

Siniša laughed, smoothed his black, curly hair and poured some champagne from the bottle to the right into a flute, lifted it to the light and noticed a greenish tint.

“These must be the drops from Baba Jana or Baba Urša,” Siniša thought to himself. “But you won’t be drugging me with your love potions!”

He heard excited female voices from the side room, the doors to which were ajar:

“Don’t be upset, Julija. I tried as hard as I could to have the Baron named Lord Chamberlain just so he would leave for Vienna. As you know, I managed to do it, but now Skerlec wants to marry Nera! So, we accomplished nothing. I was convinced that he would go to Vienna without Nera. Then I would have an easier time grooming him for you.”

“Don’t worry, I haven’t given up. He won’t be marrying Nera before his trip to Vienna.”

“How will you stop the wedding?”

“Very easily. Something happened at City Hall today that will help. Countess Ratkay and Nera were interrogated for hiding Kušenka the witch. Dvojković told me this in confidence. They confirmed their guilt at the hearing. You will simply whisper to Skerlec that everyone is abuzz about this hearing and that the court will be appalled when they find out that his fiancée is involved with hiding witches. Then suggest to him in a friendly manner to postpone the wedding until all of this is supposedly swept under the rug.”

“But what if Skerlec makes Nera revoke her testimony?”

“Don’t worry, she is much too stubborn to go back on her word. She is also quite confident that no one, not even Krajačić, would prosecute Countess Ratkay’s granddaughter.”

“This would really be a perfect reason to postpone the wedding, while still sending him to Vienna.”

“Yes. I cast all my nets...I am not as pretty as Nera, but I am experienced and passionate, so an innocent, weak-willed young man must fall into my arms.”

“Which would fulfill your dream of becoming a lady-in-waiting, just like me. But in that case, you will need to give up the pleasures of hell.”

“Let that be! One can find hellish pleasures anywhere.”

Siniša listened intently to the conversation, still as a statue and without batting an eye. Then the door opened, and Countesses Auersperg and Čikulini entered the room.

“What are you doing here, Siniša?!” the lady-in-waiting wondered.

“Two flutes and champagne. What could this mean?” Countess Auersperg exclaimed.

Countess Čikulini discretely left the room, allowing them some privacy.

“It means that two young people decided to have some fun here; or maybe just one of them did. Or someone was counting their chickens before they hatched, and so, as it stands, none remained.”

“Siniša, I must speak with you.”

“That’s the worst you could do right now.”

“I can’t take this anymore. I want to know why you stopped coming to see me! What are you doing?”

“I am looking for the Grič witches.”

“Siniša, you know what I mean. Haven’t I travelled here from Vienna on leave just to be with you? And you no longer come to me. Don’t you love me any more?”

“I love you as much as you love me.”

“I love you more than I have ever loved another man.”

“Since when have you started to experience emotions? Don’t talk of true love, or I might suspect you found a gray hair in your coiffure...”

“It would behoove you to stop saying such mean things!”

“You call my honesty evil! As you wish. But if you’re looking for true love, my dear, look elsewhere. I am still too young for that.”

“Siniša, you never used to talk to me in this way before.”

“Have you ever asked me? We never spoke of any sort of ‘love’! Come, please, let’s go into the ballroom.”

“You don’t wish to be seen alone with me?”

Siniša frowned at the beautiful Countess and said icily:

“I’m sorry, these jealous scenes between us are like a slap in the face to honesty, and I am no pretender. If you care so much about me, please do let me know when I should come visit. And now give me your hand—we are leaving. They are already heading to dinner.”

The lady-in-waiting acquiesced, pressing her lips tightly together. When she saw Countess Čikulini next she whispered:

“He thinks he won’t be marrying me! But I have a secret weapon at my disposal that will force him into marriage.”

“I can’t think of anything that would break his stubbornness.”

“Something can, and that’s his secret! He doesn’t suspect that I know it and am keeping quiet, for now. Once I decide that I have had enough, the cat will be out of the bag, and he will still be my husband.”

Count Nadaždi leaned against the fireplace in the opulently furnished room of Countess Drašković. The beautiful Countess, of average height and with a rather delicate build, stood next

to him. Her red silk ball gown brought out her dark skin and small passionate black eyes. She had powdered her thick hair white, and a tiara made of huge gemstones shone on her head.

“Why didn’t I know you twenty years ago, Suzana?” the Governor said. “Today we would be celebrating our wedding anniversary!”

“Aren’t we happy as it is?”

“What kind of happiness can this be, when we have to constantly hide our love?! If only our daughters would marry!”

“That was the only reason I agreed to today’s celebration. My husband only wanted to celebrate our anniversary so he could spend a few hundred forints. But I had another goal: to ensure that we rid ourselves of our daughters.”

“I spoke with Siniša. He is a handsome, striking man, but Terka should have chosen an aristocrat. Siniša doesn’t even have a last name.”

“We will speak more about this later. I must go fetch my husband so we can receive the guests.”

“I am not entirely comfortable seeing you with him.”

“Allow him to have that small pleasure of claiming me publicly as his wife. I am all yours, anyway,” the Countess said softly, embracing the Governor and giving him a kiss.

A few moments later Countess Drašković appeared hand in hand with her husband. Next to her, a woman still beautiful and vigorous, the Count looked extraordinarily weak. His sallow face showed signs of illness. All that notwithstanding, he was dressed in his brilliant General’s uniform, embroidered with gold and jewels and decorated with medals.



“The hostess is truly still beautiful!” Siniša told Countess Čikulini, who stood next to him as the married couple entered the room to accept congratulations on their twenty years of marriage.

“She is as dark as a Gypsy!” Siniša noted.

“She is a Gypsy. You’re mistaken to think of her as noble by blood. Count Drašković met her in Hungary, in Liptov county, when he was stationed there as a commander. Her father and mother were vegetable sellers, and today, as you can see, she is a Countess and wife to the Lord Chamberlain, a knight of the order of Maria Theresa, and the Grand District-Prefect of Križevci. And out of special consideration for him, she is having an affair with the Governor!” Countess Čikulini said spitefully.

The married couple accepted the congratulations while Nadaždi talked with Count Oršić. At dinner, the married couple was seated at the head of the table, and Countess Ratkay was seated next to Countess Drašković on one side, and the Governor next to her. The old lady told the Governor about what had happened with Kušenka and warned him about the injustice of sentencing Kušenka to burn at the stake.

“You know,” the Governor said, “that the City Judge has power that no one may or can interfere with, including myself. I must tell you honestly that these unfortunate witches cause great inconveniences for everyone and put all of us in danger with their malice. Still, I will try to privately warn the Judge of all that Your Grace has told me.”

After dinner the guests spread out across the ballrooms to enjoy themselves.

Count Petar Oršić had eaten so much that he couldn’t even breathe. He looked for a secluded spot in which to take a nap. When he noticed a small door ajar, he entered the salon into which Terka had taken Siniša before dinner. The Count situated his large, satiated body in the

big armchair. He was quite cozy there. When he saw the two opened bottles of champagne on the table, he thought to himself:

“Why shouldn’t I have one more after dinner?! It will help me digest.”

So he poured some champagne from one bottle, started to sip it, and fell asleep. When he woke up, he noticed Countess Drašković’s pretty daughter watching him and laughing.

The Count’s face softened. He arose and in the flash of an eye embraced the girl with youthful ardor and started to kiss her.

“Have you lost your mind, Count? This is very inappropriate of you!” Ženka said, barely managing to pull away from the old Count’s embrace, and running out of the room.

Baroness Linčika, all out of breath, met her at the door.

“Tell me, is anyone in the salon? I’d like to take a rest, I was dancing with the Captain. Oh, he dances so passionately, I got all worked up.”

Even before she had received an answer, she hurried to the salon, burst into the room and threw herself, exhausted, into the armchair, straight into Count Petar’s arms.

“There you are, baby!” the old man laughed and grabbed Linčika with both hands.

At first she wanted to scream, but she turned around to see who it was. When she saw Count Petar’s face, she thought it looked like a moon ablaze. She attempted to wrestle herself out of his embrace, but he held her tightly against his chest:

“Oho! You won’t escape me, little dove!”

“Count, what is the meaning of this?” Linčika asked, mortified.

“What does this mean? Ha, ha! I’m sure you know.”

“You love me, Count? Do you?”

“Of course I love you.”

“Oh, Count, I never dreamed that you could embrace so passionately, I never imagined that you adored me.”

“Me neither!”

Linčika finally freed herself from the Count’s embrace.

“Why do you recoil, little dove?”

“Only fiancées may embrace each other!”

“I have no fiancée and I shall have never have one!”

“Count, leave me be. I would have to consider you my fiancée to allow you to embrace me. Are your intentions serious?”

“Of course!”

“Oh, Count, adorn my hand with a precious engagement ring.”

The old man offered her his hand full of rings, and Linčika at once grabbed two of them.

“This is an engagement ring, and this is a gift from my fiancé,” Linčika said, embracing the Count.

He almost melted with joy and embraced Linčika so forcefully that he tousled most of her hair-do. Linčika was so happy she could barely speak; finally someone had come along who would grant her the title of a married lady.

Linčika started telling the Count about how she used to dream of him and love him even as a young girl wearing short dresses. She had always wished for a fat husband. The Count wasn’t very interested in her stories. He kept hugging her and pressing her to his broad chest.

The door to the salon opened slowly and two female heads peeped in. After she had been caught off guard by the count’s embrace, Ženka went to Nera and told her all about it. Now they

came here to see what was going on with the old Count. They were shocked to see Linčika in the Count's embrace.

Linčika screamed and wriggled out of her fiancée's embrace, and Nera and Ženka, holding in their laughter, entered the room. Linčika stood up before them triumphantly. Her hair was a mess, her make-up was smeared by the old man's kisses, and his lips looked completely red due to the rouge of his unexpected fiancée.

"My fiancé," Linčika introduced the Count, upset at the girls' laughter. But their laughter had passed. Nera looked at Count Petar with surprise, and he arose, approached her and started to hug and kiss her, too. Linčika jumped like a venomous snake. Her long face grew longer still.

Nera had barely gotten out of her guardian's embrace when Terka entered the salon. She had hardly managed to glance around the room when she felt the fat arms of the old Count embracing her and not letting go.

"For God's sake, Count, what are you doing?" Nera warned him. "What kind of a joke is this?"

But Count Oršić kept on kissing her without regard to anyone. When Terka managed to free herself from his embrace, she looked at the Count. His face was tender, his eyes burned with a strange fire. Terka started to suspect something. She rushed to the table, saw the half-empty champagne bottle and, terrified, asked the Count:

"Did you drink out of this bottle, Count?"

"Yes, my sweet! Hand me another glass. This wine is miraculous!"

Terka grabbed the flute in which some champagne was left and threw it onto the rug. Then she took the bottle and made as if to walk out with it. He face was pale and frightened.

Nera watched her carefully. She came up to Terka and asked her in a low voice:

“What was in that champagne?”

“I don’t know, let me go!”

Nera, who was much stronger than Terka, took the bottle from her and said sternly:

“Terka, you won’t get this bottle back unless you tell me what was in that champagne!”

“Nothing too bad,” Terka whispered, distressed. “Just a little potion that was meant for someone else, not the Count. Please, get someone to escort the Count home and give me back that blasted bottle.”

“Tell me who this was meant for,” Nera asked, “and I’ll give it back to you.”

“I have no interest in seducing your fiancé, and as for the others—that’s none of your business.”

“At least tell me where you got this potion?”

“From a fortune-teller. If you ever need it, I’ll take you there.”

Nera gave her the bottle and Terka quickly took it away. In the meantime though, the Count put his arm around Linčika’s waist and started to whisper a song to her. Contessa Nera asked Ženka to call the Count’s servant, who would always wait for the Count whenever he would go out to dine.

The servant got a few embraces as well, but the Count allowed himself to be escorted home. He bid a very tender goodbye to his fiancée Linčika.

Ženka left the salon deep in thought, as if she were concerned about the identity of the person for whom Terka had intended the love potion. Nera was left alone in the salon, and she started to think. Terka planned for someone else to drink the potion, but Count Petar drank it

instead. So, those potions actually existed? Terka had sought it at a fortune-teller's. This must be Baba Urša or Baba Jana. So, Terka goes to see the fortune-tellers just as the "White Owl" does?

She would trace the mysterious woman's identity, no matter what!

Dvojković interrupted her train of thought when he entered the salon. He gave a courteous bow, and said cordially:

"I have been attempting to find you all evening. I am teaching the young people a new game. Would you mind coming with me? Dvojković offered Nera his hand and escorted her to the ballroom where young people were playing the piano. The Remetins were there as well. Dvojković informed them that he was about to teach them a very pleasant game appropriate for a group that boasts so many beautiful ladies.

"I wanted you, Contessa, to play with us, too," Dvojković said to Nera.

"Now, attention please, ladies and gentlemen," Dvojković said as the young people listened attentively. "One of the ladies here is accused of having cast a spell on a young man in this group. This lady has to put on a belt with a chain attached, and tie herself to a pillar. At that point we will compose a jury and state our verdict: she will be sentenced to death, be pardoned or sent to the dungeon. If she is sentenced to death, she must find a young man who would be willing to pay for her freedom in a way that the court will determine. If she is sentenced to the dungeon she must kiss one man and remain his prisoner for the rest of the evening, and if she is pardoned she must kiss all the young men here. And now, ladies, may I have a belt please?"

"Which one of us would give our belt here, in the salon? You should have brought one with you..."

"I do have a belt on me, which was given to me by a gentleman, but the owner had lost it so it's not appropriate for me to use it for this game."

“Let’s see it,” the young men shouted. “We wish to play.”

Dvojković bent his head, crossed his arms on his chest like a holy apostle and laughed:

“All right, I will obey!”

He took a parcel out of his pocket and started to tell about the time his acquaintance found the belt and gave it to him in the hope that he would be able to help locate the beautiful owner. Then he spread out a bejeweled belt made of red silk...

“That is my belt!” Nera cried with surprise.

“Really?” Dvojković asked, his voice dripping with satisfaction.

“Here, look!” the girl took the belt and pinned it to her waist.

“And where did you lose it?” Dvojković asked.

“I couldn’t tell you. It must have gotten detached and fallen off somewhere.”

“So, may we play the game with this belt of yours that was so fortuitously found?” a cavalier asked Nera.

“Of course. No need to ask.”

“But then allow me,” Dvojković told Nera, “to bring it to you personally one of these days. I will be grateful to have this belt as an excuse to see you again.”

Baron Skerlec watched the scene with a smile on his face, and then he also joined the game that the young people started raucously playing.

## Chapter 26: Whose Love Letters Are They?

The next day Petar Oršić came to see Countess Ratkay all broken, pale and embarrassed. His face was frowning and downcast. He found Nera in the garden, greeted her and asked her repentantly:

“What happened to me yesterday?”

“You got engaged to Baroness Linčika!” she replied, bursting into laughter.

“Listen, Nera, did someone play a joke on me? I was unusually drunk.”

“Yes, godfather, a bit, a bit. But it’s not a big problem,” she said, attempting to hide last night’s goings-on from the Count.

“The hell it isn’t! That scarecrow, Baroness Linčika, sent me roses today and invited me to lunch. She was inviting her darling fiancé! I even gave her rings! Listen, Nera, I really did propose to her. Don’t laugh at me, it’s no joke. I think that champagne was laced with something that wasn’t meant for me.”

“No it wasn’t, godfather,” Nera said. “But don’t rack your brain over this!”

“I wouldn’t, but Linčika is about to.”

The Count shared his woes with Nera, and then went to see the Countess to tell her about his troubles from yesterday.

Nera was left alone in the garden. The sun was strong, and she called for Filip who was milling about to bring her a book. Filip returned a few moments later and handed it to her.

Nera opened to the page where she had left off reading yesterday. But she immediately jumped off the bench and looked at the servant who was moving away to the castle. In the book



was the same type of letter that Nera had received twice before. She called the servant back.

When he stood before her, she looked carefully into his face and told him sternly:

“How dare you put this in here?”

The servant never batted an eye. He looked Nera in the eyes calmly.

“Your Grace, I didn’t put anything in your book. I don’t know what that is.”

“You are lying. You keep bringing me these letters. Here, take it and tell whoever is sending them that I don’t wish to read them.”

The servant remained standing there calmly, as if he didn’t understand a word she had said.

“What should I take, and to whom, Your Grace?” he asked.

“To whoever gave you this letter.”

“Your Grace must forgive me, but I know nothing of any letters.”

“Who is sending them? I want to know!”

“How should I know, Your Grace, if you don’t.”

“You are a very skillful liar. Either admit to it, or I will dismiss you immediately from my service.”

“If Your Grace wishes, I will obey and leave, since I have nothing to confess.”

“Very well. You are to leave this castle immediately!”

“I will obey, Your Grace, although you you have driven away your most faithful servant.”

Filip turned and went into the castle.

Nera couldn’t help but feel sorry for her actions toward this man whose calm, clear eyes looked upon her so faithfully. She lowered herself onto the bench and looked at the mysterious

letter written in blood instead of ink, just like the previous ones. Without much thought she tore the envelope open and started to read:

“Nera!

“Nature has adorned the world in divine beauty, but there is no one like you! None speaks as intelligently, thinks as profoundly and walks as determinedly as you. Your power lies not in your beauty, Nera; your power lies within you. You are the strength of a hurricane, the blaze of the sun, the crispness of a spring morn. You are the mystery of a dark night strewn with distant stars. You are the spark in the heavens left by a star on its journey through the vastness of the universe.

“Nera, I sit alone in the dark of the night and I look up at the heights beyond my reach. A star shines there—my star, watching the darkness with its golden eye. What does it know about the longing that someone feels for it down in the darkness? ...And it will shine this way forever, proudly, far up in the sky. It will never look through the darkness; it will never see my teary eyes filled with longing. Nera! As far as the Earth is from the heavens, this is the distance that separates me from you. If only this darkness would last forever so that I might take shelter in it, and if only the sky would be forever strewn with stars so that I might look upon you!”

“Why does he write to me? What for? Who is this man?” Nera wondered, feeling a definite need to know the identity of this person who loved her in such a poetic manner. She started to think of whom it might be.

Vojkffy’s words and gaze were completely different from these letters. She thought of all the different young men she knew. Could it be one of the young counts Erdody who kept looking at her strangely? Or perhaps Tito Krajačić? The young Malakoczy? Perhaps little Čikulini? Or

maybe Stiller? She went over all the Remetins in her mind, all her acquaintances and cavaliers. But she didn't think any of them could be responsible.

"Surely it can't be Father Smole or the Council Commissioner?" she thought to herself and laughed. "I will get to the bottom of this," the girl decided.

She caught sight of a man passing through the garden. It was Filip. He looked at the Contessa and halted, and Nera called to him. The servant approached her. He carried a bundle of laundry in his hands.

"Filip, I might be doing you wrong, but people make mistakes."

The Contessa noticed Filip's eyes grow moist.

"Your Grace," he said calmly, in a warm tone of voice, "I will always faithfully serve you, even when I am no longer employed at your castle."

"If you are innocent, you may remain here with us."

The servant kissed Nera's hand and said:

"Your Grace will have the opportunity to witness my loyalty."

Having said that, he went back to the castle. Nera still couldn't shake the suspicion that he was the one bringing those unusual letters.

That evening Nera had to go with her grandmother to a dinner party that Count Nadaždi was throwing at his estate in Bukovac. This is where he stayed whenever he came from Varaždin to Zagreb for a visit. Nadaždi was a kind host so he invited all the aristocracy and nobility to his castle. Countess Ratkay was not feeling well, but she hid the fact so that she would not have to refuse the Governor's invitation. Nera brought along a small book bound in red leather and hid it in her cape. When the young people started dancing after dinner, Nera brought out the book, opened it and declared to the curious gentlemen:

“I don’t believe we will spend many more evenings together.”

“Will you truly marry and move to Vienna in a month?” the questions came at her from all sides.

“Yes. That’s why I would appreciate a memento from all my acquaintances. Do you see this book? Its pages are white, empty. All the gentlemen should write a few farewell words for me in it and sign their name. This will be a dear memento for me while I am abroad. But please, all of you should participate.”

Everyone hurried to fulfill the beautiful Nera’s wish, striving to immortalize their wit and their name in that book. At Nera’s request, little Sanda took the book and went from guest to guest, asking for a few words and a signature for Nera.

In the meantime the Contessa sat with Countess Čikulini and the lady-in-waiting Auersperg, chatting merrily. As she collected the signatures, Sanda approached the group where Lieutenant Branko, Captain Siniša and Skerlec were. Everyone signed their name, and Lieutenant Branko signed both his and Captain Siniša’s name and offered him the tip of the quill. Siniša grasped it between two fingers and lowered it again, and the Lieutenant drew a small cross by Siniša’s signature.

“What does this mean?” Sanda said, surprised.

“It means, pretty little lady,” Siniša said, “that I don’t know how to write.”

Little Sanda moved on. The gentlemen around Siniša grew silent, obviously embarrassed by the Captain’s admission. Baron Skerlec smiled, but turned his head to hide his laughter. It was too late. Siniša noticed it. He looked at the Baron threateningly and said:

“I did not study how to write on paper with a pen, but rather with a saber on the foolish skin of various diplomats and future court lackey candidates.”

The gentlemen grew animated. Skerlec turned pale, approached Siniša and asked:

“Whom did you mean to insult with that remark?”

“Anyone who thinks it’s prudent to mock a soldier for not knowing how to spread idiocies in ink. And you laughed!”

The gentlemen who were present attempted to remedy the situation. But Siniša arose and said:

“The Hon. Baron should show me if he is as adept with a saber as he is with a quill, and I will be honored to oblige.”

With that, the Captain and his Lieutenant left the room.

Around midnight Sanda brought Nera the book filled with verses and sentences. Nera studied the letters carefully. She thought this would be a sure way to find the man who had written the love letters. But none of the handwriting resembled the writing in the mysterious love letters. She found this very surprising. So, this man was a member of those layers of society who did not mingle with the nobility? When she thought how the stranger always wrote about the earth and the sky standing in their way, she grew even more convinced this man was a simple burgher. But still, his letters were sharp and firm, his words elegant and poetic!

“What is the meaning of this cross?” Nera asked Sanda.

“That is Siniša’s signature. Imagine, Contessa, he doesn’t know how to write. He is a famous soldier, but as you can see, he is very uneducated.”

“He’s a true Trenk man!” Nera said.

The next morning, as she was carefully comparing the aristocrats’ and noblemen’s letters to the mysterious love letters in vain, Baroness Skerlec burst into the room. The stout lady could barely breathe. She stood in front of Nera without greeting her.

“What have you done to my son, you wench? What have you done? What evil spirit inspired you with such a crazy thought?”

“For God’s sake, aunt,” Nera was taken aback, “what is wrong with you? What have I done to you?”

“Why did you bring that damned book? I always knew you would be the death of him.”

“What book? Whose death?”

“Didn’t you ask people to write some foolishness in some book? Your silly idea caused Ivo to get into a fight with that brawler Siniša. That simple policeman can’t even write, and now my son is forced to lie in bed wounded. What if the Queen should find out!”

“Wounded?” Nera screamed. “Ivo was wounded?”

“He got into a duel with Siniša. If the Queen finds out, he will be imprisoned and his future will forever be ruined. And it was only a few days until his appointment was to come through. This is all your fault!” the Baroness continued to berate her. “I always felt that you would destroy him, but he never believed me!”

“Don’t accuse me like this, aunt, but instead let’s go to your house and see him!”

“To my house? I can’t even take him home. They got into a duel by Countess Čikulini’s summer home and that is where he is recuperating now. Oh, the things I have lived to see!...” the Baroness kept complaining, and went to look for Countess Ratkay.

Nera was left alone. She threw her red book with the unknown lover’s letters in the closet, grabbed her hat and cloak and went out into the hallway.

Here she met Francesco.

“You already know everything?” the young man asked her.

“I do! It seems as if this Captain only came here to get into fights,” Nera said angrily.

“I was at the duel.”

“Is Ivo seriously wounded?”

“I don’t think so. He never lost consciousness.”

“My God, that military brawler could have killed him.”

“Don’t be mad, Contessa. It’s not Siniša’s fault.”

“You vouch for that man, though I believe he is a criminal?”

“No, you are wrong about him. I heard about how the challenge took place and I saw the duel with my own eyes. Siniša could have killed him on the spot, but at the last minute he pulled his saber and saved Skerlec from imminent death.”

“To suit himself. If he had killed him he would have been locked up in the dungeon, and perhaps even executed!”

“A true brawler wouldn’t care. In such a fight he wouldn’t think of anything but slashing furiously.”

“Let me go. I can’t stand listening to you defend him. Why did he challenge him to a duel? Is it Skerlec’s fault that he can’t write?”

“I was there when the argument started. The Baron may have mocked him accidentally, but Siniša is too proud to let any insult slide. You can’t mock a Trenk man, or you’ll get killed!”

The door opened and the Baroness came out with Countess Ratkay. Nera noticed that the two ladies must have had a serious argument. The Countess nevertheless invited Nera to go along with her and the Baroness to see the wounded Baron.

Once they arrived, the Baron gratefully pressed his fiancée’s hand and said sorrowfully:

“Don’t worry, Nera, I won’t die, but our wedding has been postponed. This hurts me more than my wound does.”

The Contessa felt deeply sorry for her fiancé. Though she felt no guilt for her actions, she was pained at being the cause of the duel, even unwittingly. She also felt guilty for doing all of that yesterday just to identify the author of the love letters. Nera decided to redeem herself by attending to and watching over her wounded fiancé. She and her grandmother stayed until late in the evening at Countess Čikulini's, who then escorted them herself all the way to the steps of her castle.

“I will convince you of my sincerity and devotion to you,” Countess Čikulini told Nera. “I believe that the care I will take of the patient will speak for itself; I will treat him as my own brother.”

When Countess Ratkay left with her granddaughter, the young widow returned to her friend Auersperg who was staying with her, and whispered excitedly:

“Look, wasn't this turn of events fortunate for us? Your wild Siniša has no idea what a favor he has done me. From this moment on, Ivo is mine!”



## Chapter 27: The Red Belt

For three days now, Dvojković had been coming to the Countess Ratkay's castle in vain. She stayed with her granddaughter at Countess Čikulini's, where Skerlec lay wounded. The Baron felt strong enough to go home and requested for that to be arranged. But doctor Stiller rejected any suggestion that the Baron be moved out of the castle. No one suspected that the doctor did so to comply with the wishes of the pretty widow, who was spending a lot of time around the patient and who took it upon herself exclusively to care for him, and who did so in an especially cordial way whenever Countess Ratkay and her granddaughter were not around.

When the Countess heard that Dvojković had been looking for her, she was convinced that this was in regard to her deposition about Kušenka. She sent a note to the Council Commissioner to visit her in the afternoon, and she hurried back from Countess Čikulini's vineyard while Nera and Count Oršić stayed there with Skerlec.

Dvojković arrived on time. He wore a black velvet suit, had pinned snow-white lace around his neck, and covered his head with a fine wig that stood in sharp contrast to his fresh, rosy cheeks. His tall, somewhat stout figure always left a pleasant impression, and his perpetually agreeable smile did not alert the Countess to the bad news the Council Commissioner was about to bring her.

“What good news do you have for me?” the Countess asked Dvojković.

“I must warn you that I am here exclusively as your friend and that our conversation must remain strictly confidential.”

“What is the meaning of this?”

“I will explain straightaway, without beating around the bush, Your Grace. I have been seeking you out regarding your hearing at Judge Krajačić’s chamber. I believe it must be pretty clear to Your Grace what kind of position you put yourself in with the court when you, along with Contessa Nera, gave Kušenka shelter though the court was asking for her to be handed over and had made an announcement proclaiming anyone who helped her a co-conspirator.”

“Yes, Hon. Council Commissioner, you are right. Nera and I are as much witches as Kušenka is.”

“I am sure that you aren’t,” Dvojković replied, “but this isn’t about me, or you, illustrious lady, but about your granddaughter Contessa Nera, whom you love so deeply, and whom I hold in high esteem as well.”

“About her?” the old lady repeated, lifting her head like a wild animal when it catches a whiff of danger threatening her young.

“Yes, about her! I want to warn you, as a friend, which I shouldn’t be doing as a defender of the law. At the hearing, the Contessa admitted to walking up to the tower at the Stone Gate and to listening to the witches being tortured. As you know, we only torture the witches at night, which makes it clear that the Contessa must have come by the tower at night. And this is sufficient evidence for Judge Krajačić to suspect that the Contessa is the so-called White Witch that we have been looking for for the past three months, and who was seen under the tower. Of course, I don’t subscribe to that opinion, but I have no power, and Your Grace is well acquainted with Krajačić. He is capable of suspecting anyone, including myself, and his own father, and he would sentence his own mother to burn at the stake with a clear conscience if someone were to accuse her of being a witch.”

“I believe you. He is a superstitious fool and he should be sent to the madhouse, not the courtroom.”

“But the people support him and worship him, because he believes in the same things that the people do. Of course, I tell you this in strict confidence. I am convinced that witches exist, but Krajačić sees a witch in every woman he meets. Anyway, this is beside the point today. Let’s return to the matter at hand.”

Dvojković took a red silk belt out of his pocket and asked the Countess:

“Does Your Grace know whom this belt belongs to?”

“My granddaughter. Nera told me about this belt. Where did you get it?”

“An elegant gentlemen brought it to me, and I had given him my word of honor that I would keep his name a secret. He told me that the White Witch had lost this belt at the Stone Gate. He picked it up after she walked past him.”

The Countess looked at him with fear in her eyes.

“The gentleman who gave me the belt requested that I use it to trace the White Witch. I thought that this belt belonged to a rich burgher woman, so I went to Drašković’s home that evening with this belt still on me, and unfortunately I used it in a party game. As soon as the Contessa saw it, she exclaimed in front of all the guests that the belt was hers. And do you know who happened to be there to hear her? That gentleman! The following day he came to see me and asked me to surrender the belt so he could go to Krajačić to report the incident and testify. But, Countess, don’t get too distraught,” Dvojković said, “not everything is lost yet. Krajačić does think that the Contessa was under the tower that night...”

“So what if she was? Couldn’t she have just been driven by compassion to hear the wails of the imprisoned witches?”

“That is possible, but Krajačić is convinced, as are all the senators and jurors, that this was the woman who murdered the baby that was found at the Stone Gate and took its heart out to use in witchcraft. In short: they are convinced that this woman is an actual witch.”

The Countess turned pale. The last drop of blood had left her face.

“You mean to tell me, that my Nera...”

“It is precisely because I am convinced otherwise that I came here. Listen to me—Krajačić is prepared to believe the worst about the Contessa. And then there is that gentleman who gave me the belt and who will testify as a witness at court. And you know that all it takes is one witness like that. The Judge might be able to force me to file a lawsuit.”

“Sir, you are here to warn me about the danger my granddaughter is in?”

“Yes, I am here to advise you and help you save her.”

“Save her? Does she need saving? She is a pure angel, Countess Ratkay’s daughter. No, this can’t be.”

“Unfortunately, Countess, this is how things stand. You know Krajačić. He has despised the Contessa ever since that evening when she stated that she did not believe in witches. He holds the power, and if they find even one witness—and they already have one—the battle is lost. You know that the witness does not need to prove anything for his testimony to be damning. And once he has proof in his hands, such as this belt, well then the case is closed.”

“They would accuse my granddaughter of being a witch? Sir, do you know what this means?” the Countess cried, choking with emotion. She trembled, and her face grew paler still. Suddenly she jumped up, and screamed as if she could already see her granddaughter at the stake: “No, this won’t happen. I will go to the Queen!”

“Yes, I figured as much. I am sure that you would be successful with the Queen, but it

might be too late for that!”

“Too late? Have you lost your mind? How could it be too late, why? Nera! Nera!” the Countess started to scream, calling out for her granddaughter as if she were afraid that they had already taken her to the dungeon.

“Don’t despair, Countess,” Dvojković comforted her. “Your granddaughter is still free, though she is in grave danger. But if you want, we can still save her,” the Commissioner said quietly.

“Save her? Save my granddaughter? If what you say is true, tell me how to remove this terrible accusation from her straight away.”

“I shouldn’t be doing what I am about to suggest. I am here to defend the law and it is my duty to safeguard the justice of our land, but as your friend I will do for you what I have not done for anyone before. I will disregard my duty to help save the Contessa.”

“How? How? Speak?”

“We must bribe the man who found the belt and who wishes to testify against the Contessa.”

The Countess’ determined eyes stared at the Council Commissioner.

“You’re suggesting this? You?” she shrieked.

“I understand, Countess, that this is a terrible transgression for a defender of the law. However, I am your friend here and I am telling you: this is your only chance. In a matter of hours or even moments this witness could step in front of Krajačić and accuse the Contessa, and after that no one will be able to save her. She will be taken to the dungeon and by the time you are able to take any steps toward her liberation, by the time you see the Queen, he will have tortured her and perhaps, even burned her at the stake...”

The Countess stared out the window, which was blazing in the setting sun. She uttered a muffled cry, and then arose and flew to the window. Her face was distorted, her eyes bulged out of their sockets in the same way as when she saw the flames from Kušenka's stake.

"For God's sake, Countess, calm down."

"Where is that man?!" the Countess screamed. "Have him come here!"

"You know those bastards are great cowards. He doesn't dare come here himself. I tried to persuade him to handle it himself, but he wouldn't do so, and instead has authorized me to negotiate with you."

"How... how much?" the Countess was barely able to utter. "How much does he want?"

"Twenty thousand forints!"

The Countess pointed at a small cabinet in the corner of the room. It was open, and a red silk bag was in the drawer. She pried herself away from the window and rushed, stumbling, to the cabinet. She made to give the Commissioner the bag, but it dropped out of her hands.

The Countess stared ahead, her face contorted, as if she could see a terrible phantom in the distance.

"What is it, Your Grace?" Dvojković asked, approaching her. "You are not well!"

The Countess' beautiful old face was distorted. Her tall, firm body buckled and she fell onto the rug. The Council Commissioner was at first surprised, but then he grabbed the red bag along with the belt, and pocketed them. Then he opened the door and started calling for help.

At that moment Contessa Nera drove in with Count Petar Oršić. She walked in calmly, not suspecting anything, but when she heard what had happened she flew up the stairs. When she saw her dear grandmother lying on the floor as if she were dead, she screamed and threw herself toward her, lifted her head and looked at her face. In horror, she noted that it was distorted, and

that her body was numb and heavy. Count Oršić almost fainted himself when he saw his old friend in this condition.

Everyone in the house was alarmed, running up the stairs and hallways as if beside themselves. The servants rushed to fetch doctor Stiller, and the Council Commissioner attempted to help.

“What happened here?” Nera asked, having composed herself as she saw Dvojković.

“We were having a quiet conversation when the Countess suddenly became ill, and collapsed onto the floor.”

Dvojković helped the servant Filip lay the old woman on the sofa. Nera paced the room with her hands on her head, crying.

Doctor Stiller came and examined the Countess while Nera and Oršić waited with trepidation. He declared that there was still hope that she would regain consciousness.

“Hon. Doctor,” Nera said, pleading, “save my grandmamma.”

The doctor had the Countess put to bed and did everything he could to help her come to. Dvojković went home soon after, having offered his condolences. The doctor, Count Oršić and Nera stayed with the Countess, who was already starting to show some signs of life.

## Chapter 28: Grandmamma's Secret

Everything changed suddenly at the "Red Castle." Everyone was mournful, everyone's face showed concern. Everyone walked carefully, shut the door quietly, and spoke in a half-whisper.

The Countess still lay unconscious, just as Nera had found her that evening. The granddaughter fell to her knees by her grandmother's bed, buried her head in the pillows and cried. A gentle rain pattered against the windows.

Count Oršić was overcome with despair. He kept looking at his friend's face, covered with a deadly pallor.

In an hour the doctor came again. As he was leaving, he expressed hope that Nera's grandmother would be well again. Nera sat by her grandmother and watched her every move, waiting for her to come to.

Finally the Countess opened her eyes and looked about.

"Grandmamma!" Nera cried, as if they had just been reunited after a long separation.

"How are you, my dear grandmamma?"

"You are here?!" the old lady whispered. "You are here, Nera?!"

"Why is that so surprising, grandmamma? Where else should I be but at my grandmamma's side, since I love you so!"

The Countess' eyes stared at her beautiful granddaughter who bent over her with all of her childlike love.

"Did he leave?" the old woman asked?



“Who, grandmamma?”

“Dvojković.”

“Yes, he left a long time ago. Why do you ask about him, grandmamma?”

“No reason! It’s nothing. We were talking...”

“What about, grandmamma?”

“Kušenka.”

“Were you upset by that conversation?”

“No, we were having a perfectly pleasant conversation when I suddenly got dizzy. Please look and see if my red bag is over there on the floor?”

Nera found the request odd, but humored her grandmother.

“No, grandmamma. There is nothing there.”

The old lady’s face relaxed, as if she were pleased with the response. So, Dvojković took the money. She was calm now; nothing bad would happen to Nera!”

“Grandmamma, would you like to eat something?” Nera asked.

“I would like some milk. But why can’t I move my arm? My leg is asleep, too.”

“Be patient, dear grandmamma. You are still weak, but you will soon get better, very soon, and we will be happy and joyful once again.”

“Have you sent word to Ivo about my illness?”

“I sent him a letter. Uncle Skerlec was here, as was my aunt, but they left already. Godfather Petar is still here, as is Father Smole.”

“Good, kind souls.”

“I will go and tell them that you are better!”

“Go, but ask them to give us some privacy for a bit longer. I have something to tell you.”

Nera rushed to the dining room and exclaimed:

“Godfather, grandmamma can talk and has regained consciousness. But stay here, I will call for you when she is ready to see you.”

Then she returned to the bedroom. The old lady lay there immobile and watched the door through which her beautiful darling came in.

“Nera, close the door and come closer!”

The girl did as she was told, and came up to the old woman’s bed.

“I am afraid that this is the end for me.”

“But grandmamma, why must you sadden me so? You will get better!”

“My child, we humans are unfortunate folk. We can’t be sure of our fate for the next half an hour. This is why it is time for me to tell you...”

“Tell me what, grandmamma?”

“The thing you were forbidden to ask about.”

“Today? Grandmamma, wait until you recover.”

“No, I wish to tell you today. It is time for you to know the whole truth. Who knows what awaits tomorrow? Do you remember that evening when we were in the ballroom that looked over Mesnička Street?”

“Yes, grandmamma,” Nera said, her heart heavy with trepidation. That evening she had begged her grandmother to tell her why she had fainted, and why she was so upset by the stake. And today she was terrified to learn the truth.

“Stay strong,” the old woman said, “and listen carefully.”

“It was ten years ago, when you had just turned seven. Your father’s name was Count Keglević. He was kind and he loved your mother, but he inherited levity from his father. He

would often go hunting with his merry crowd, and they would stay out for two, three weeks at a time. Young people from all over the world would come to your parents' estate. Your mother was beautiful and cheerful, and many fell hopelessly in love with her looks and her character. But she loved your father and would categorically refuse all who tried to seduce her. One morning, when your father was away, some hunters came to the castle and told your mother that your father had been shot while hunting and that she must rush to him straight away because he wanted to see her. She did not waste a moment but drove off with the unknown hunters in the carriage that they said your father had sent for her. I was visiting your parents at the time and I awaited her return, and that of your wounded father, with trepidation..."

"And did she come back?"

"Hold on, child, easy now, I am tired."

The old lady rested a bit. The room was silent, but for the sound of the rain tapping on the windows. A greenish light illuminated the Countess' sad face, on which were reflected painful memories. In a few moments the grandmother interrupted the anxious silence again.

"I waited with concern, my soul filled with unknown dread. Suddenly your father burst into the room."

Nera shuddered and cried: "Unharméd?!"

"He was fine, only drunk. I didn't get a chance to say anything when he asked:

'Where's Olga?'

'I was going to ask you the same,' I said. He started to laugh.

'Don't be ridiculous,' I was angered. 'Where did you leave your wife?'

His face grew serious.

'I don't know what you mean, mother,' he said.

‘Why did you send for Olga under the pretense of being shot when this is clearly not true?’

‘Who, me? That is crazy, mother!’ he cried. ‘I never sent anyone or any message. Where is Olga?’

My voice trembling, I told him what had happened. He turned pale. The rifle he had been using for support fell to the ground.

‘This is either a prank or... a crime,’ he said, his voice hoarse. He immediately called all the servants and everyone who was at the castle at the time and interrogated them, but no one knew who those men were.

We waited a bit longer and then your father returned to the hunting grounds. The young aristocrats were still drinking and partying in the woods, and no one knew anything about anyone sending a carriage or a message to your father’s castle. Horrible days ensued for us. Your father had changed, he paced the castle like a lunatic, and I was lost. We told everyone your mother had gone to Vienna, to visit her mother-in-law.

One day, your father disappeared as well. He left a letter for me. It’s over there, in the cabinet to the right. Look for it, it is tied with a red ribbon.”

Nera went to the cabinet and found the little letter. She opened it with an unsteady hand, and started to read:

My dear mother,

It is all my fault. Instead of living for my family, I sought entertainment elsewhere, but I swear that I loved Olga with all my heart. And I cannot stand to live without her any longer. I don’t know whether she left me because I was so irresponsible, or if she fell victim to an admirer. My search for her was in vain, and I can’t bear to live any longer. I

crept into my dear little girl's room, my little Nera. She was sleeping sweetly. I kissed her beautiful forehead, which reminds me so much of her mother. My little orphan, my Nera, will cry when she asks for her mother and father, but I cannot stay with her—every line of her face reminds me of the happiness that I have lost. Mother, take her in, watch over her and tell her that her father died of heartbreak, since his heart was much nobler than his temper. Ask her to forgive me for leaving her all alone in the world.

Goodbye, mother, take care of Nera, my sweet, beautiful, unfortunate child!

Your wretched son-in-law,

Nikola Keglević

A sob trembled in the silence of the sickroom. Nera held the last letter from her father to her breast and cried with all her soul. The Countess listened as the pain poured out of her young, childlike heart. The girl stopped suddenly, raised her tear-drenched face to her grandmother and asked fearfully:

“And where did he go, grandmamma?”

“A few months later the City Hall on Grič announced that Count Nikola Keglević died in battle against Germany. I have been mourning his death ever since.”

“And my mother?”

“Your mother? Wait, let me catch my breath,” the Countess asked, again.

She craned her neck as if she were getting choked-up, and then she continued:

“Ten months after her disappearance an old woman came to me and told me that a coachman who was on his deathbed in Stubica wanted to see me and share some information about my daughter.”

I went to Stubica, and found the dying man. I came up to his bed with a heavy heart.

“Your Grace,” he whispered, dying, “I have been on this deathbed for five days now, but my soul is not free to leave this body because I am weighed down by a heavy sin.”

“Speak,” I commanded him. My heart was filled with fear.

“Forgive me, Your Highness,” he started to beg, “I was one of the men who took your daughter that day.”

“Where is she?” I asked, eagerly.

“I was our parish priest’s coachman. One morning I had to go fetch him at the neighboring village. On my way there some hunters stopped me and asked me to drive them to your castle because an accident had happened on the hunt and they needed to fetch the young Countess. Not suspecting anything, I did them this favor, took them to your castle, and then drove the men and the Countess back. They told me that the hunting grounds were along the same road that I was heading down. Suddenly, when we were in a thick forest, a gentleman appeared in front of me. He waved his arm and the hunters ordered me to stop the carriage. Then someone threw a bag over my head, tied it around my neck and told me to stay still. They said they would kill me if I moved.

“I sat in the carriage, petrified with fear. I heard the Countess scream and I could tell that they had gagged her. They had another carriage ready in the vicinity and that is where they took the Countess there. When it was all over, they said to me:

“‘If you so much as make a peep about what happened, you will end up in the dungeon. No one will find us, and we will tell everyone that you were the one who robbed and killed the Countess.’

“Then something moved around my carriage and one of them whispered to the other:

“Everything is fine now, Keglević won’t ever suspect that you were the hawk who tore up his nest. You just have to make sure that the lady-in-waiting never suspects what a beauty you’re hiding in the tower of your castle.’

“Have no fear,’ the other voice replied. ‘The Countess knows I am a faithless and fickle lover, so she won’t ask me the reason if I stop coming to visit her for a while.’

“The one who had been driving my horses left the carriage suddenly, untied the extra horse that had been tied to the carriage, mounted it and left me there in the middle of the woods. Somehow I managed to break free from the ropes and the bag around my head. I kept quiet out of fear that I would be blamed for robbing the Countess. Who would ever take a serf’s word?!”

The unhappy man gathered some strength and continued:

“A month ago a stranger came up to me, dressed like a burgher, as I was transporting the priest’s corn to his house. He was carrying a baby wrapped in a kerchief, and he asked me if he could place the baby on the cart since it was heavy, and he was carrying it to his sister-in-law in the village! We lay the baby down on the cart—how could I refuse him! Then he started to talk as we walked by the cart. When we got to the woods, the man stopped suddenly and said:

“What do you think, whose baby is this?’

“I was surprised.

“Your sister-in-law’s,’ I replied.

“You idiot,’ he said mockingly, ‘This is the son of that Countess that you drove away from Keglević’s estate ten months ago. Why are you looking at me like that? I was with you when it happened. You just don’t recognize me because I had a beard.’

“And where is the Countess?’

“Haven’t you heard that the old Ratkay lady announced that her son-in-law died in the war and that her daughter was so grief-stricken that she threw herself off the city tower!”

“If all of this is true, then where is the Countess?”

“She didn’t like it at my master’s house, so she tried to run away. But we caught her just in time and set her up cozily at the stake with the other witches! She’s been dust and ashes for a month now.”

Nera fell to her knees. Then she sobbed violently at her grandmother’s bedside. The old woman hurried to finish her tale of woe.

“And now,’ the stranger said to the coachman, ‘here’s the child. Take it to Countess Ratkay and tell her we hope she enjoys her grandson.’

“I decided to grab the man and tie him up, to deliver him to justice,’ the coachman told me. ‘But he anticipated it, struck me, broke my ribs and disappeared into the woods. I have been dying ever since.’”

“Did the coachman die?” Nera asked through her tears.

“I wanted to save him and take him across the land to find the unknown man who delivered the child. He would have recognized him for sure. But before I could even call for the doctor, the unfortunate man died.”

“And what about the child, grandmamma?!”

The Countess closed her eyes and whispered quietly:

“It remained in the village. I couldn’t even bear to look at it.”

“Oh, my God!”

“I felt guilty about that many times. I wanted to return to that village and ask about the child. But then a man would appear before my eyes, laughing at me and mocking me for raising



the fruit of his crime. And hatred was born in my soul toward that innocent, unfortunate child. Then I started to investigate if a witch had been burned at any estate.”

“Can estate owners burn witches on their own accord, without a trial?”

“Everyone who has a right to carry a sword may burn a woman who is accused of being a witch. Furthermore, they must do so, because the law commands that if one of their female surfs has been accused and if a witness is available to corroborate the charges, they must burn her. So, even if I could have found the man, I wouldn’t have been able to charge him with any crime, and I would have disgraced your name. This is why I kept silent. I heard that many witches were burned in Stubica, but I couldn’t find out who they were.

“Among the women who were burned there were some whose names weren’t even known. Now you understand, my child, why I retreated from the world and shrouded our lives in silence. Now you know why I was so upset the night they burned Kušenka’s mother and why I had that ballroom closed. You can see the stakes from there...”

The old woman’s face showed her unmeasurable sorrow, and Nera’s eyes became a font of endless tears.

“They burned my mother as a witch?!”

“Cry, my dear child, tears help dull the pain,” the old lady whispered. “Do you remember, Nera, how you told me one day in this very room: ‘Grandmamma, something whispers to me that burning the women at the stake is a terrible crime. A great injustice is being committed with these acts, and some secret force beckons me to investigate, to reveal it...’ That was the voice of your mother speaking through you, rising from the ashes of the stake.”

“Oh, grandmamma, now I also feel the reason behind my obsession and interest in the horrid witch burnings. They burned my mother!”

“It has been ten years since this happened and since that coachman died. You were only seven at the time.”

“Then that child, my brother, is ten years old now. Grandmamma, I just thought of something. That lady who came to Baba Jana’s that night spoke of my brother. She told Baba Jana: ‘The Countess is being punished by God for not embracing her grandson.’”

“Yes, my child. And when you told me about this I went over to Baba Jana’s house one evening, wrapped in a thick veil, and I questioned her and offered her money. But she wouldn’t say a word. Then I asked Captain Sale for help, but he was unable to learn anything new. Baba Jana denied everything, and in Stubica no one knows what became of the child.”

“Can it really be true that the devil who ruined my mother and father and tore our quiet, happy home apart should escape punishment?” Nera cried, her voice shaking.

“Nera, come closer,” the old lady said. “Listen to me. I don’t know what will come next. Perhaps I won’t ever get up from this bed... Don’t cry, I am just laying out the facts. I lived for you for ten years, and I gave you all the love that my heart had to offer, but during this time a terrible hatred ripened in my soul toward the man who destroyed my daughter and my son-in-law. I was impotent on my own, but I always thought: when you are happy, when you are provided for by a husband who loves and defends you and never leaves you alone, then we will once again have the opportunity to look for the man who ruined your mother’s and father’s lives, and to avenge ourselves.”

“Grandmamma, that moment is already here. If he is still alive, we will find him and he will pay dearly for my parents’ lives.”

“When those villains’ hands grabbed you, it seemed to me that the black devils had risen from hell, having sworn to take everything that is dear in life from me. And I swore that I would

tell you everything as soon as you were happy and sheltered by the broad shoulders of a husband. Still, I am afraid that Ivo is not brave enough to protect you or to join you on this path...”

Nera was silent. Her heart was so filled with grief over the fate of her parents that she couldn't even consider her grandmother's opinion of Skerlec.

“What do you think, Nera?”

“Grandmamma, I don't know what to say.”

“Listen. Tomorrow you will go to him with Count Petar. He is much better now, and I want him to come see me even if he needs to be carried here. I wish to speak with him privately. Now call Count Petar to come. He's the only one who knows my secret.”

Nera wiped her tears and went brokenhearted to the dining room where Count Oršić and Father Smole waited. In a few moments, when her old friend Oršić came to the Countess' bedside, she looked at him and whispered quietly:

“Petar, I feel as if this is the end.”

“Don't despair, Suzana. This is just a passing illness.”

“I am prepared for anything. I feel that this is my final hour. Petar, have you forgiven me?”

Count Oršić was silent. Heavy tears streamed down the old man's face...

“I caused you so much pain,” she said quietly, “I know. But I have suffered too. You never knew that the joyful smile of my once youthful lips hid a heavy remorse and—perhaps—something more...”

“Suzana!”

“I will admit to it now. When the dream of my young, fiery soul turned to dust, I felt a need for your kind, bright and faithful love. I wished and longed for it then. But it was too late.

We were both married to another... This is the only sin of my life. I lived with a man I grew to hate, and I loved you, whom I once rejected.”

“Suzana, why would you keep this a secret? Why did you let me live a lonely and empty life, why did you not speak afterwards?...”

“After we both were widowed? My dear friend, we were both much too old at that point. My heart was happy to spend the days in the quiet friendship that love had left behind.”

Petar hid his face in his hands; his large body shuddered with a hushed sob. The Countess closed her eyes and shed warm tears in silence. The stillness revived the Count, and he took hold of the dry, old hand that once rejected him in its youth and started to kiss it.

“Thank you, Suzana, for telling me this. I know now that you once loved me. It feels as if I have regained something that was once lost.”

“I am giving you this satisfaction in the final moments of my life.”

“No, Suzana, you will recover, you must recover.”

“I feel as if the left side of my body has fallen asleep. Half of my body lives no longer, and who knows if the other half will soon follow suit. Petar, do you promise me that you will never desert Nera? Will you be her guardian and her father? I told her everything. She will be strong enough to bear this, but she needs a father’s love. Be that for her.”

“I swear it, Suzana, on my gray head, and on our buried love.”

The room was silent again. The Count still held the old woman’s hand, and both were quiet as if they were lost in the long-gone moments of their youth. They both felt as if they stood before their own open tombs, bidding each other farewell at the start of their eternal rest...

They were silent for a long time, as if they were praying for one final memory at the grave of their past. Then the Countess opened her eyes:

“Petar! Nera is in danger. Make sure the word doesn’t spread, this is what broke me. Are we cursed, Petar? Should she, just like her mother before her...”

“For God’s sake, don’t speak this way, this is a phantom of your agitated soul.”

“It’s not an apparition, it’s not.”

“Suzana, please, we will speak of this tomorrow, you must save your strength now.”

“No, no! Dvojković was here, he told me...”

“Quiet! It’s Nera,” Count Petar whispered.

The Contessa entered the room and tiptoed to her grandmother.

“My dear grandmamma, aren’t you much better already? It’s time for you to take your medicine.”

The girl poured a few drops from a vial into a glass of water and handed it to her grandmother.

“Nera, my dear child, have you thought about what I said?”

“Yes, grandmamma.”

“You won’t rest until you find the villain?”

“We will find him together, grandmamma!”

“Mark my words, my child. All I know is that he was a lady-in-waiting’s lover—which must mean Countess Auersperg’s. I deduced this from the conversation of the two kidnappers which the coachman overheard: ‘Just make sure that the lady-in-waiting never suspects what a beauty you’re hiding in your castle’s tower,’ one of them had said. And the other responded: ‘She knows me to be an inconstant lover.’ This is the clue that you should follow, Nera. The Countess spends most of her time in Vienna and I went there over the years to try to find out who her lover was. But she was skilled at keeping it a secret, and I never learned anything.”

“She had many lovers,” Count Petar said, “and it would be very hard work to find the villain we are looking for.”

“But you must find him!” the Countess cried in a voice so forceful that Nera and Count Petar instinctively looked at each other. It was the same strong, powerful voice that Countess Ratkay used to tame, command and break anyone’s resistance.

“We will,” Count Petar said.

“Nera,” the Countess continued in the same tone of voice, “if you want me to stay calm, you must swear to me on the fiery grave of your unfortunate mother that you won’t rest until you catch that man.”

“I swear it, grandmamma!”

Nera’s answer was as determined and solemn as if she had made an oath to God himself.

“And you will avenge us, Nera?”

“I will avenge us, I swear it wholeheartedly, grandmamma.”

“If you ever feel the need to make a monument of your love for me, Nera, have it be in the shape of revenge. Will you do this?”

“Yes, grandmamma! I swear it on my mother and father’s memory—and on my own life’s happiness. I won’t be happy or content until I avenge the destruction of our happy home.”

The young girl’s words sounded like a threat from a strong, powerful spirit.

“Yes—yes, that is the true voice. That is the voice I trust,” the old woman whispered, closing her eyes. Then she opened them, looked out into the greenish light and started to speak as if in a dream:

“This is why I raised you in the pure outdoor air so your spirit and your body would be strong, to withstand the past and face the future. This is why I taught you not to fear the night,

not to fear the living or the dead. This is why, instead of societal prescriptions, I gave you the freedom to sharpen your mind, to hold the reins of a wild steed instead of toys, to handle a pistol instead of a doll. This is why I raised you as the woman you are today. And I am not afraid for you, Nera! The villain will fall into your hands. Every drop of his blood is filled with my curse, every one of his days and every step he takes cursed and damned a hundred times. My curses must lead him to your avenging hands. Nera! I curse him even now as I face my own open tomb, and every particle of my decaying body will curse him as well...”

The grandmother’s words sounded eerie in the silence of the night.

“God knows who this man is, on whom all these awful curses fall?” Nera thought, and looked at her grandmother’s face, which was transformed by a terrible, unbridled hatred. It was at this moment that she realized just how much she loved her grandmother and how much she hated the man who had ruined her family’s happiness...

The rain still beat at the windows, and its murmur filled the sickroom with quiet melancholy. The old woman closed her eyes and fell asleep. Her granddaughter stayed up to watch her, her soul anxious and with a trembling in her chest, where every beat of her heart begged, prayed and whispered:

“Health—return back to our peaceful home!”

Father Smole sat in the dining room, prayed the rosary and sighed:

“Health, dear God, please give her back her health!”

## Chapter 29: An Ill-Fated Visit

Hours passed. A deep slumber seemed to strengthen the Countess, which filled Nera and Oršić with high hopes for her recovery. Suddenly, a doorbell rang through the night.

“What’s this?” Nera and Count Oršić wondered.

The Count left the room to see who it was that had come to visit at this time of night and waited for the doorman at the stairs. But instead of the doorman, Dvojković appeared.

“What brings you here at this hour?” the Count asked.

“I come from Countess Čikulini’s. Baron Ivo is terribly worried over the Countess’s travail, and he asked me to send word of her condition tonight.”

“Please come in, Father Smole is there as well.”

“Thank you,” Dvojković said. “I will just pen a letter and send a servant to deliver it to the Baron.”

Dvojković greeted Father Smole and sat down.

“I hope she recovers,” Oršić said when Dvojković asked about the Countess’ health. The doctor told us to call if she seemed to get worse.

“The Baron and Baroness are at their son’s bedside, and they would also like to have an update on the Countess’ condition. Is she conscious?”

“Yes. She just fell fast asleep.”

“Wonderful. She is a robust lady, she will convalesce and recover completely. I’ve seen many who, after suffering a stroke, were able to move perfectly well as if nothing had happened.”



They talked a while longer, when Dvojković asked:

“May I write a letter for the Baron?”

“You are welcome to use the adjoining room. But please take care not to wake the Countess.”

They entered a small salon by the Countess’ bedroom that held a large desk.

“There is paper and ink here,” Count Oršić said and left the Council Commissioner alone.

He grabbed the pen and ink and started to relate Count Oršić’s report to Baron Skerlec. As he did so, he looked around the room several times, quill in hand, listening. He turned to the dining room constantly as if expecting something to happen.

Suddenly, the household was in a panic. Someone was running up the stairs, chairs were moved in the dining room, from all sides shouts and commotion could be heard, then footsteps running down the stairs. Voices came from the garden: “Fire, fire!”

Dvojković jumped up and froze, his ears straining like a rabbit’s. He turned to the dining room, opened the door, and when he saw no one was there, he turned and in a few steps found himself at the door to the Countess’ bedroom. There he stopped to listen for a moment, then swung open the door.

Nera was standing right in front of him, and they almost collided.

“What is it?” she whispered, surprised at seeing Dvojković.

“I heard someone shout ‘fire’ in the garden.”

“Dear Lord,” Nera breathed, “and grandmamma is asleep!”

“If it’s dangerous, we will carry her out of the castle.”

“Go check on it,” Nera said. Dvojković hurried ahead and opened the door through which they could hear the cries: “Fire, fire!” Nera ran down the stairs to see where the fire started.

And Dvojković, after Nera ran past him, moved straight into the Countess' room. She was still fast asleep, recuperating. He noiselessly crossed the thick rugs, approached the side table on which the medicine vial stood, grabbed it and filled it with some liquid, and turned suddenly to disappear into the adjoining room. He could already hear Nera's footsteps. He quickly fell to his knees, pulled the thick rug off the floor with all his strength and started to fold it.

Nera returned and stopped when she saw the Council Commissioner.

"What are you doing?"

"I am preparing a stretcher for the Countess in case we need it."

"Thank you for your kindness, Hon. Commissioner, but there is no danger. Something was burning in the kitchen quarters."

"I saw that, but who knows. Fire is a dangerous calamity, and one never knows where a spark might fly."

"You are right, but I hope we will be fine."

"In that case I will go downstairs to see if I can be of use."

Dvojković went downstairs, and Nera noticed the letter he had started writing on the table. She read it and realized it was meant for her fiancé. She now realized why Dvojković was in this room. Not suspecting a thing, she went into her grandmother's bedroom. The old woman woke up and looked around.

"Is that you, Nera?"

"Yes, grandmamma."

"What is all that noise?"

“It’s nothing. The servants are running about because one of them fell ill,” the girl said, not wishing to trouble her grandmother with the truth. The old lady closed her eyes, and Nera sat by her bed. Down in the garden, the servants put out the fire that had just started to burn in the corner of the kitchen. A man, caught in a chokehold by Filip, was shouting by the fence.

“Why were you trying to set fire to the house? Speak, or I will strangle you, you bastard.”

“Ow, ow, he’ll kill me!” the man yelled, his voice fading under Filip’s strong grasp.

Dvojković came up to them at that moment, having heard the man call for help. He saw Filip choking the arsonist, and trying to threaten him into disclosing his motive for setting fire to the house.

“Let him go,” Dvojković said to the servant.

“He must say why he started the fire.”

“Don’t worry, he will admit to everything once we put his hands in the thumbscrew. Take him to the Magistrate’s office .”

The servants gathered around the Council Commissioner, respecting his orders. They took the young man to the Magistrate’s office .

A short while later Dvojković bid Oršić and Nera goodbye, took the letter he had written for Skerlec and went straight to the Magistrate’s office , where he had the prisoner transferred to another room. Once they were left alone, he said:

“How the hell could you have been so clumsy as to get caught!”

“That rascal Filip was standing somewhere nearby. The minute the fire started, he grabbed me by the neck.”

“You should thank me and your lucky stars for getting you out of there in one piece. Now take those clothes off and don’t show your face around here. Here’s your money—you did well, after all. I am pleased.”

The young man took off the peasant clothes and Dvojković stored them away in a drawer. He took out a burger’s garb and handed it to the man, who put it on, pulled a hat over his head down to his ears, and exited the city jail.

At this point Dvojković was ready to leave as well. A policeman was sleeping soundly in front of his door, and he crept out of the Magistrate’s office without making a sound.

A greenish light still shone in the ‘Red Castle.’ Count Oršić sat with Father Smole in the dining room discussing the identity and the motive of the young man who set fire to the kitchen building.

Nera arose, looked at the time, bent over her grandmother and asked her quietly:

“Grandmamma, would you like to take your medicine? It’s time.”

“Yes, my child. I feel that it is helping.”

The girl went to the side table where the vial containing the drops stood. The lid was on, and everything was just as Nera had left it when she gave her grandmother the medicine three hours ago. Nera poured a few drops into some water, lifted her grandmother’s head and held the glass to her mouth. The grandmother tasted the medicine, looked her granddaughter in the eye and said in a trembling voice:

“My dear child! I feel so anxious, as if this is the last time I will see you...”

“Why are you troubled by such dark thoughts, my dear grandmamma? You will recover; what would I do without you! You must recover because I will it to be so, I feel that I would be unhappy and lonely without you by my side.”

“No, no, my sweetheart. I must not leave you alone in the world, I want to live, I want to defend and protect you. Black crows would fly to you over my dead body...”

The old woman slumped, and Nera looked at her pale, old face. She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

Nera went into the dining room and instructed Father Smole and Count Oršić to get some rest. She would watch over her grandmother until the morning, when they would relieve her.

The girl put on her nightgown, drew the green shade over the lantern, sat down and leaned her weary head on the armchair.

The lamp on the ceiling cast greenish shadows across the room, making her grandmother, who lay on the bed, look like a ghost. Her regular breathing was the only sign of life. Nera kept looking at the greenish light, thoughts running through her head. She had never imagined that she could lose her grandmother, who was both a mother and father to her. The wind whistled quietly outside, frightening the night and all its phantoms...

Whenever sleep would try to close the girl's eyelids, the wind would ring against the windows and startle her, as if to warn her:

“Don't sleep, watch!”

### Chapter 30: A Sad Day

Dawn rose in the East, but hid her white face behind gray clouds. The sky looked dolefully over Grič and spread a soft little rain over the earth. As if it were crying... Nera jolted awake and looked at her grandmother's bed. Her grandmother's eyes were wide open, staring at the ceiling, and she was muttering something under her breath. The girl jumped off the armchair, approached the bed and gently asked the old woman:

“Grandmamma, are you feeling better?”

The old woman didn't respond or look at her, but just kept staring fixedly at the ceiling.

“Grandmamma, are you alright?” Nera asked again.

No answer. The granddaughter stroked her grandmother's white hair and asked once more:

“Do you not understand me, grandmamma?”

The old woman kept moving her lips strangely. A cold shiver shook the young girl's body, and her face darkened. She started to call to her grandmother again, but in vain. A terrible anxiety took hold of her heart. She flew from the room, rang for the chambermaid and had Count Petar awakened. He had slept with his clothes on, so he came straight away.

“What is it?” he asked sleepily.

Nera threw herself against his chest and whispered:

“Godfather, I don't know what this means. Grandmamma is staring at the ceiling and doesn't answer me. What is the matter with her, for God's sake?”

The Count went into the bedroom. He found the Countess in the position Nera had described. His perpetually rosy face turned pale.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with her, but it doesn’t bode well. Send for Stiller.”

The doctor came half an hour later and examined the patient. She still didn’t respond, nor had her behavior changed. She kept staring at the ceiling, moving her lips or mumbling something. The doctor looked at Nera and the Count compassionately and said:

“I can’t be sure, but something is affecting her mind. She is not herself.”

Those words struck Nera like lightning. She grabbed her head and collapsed onto the divan. Count Oršić swayed as if he were about to fall to the floor.

“And what will happen now?” he asked the doctor finally.

“We shall see. Try to put some of this medicine into her mouth, so that she might swallow at least a drop. If this doesn’t help, nothing will.”

The doctor departed, and Count Oršić and Nera were left behind, heartbroken and melancholy. They were speechless, though they both had a terrible question plaguing their souls: Whatever shall we do next? The girl couldn’t bear to look at the bed. The old woman’s empty, dry stare filled her with dread. This wasn’t her grandmother’s look, those eyes were no longer the windows to her grandmother’s soul. It was as if she had died and left behind nothing but those cold, empty eyes.

It took a long time for Nera to compose herself and understand what had happened to her dear, happy home. She couldn’t believe that misfortune had truly entered these happiness-filled rooms, bringing with it a host of grief and sorrow. They woke Father Smole, and the three faithful souls, who all loved the Countess sincerely, stood there shocked and helpless. Right away they called for the old Baron Skerlec, the Countess’ brother. He was terribly affected when

he saw what had happened, but the doctor who had come and spent the morning at the old lady's bedside still assured them that things might turn around for the better. They were instructed to wait patiently.

That afternoon Nera and two of her servants rode off to Countess Čikulini's summerhouse. None of the servants were in the anteroom, so she walked straight into the great salon, where she found Baron Ivo, Countess Čikulini and Countess Auersperg engaged in a lively conversation. As soon as they saw Nera they stopped talking. The Baron blushed, and Nera noticed her fiancé was uncomfortable. The two countesses were also taken aback, but they rushed to meet her. They hugged and kissed her, offering their deep condolences for the unfortunate fate of her grandmother. The Contessa was uncomfortable with this show of affection. She felt that the women had been talking about her when she walked through the door, and something told her that what they were saying was not in her favor.

Baron Ivo was seated in an armchair. He was well enough to spend most of his day out of bed. Nera approached him and, despondently, offered him her hand, which he kissed. The two countesses left the room to give the fiancés some privacy. When they were alone, Nera asked Ivo in sincere sympathy:

“How are you, Ivo? You don't feel pain anymore, do you?”

“Only sometimes. Otherwise, I'm fine.”

“Thank God, I wish so much for you to be well again,” she said to him warmly, feeling sincerely sorry to have been remotely involved in causing him this pain. “It was so good to be able to sit by your side! You felt better!”

“I would feel better now had you not caused me so much grief.”



“Me? How?”

“What did you say to the City Judge? It is simply implausible that anyone with a right mind can speak that way. What were you thinking? Didn’t you realize that your statement incriminated you and placed me and our whole family in a very precarious position?”

“Ivo, I did not expect this type of greeting from you. I asked you about your health and I expected you to be concerned about the health of my grandmother.”

“Why should I ask when I know exactly how she is doing! But you shouldn’t be offended at my scolding because you know well that we all could suffer the consequences.”

“If you are afraid for yourself and your family, there is an easy solution to that.”

“I only meant that you must withdraw your statement as soon as possible.”

“I will do no such thing!”

“Nera, please, don’t be so stubborn. Can’t you see that this could ruin you? Krajačić wouldn’t hesitate to persecute his own son. Don’t rely so much on your social standing and your grandmother’s status.”

“I have faith that the truth will prevail and the deluded superstitious folk will be enlightened.”

“You speak like an apostle. You were not called to instigate revolutions. You are a woman, and you are loved, so be good and smart and recant your testimony, and all will be well. Krajačić wouldn’t dare ignore your retraction.”

“No, Ivo! I stand by my words.”

“But, for God’s sake, your testimony is the talk of the town, and people are gossiping. Can’t you see that we can’t get married until you clear your name?”

The girl looked at the young Baron with surprise for some time, silently. Then she said, calmly and coldly:

“I am sorry, but in that case, we won’t be getting married.”

“So, you won’t revoke your testimony, no matter what?”

“No, I won’t. I told the truth. I will never spit in the face of truth and disgrace myself with lies. As a knight, you should never suggest I do such a thing, and I expected you to support and defend me.”

“You want me to defend you while you question the laws?”

“We really are ill suited for each other. You are invested in protecting your future, and I my ideals. These two cannot go together. If, as my fiancé, you are unable to understand and defend me, if you cannot stay by my side or recognize that I am in the right, then it is only natural that we cannot get married. In fact, we cannot be man and wife because our marriage would be a great and repulsive lie. Here is your ring, I am breaking off the engagement.”

The Baron looked at her in disbelief, his vision blurred. Nera, in the meantime, left the ring on his lap and hurried out of the room and into the garden where her white steed awaited her. She mounted it and left without saying goodbye to the two countesses. When she arrived at her sad castle she ran up to her grandmother, looked at her dead, unfeeling eyes and started calling to her:

“Grandmamma, hear me, answer your poor Nera! Hear me, grandmamma, don’t leave me alone in this world—alone, all alone!...”

Meanwhile, at the Council Commissioner’s castle by Mesnička tower, Count Oršić was sitting down with Count Vojkffy, who had recovered from the wound inflicted by Siniša. Count Vojkffy expressed his condolences regarding the Countess’ affliction, asked profusely about

Nera, regretting her dire misfortune, and then left the room. Once Dvojković and Oršić were alone, Oršić said to the Council Commissioner:

“The Countess told me something about you before she suffered this terrible illness. You had informed her of some important events?”

“Yes. Did she tell you the whole story?”

“No, unfortunately. The Contessa walked into the room right when she started to tell me about it so we stopped the conversation, and she never woke up after that. Please, be so kind and tell me what it was about.”

“I would have come to see if you hadn’t visited me first. I wouldn’t want to miss an opportunity to prove my friendship for the Countess and her granddaughter. I was devoted to the Countess and most everyone is in love with her beautiful granddaughter. So don’t be surprised that I am about to tell you something that will break the law and my own sense of duty. You are the only person to know of this and I hope I can trust you to keep a secret.”

Dvojković told the Count the same story he had told the Countess, which upset her so much that she had suffered a stroke. Then he suggested that they bribe the man who had found the red belt. Count Oršić was devastated to learn the danger that Nera was in, but he took it better than the Countess and placed twenty thousand forints in Dvojković’s hands immediately.

“I would give all my possessions to save her from such a terrible danger,” Count Oršić said. “But will this man who found Nera’s belt keep quiet?”

“I guarantee his silence!”

“Will you get the belt from him? I want it returned immediately.”

“I have it, and I can give it to you straight away. You know how those bastards are, they have no scruples and would be willing to use it to extort money over and over again.”

Dvojković surrendered the belt to Count Oršić, who then bid him farewell and left him alone. The Commissioner's face smirked with pleasure as he placed the money in his safe.

“That belt was lucrative business,” he smiled to himself. “I suspected that the very night I found it at the Stone Gate.”

### Chapter 31: A New Peril

The sun had set twice since Nera first started calling to her grandmother in vain. Her eyes unfeelingly roamed the ceiling, her gaze was vacant and cold. She would occasionally murmur a few incomprehensible words, and then either fall asleep or stare at the ceiling all night. Nera spent the night in her grandmother's bedroom. She put on some light clothes and rested on the divan, waiting for her grandmother to awake from the unconsciousness that people referred to as confusion of the mind.

The house was quiet. Count Petar went to his Slavetić estate to arrange his affairs so that he could stay by the patient's bedside in Zagreb for longer periods of time. She was the love of his youth.

The night drew on, covering the sorrow of the 'Red Castle,' its flowering gardens and the profusion of roses that climbed up to its very roof. A man stood at the door that led from the vineyards to the castle gardens. He pressed himself against the wall like a statue; hidden by the darkness, he looked like a shadow. Suddenly something knocked on the garden gate. The man bent to the keyhole and slowly opened the gate to two dark figures wearing hoods.

"Is everyone asleep?" one of them asked quietly.

"They sleep like the dead," the doorman answered.

"You will stay by the door," the other man said. "Look over there, we have two of our associates outside. If you have betrayed us, and if we are caught, they will cut your throat."

"Why should I betray you? I provide an honest service for honest pay."

Both men wore floor-length cloaks. They moved forward hiding in the shadows of the trees, and slowly, quietly approached the castle door, muffling their footsteps by treading on grass. They halted under a tree:

“Do you see that light up there? Those are the old Countess’ windows.”

Both men sneaked through the bushes, climbed the steps to the castle door and examined it.

“It’s open,” one of them whispered.

“Go ahead, you’re more familiar with the house than I am.”

“Just be careful. If Nera is asleep, we will drug her, but if she isn’t, we’ll gag her and carry her out quickly to the gardens, where it’ll be easier to prepare her for her trip to hell. I hope today’s business will go more smoothly than that time with the coffin.”

“That plan was too naïve to work.”

“After all, it was conceived under the influence of champagne!”

“If we fail today, we will disgrace Lucifer forever. Then Filip will have to follow the ‘White Owl,’ and you’ll get Baba Urša.”

Silence again. The first man started to slowly open the door that had been left ajar. Suddenly he fell on top of the other man and they both found themselves down on the steps as if an invisible force had pushed them over. A man bounded out from behind the door and threw himself on them. The first of the hooded visitors who had fallen on the stairs jumped up and rushed to his friend’s aid. A terrible commotion ensued in which one man fought the two who tried to enter the castle. None of them uttered a sound, save for the heavy breathing of the fighters.

“Shoot him,” one of the two whispered.

“We will wake the household. Give me your dagger!”

The fight went on for a few minutes more. A dagger flashed in the dark, and the man who was defending the castle’s entrance as fiercely as a lion threw himself forward to grab the dagger with his bare hands. A black bloodstain spilled out of his hand over the white stairs. The man knelt as if he was about to faint, then turned his head to the hallway and shouted in a fierce, deep voice:

“Fire! Fire! You are all going to burn!”

His shout resounded through the castle’s main hallway and spread out into the ground floor where two lackeys were sleeping right by the door. The intruders waited a moment to see if the screams had woken anyone, and indeed, windows were flung open, voices rang through the hall, and a light was turned on. Both intruders cursed furiously and flew back to the gate they had come in through. In a short time the servants who slept in the castle had gathered to escape the house, fearing the fire. But they tripped over the man on the stairs.

The chambermaids screamed, and the servants shone a light on the man.

“In God’s name, Filip! What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Look, he’s covered in blood!”

Nera rushed down, wrapped in a robe, to see about the fire. She was shocked to find Filip covered in blood on the stairs.

“What happened to him? Who attacked him?” Nera asked, thinking the servants had gotten into a fight.

“Burglars, robbers, they wanted to enter the castle,” Filip said. “Run out to the gardens, catch them.”

The men ran out, and Filip tried to get up. He said:

“I am fine, they just nicked my veins a bit.”

The Contessa bandaged his hand and, with the help of the chambermaids, took him to a room on the ground floor. The servants returned shortly afterwards, informing the mistress that they hadn't found anyone. The intruders had escaped through the garden gate, where they had found the unconscious doorman. Once the servants left and Nera and Filip were alone, he said to her:

“Your Grace, the doorman means you harm. Take the castle keys from him.”

“What did he do?”

“He was acting strangely all evening. He kept pacing the servants' room, trying to get the rest of us to go to bed. Once we had gone to bed, I noticed him come in to check if we were asleep. He lingered by my bed in particular. I pretended to be sound asleep and he left the room quietly. I got up and went to the window, and I saw him pacing around the gardens. I went into the hall and noticed that the door had been left ajar. ‘Why did he go out at this time of night?’ I thought to myself, and decided to wait. I couldn't see anything in the dark. I wanted to go after him, but then I saw two shadows sneaking through the garden. I hid behind the door and saw two hooded figures. They were talking about kidnapping you. I knew the doorman had let them into the garden, so I waited in ambush behind the door and prevented them from entering the castle. We fought for a long time, and when one of them tried to stab my heart, I grabbed his dagger and cut my hands on it.”

“Why didn't you call for help immediately?” Nera asked, very agitated by Filip's account.

“I didn't wish to wake Your Grace. But since it couldn't be helped, I yelled ‘fire’ because that's the one thing that is always sure to rouse a household.”



Nera watched Phillip gratefully as he sat in front of her, holding his wounded right hand. His hard, bony face was a bit sullen, but his brown eyes were calm and cool, and his face never showed any sign of mental effort. His body, which seemed to be composed of iron muscle impressed Nera; she only now noticed that this man would really be capable of fighting two or more people.

“Thank you, Filip,” she said warmly, placing her hand on his shoulder. “You are a kind friend to me. A servant who doesn’t consider his mistress a friend would never risk his life for her.”

Filip did not reply, but kept fussing with his bandage instead. A lackey entered the room with a black silk hood in his hands.

“Where did you find this?” Nera asked with surprise.

“On the stairs, Your Grace.”

“I tore it off of one of the intruders’ head,” Filip said.

The Contessa examined the hood closely and found that the inside of it was embroidered in golden thread:

*“To her Lucifer—the Captain of Hell.”*

She was surprised by this and stared at the odd inscription for a long time. Then she folded the hood and had Filip escorted to a bedroom and instructed to rest. She had sent for the physician against Filip’s will, and stayed as he tended to his wounds. Once Nera left the room she instructed the chambermaid to take care of the patient and watch for a fever.

“Your Grace,” the chambermaid said to her mistress in confidence, “he predicted that we would be the target of a robbery. Ever since he came here he never slept at night, at least according to the others who sleep in the same room as he. They say he always crawls through the

house like a cat, searching and waiting and watching out for things. He only goes to sleep right before dawn and wakes at sunrise.”

Once she was alone again in her sick grandmother’s bedroom, she re-examined the strange hood with its mysterious gold lettering.

“I wonder what this message means?” she thought to herself. “Expensive silk and golden embroidery such as this can only come from a rich manor.”

### Chapter 32: A Message from the City Judge

Judge Krajačić was smoking his pipe and pacing the room after dinner. Sanda and Tito watched their father with wonder; he had a habit of taking off his *surka*, sitting down in his armchair and smoking his pipe every day after a meal, but today he never stopped pacing. His gray face was calm, except for his small, penetrating eyes that kept glancing toward the door, as if he was nervously waiting for someone.

In a short while, there was a knock at the door. Krajačić halted and watched Mikica walk in. He held his hat under his arm and letters peeked out from his pockets.

“Children, leave us be for a while,” the Judge told Sanda and Toto. They got up and left the room. Once the door closed behind them, Krajačić approached Mikica and asked in a half-whisper:

“Where are the scapulars?”

“Here they are, Your Grace. They have just been blessed.”

Krajačić kissed the *škapulars*, hung them around his neck and hid them under his vest.

“Did you have your *škapular* blessed again?”

“Yes, you may take a look,” Mikica drew a scapular out from under his old *surka*.

“And is everything else in order?”

“Yes, your highness!”

“Then you may leave. Just be sure to act wisely.”

“Your Grace will be pleased!”

Mikica left, and a few minutes later was marching down St. Marko's square, his head held high. He stomped about arrogantly as if he felt himself taller than the passersby. Then he turned into Gospodska Street, toward the Capuchin Square, and rang the bell of the 'Red Castle.' The new doorman answered the door. Mikica told him he had been sent by his Grace the City Judge to deliver a message for the Contessa. In a few moments he was offering her a deep bow.

"I am a most humble servant to your noble birth, illustrious Contessa," Mikica greeted her. "His Grace, the Royal Judge Petar Krajačić asks that your noble, illustrious self please come see him at the City Hall."

"What does the City Judge want with me?"

"That is a matter of investigation and I am unable to comment until the investigation is completed. But I believe it would give you great joy to know what the royal Judge has in store for you."

"So, tell me," Nera nudged him.

"Since we found no devil's seal on Kušenka's body, and she never admitted to being a witch, it looks like she will be released from the tower, especially since such important persons have vouched for her. His Grace the Royal City Judge would like for Your grace to state under oath that Kušenka is no witch, which would help set her free. Now Your Grace, my illustrious Contessa, knows exactly how things stand. Kušenka will be the first woman to leave the tower alive and return to her home, and she will have Your Grace to thank for that."

"All right, I will come straight away," Nera said, pleasantly delighted with the news.

Mikica made a deep bow, left the castle and walked slowly down Gospodska Street. A few moments later the Contessa rushed to the City Hall. On her way there she encountered friends and acquaintances who asked her about Skerlec and her grandmother, expressed their

condolences and offered advice on how to care for him. No one yet knew that Nera and Skerlec had broken off their engagement.

Nera finally reached the City Judge. He was surprisingly accommodating, offered her his armchair and asked a few questions about Kušenka. Nera defended the girl passionately.

“The only thing we need to do now is discuss this with both of you,” Krajačić said.

“Be my guest, Hon. Judge.”

“I am not sure if you would feel uncomfortable following me to the tower, but we can’t have the meeting here. If I had the girl brought here, the whole town would show up.”

“Hon. Judge, I am happy to go with you to the tower,” the Contessa replied, wishing with all her heart to save Kušenka as soon as possible.

The City Judge asked the Contessa to go ahead of him, telling her he would follow her as soon as he had gathered the necessary files and met the two senators who needed to be present for the hearing. He also instructed her not to tell a living soul about where she was headed and why. Nera went down Stone Street toward the tower. Mikica came up behind her and opened the door to the guardroom, since the gentlemen were on their way. The girl entered the room in which Jelica Kušenka had once listened to the moans and cries of her mother. Finally, the Judge and the two senators appeared, and Mikica instructed the policemen to open the iron door that led to the tower. The big key clicked in the old, rusty keyhole.

“Hand me the lantern!” Mikica demanded.

The guard went ahead holding the light up high.

“Your Grace should watch out,” Mikica warned Nera, “these stairs lead down.”

In the pale light Nera discerned a winding stone stairway. She held on to the cold, wet walls and started to descend. The stuffy, moldy air rose up from the darkness, growing nastier

and more unbearable the further down she went. Once they had reached the bottom, the guard turned around in the narrow space. Nera could see a door to her left and one to her right, and could hear stifled sighs and moans from within. She started to feel uncomfortable, and she halted.

“Just a few more steps, Your Grace,” Krajačić nudged her, “and we will be there!”

Krajačić and the senators accompanied her. The guard stopped, a lock clicked. Nera felt anxious, but she followed the guard inside, and found herself in a narrow and bare, dark space. From high above them, the light of day shone through thick bars. The space in front of her was as dark as a tomb. She turned around, looking for Kušenka, but she did not see her. The guard hung the lantern on a nail and Nera saw him take a thick chain off the wall. Nera looked around for the Judge and Mikica. To her horror, they weren't there. She carefully turned to the entrance to see what had delayed them, and immediately felt two heavy hands on her shoulder.

“What is it?” she shuddered. She wanted to break free, but the hands held her like iron cuffs. Dismayed, Nera noticed the guard's frowning face and felt him pull her to the wall. The chains clanked.

“What do you want with me?” the girl yelled at the guard.

“Nothing, pretty little miss, I'll just tie you up a bit.”

“Are you insane? I am here for a hearing. Hon. Judge! Hon. Krajačić!” Nera shouted, bending toward the door.

“Call your devil for help, not the Judge!” the guard mocked her.

“But for God's sake, man, you are mistaken. The Judge came down here with me for an interview with Jelica Kušenka, and not...”

“Ha-ha!” the guard laughed out loud. “He did a great job luring you into the trap.”

“You are wrong, man! Let me speak with the Judge.”

“I am not wrong. I know you, my dear Countess. The Judge ordered me to tie you up, and as for what comes next, you shall see.”

The guard fastened a thick, iron belt with a heavy chain around Nera’s waist. She did not resist, since she saw that it would be in vain. The guard left the room and closed the door: the key clicked in the rusted keyhole.

“What is happening to me?” she asked herself in a half-whisper, assuring herself that she had not gone crazy. What she felt was surprise, shock. She was still not completely aware of what had and would happen to her. Why would they lock her in the tower? But she felt no fear, because she was sure that the Judge himself would come at any moment to free her.

“This must be the guard’s mistake,” she thought to herself, straining her ears to hear the expected footsteps of the Judge. But no one came. Hours passed, and no one appeared.

“Can this be possible?!” she screamed desperately. “Is it possible that they wanted to imprison me and that they lured me in here? How accommodating the Judge was, how nice, how changed? Was all of that just an act and a premeditated lie? Could the guard be right?”

She could see her grandmother’s bedroom before her eyes; she lay there under the greenish light all alone, with no one to help her.

“No, no!” Nera said to herself. “Count Petar must have come back today, and when he sees that I am missing he will surely look for me, and they will let me go. How could they imprison Countess Ratkay’s granddaughter, the Skerlec’s Protonotary’s niece—and a fiancée... No, I am not a fiancée anymore! Could it be possible that Ivo Skerlec, if he ever loved me, wouldn’t do what he could to rescue me?”

She continued to assure herself that she would be back in her castle, by her sick grandmother's side again before the moon came out. Hours passed and she stood there in underground darkness, within four thick walls. The bars protruded high up above her.

“Contessa Nera, in a tower?! This is madness,” she thought. “A terrible madness! They will come for me! They must come for me!” She kept comforting herself, and she waited...

Count Petar Oršić returned from his estate, practically sneaking into Countess Ratkay's castle out of fear that Baroness Linčika might see him. Ever since he had asked her to marry him that night he had been running away from her as if she were the devil.

When he did not find Nera there he thought that she must be at the Skerlecs'. But when she never returned that evening, he sent for her. Baroness Skerlec sent word that she had not been there, so the Count went to see if she was at Countess Čikulini's.

The Countess Čikulini was sitting in a small salon. Mikica Smernjak came in.

“So, did you tell the Judge the whole story exactly as I instructed you?”

“Yes, Your Eminence.”

“So, how did he take it?”

“Not even God himself could convince him now that Contessa Nera isn't a witch.”

“And you will ensure that the world learns about this quickly!”

“Don't worry, your eminence, the world will find out. Your eminence will allow me to share with you most joyful news. The Contessa is no longer at her castle.”

“Where is she?”

“In the tower!”

The Countess seemed startled at this news.



“This is a bit too fast.”

“But the Hon. Judge is all too expedient when it comes to this business.”

“And where are the witnesses who will testify against her? The Judge can only imprison a witch if there are accusations against her.”

“Don’t worry, Your Grace. One can always find witnesses when one needs them. Two more witches accused Contessa Nera, actually.”

“Go now,” she said to Mikica. “Come back if you need anything. Here’s some more coins for now.”

And the Countess gave Mikica a small silk bag. He bowed thrice and left. When he saw Count Oršić in the hallway he ducked away quickly and took the other stairs. When the servants announced Count Petar, he found Countess Čikulini seated in her grand salon, her face covered in a silk kerchief, sobbing.

“What’s the matter, Countess?” the Count asked.

“You don’t know? My God it’s terrible.”

“What is so terrible?” the Count asked, surprised. “Did something happen to your son-in-law?”

“Ah, no, my dear Count. Our dear, unfortunate Nera...” Count Petar shuddered.

“Nera? What about her? I just came to see if she was perhaps here with you?” the old man said fearfully.

“Ah, I wish she were with me! Unfortunate girl! I dare not tell you...”

“But, for God’s sake, tell me. I must know where she is and what happened to her?”

“She is in—the tower...”

The old Count couldn’t utter a word, it was as if he had gone mute. His lips trembled,

his eyes twitched, and his body felt stiff. It took him some time to compose himself and respond:

“This is impossible!”

“It’s true, the whole of Grič is abuzz.”

Count Oršić was beside himself.

“Calm down, Count,” the widow said, seemingly affected. “I will do everything in my power to help get her out of the tower. We won’t stand by and let our noblewomen be persecuted like witches. You know you can count on my support, as well as the support of Countess Auersperg, who is much respected by the Queen.”

The Count quickly bid her goodbye and went straight to see Judge Krajačić, who was still in his chamber. This is where Count Oršić learned the whole truth. When he demanded energetically that the Judge set Nera free, and when he threatened to go to the Queen who wouldn’t allow Countess Ratkay’s granddaughter to be accused of witchcraft, the Judge gruffly snapped back at him:

“I am upholding the laws that the Queen has set forth. The Contessa has been accused, and I can’t help her!”

“Who accused her?”

“Kušenka and Katica Dolenc, both witches. They betrayed the Contessa, and I am unable to ignore such damning evidence. The law is created equally for all of us: the burghers and the countesses, even if you take the matter to the Queen herself!”

Count Oršić was desperate. He took his leave and went to see his brother, Krsto Oršić, who was Zagreb’s District-Prefect and Vice-Marshal. He asked him to do something for Nera. The Vice-Marshal was shocked; his kind face with its small blonde mustache showed great concern.

“This is an egregious matter, dear Petar! You know that the Judge holds all the power with regard to the witch trials. All I can do is ask him to be accommodating, but of course, he is free to dismiss my request. The Judge is nothing but a burgher, and you know how they enjoy getting their hands on one of us.”

“But, for God’s sake, I would hope that the aristocrats have as much power as a misguided Judge? If we all come together and demand that the girl be released, they would have to let her go. Then they are free to conduct an investigation and inform us of the accusations against her.”

“I will go see the Judge right away,” the District-Prefect said, “and you wait for me here.”

It seemed to Count Petar that minutes ticked away slowly, as if time had stopped altogether. When his brother finally returned, Count Petar was as desperate as before. The District-Prefect was told the same thing as Count Petar: the Judge wouldn’t and couldn’t let Nera go.

“The Judge’s excuse is that he is unable to do it out of fear of mob retaliation. Once two witnesses accuse a woman of witchcraft, she can be detained, and if only one woman admits during torture that another is a witch, then the accused is done for.”

“You see, Krsto,” his brother said, “we never concerned ourselves with what people were doing to these witches in Croatia. Is this our payback?”

“What should we do?”

“It would be a good idea to inform Countess Auersperg so that she can intervene with the Queen.”

“Do as you must. I am off to Vienna; but who can I entrust with the care of poor Suzana?”

“I will speak with my wife. She is a kind soul, and you will be able to make the journey. This whole tragedy stems from Nera and Suzana having hid that unfortunate Kušenka!” Krsto said, concerned.

“That wouldn’t have been a tragedy if Suzana were well, but her unexpected illness at this time is a real hazard for Nera. The only reason Krajačić was able to imprison her was the fact that Suzana suffered such a terrible illness. If only she would get better! That poor child! How awful it must be for her in the dungeon! This will be the death of me. I can’t even think about her wasting away in that tower, possibly being tortured...”

“The process is not as fast as all that. The court must hold a hearing first.”

After the long discussion with his brother, Count Petar went to see Dvojković.

“This is just terrible, Count. But I can assure you that my witness never said a word,” Dvojković said.

“I am aware. Some hags accused her under torture. I will ransom my entire estate just to free her, and then let them carry out their investigation.”

“I am completely helpless here. I must represent the law. That unfortunate Krajačić is to blame for this. Maybe you could try bribing him?”

“I offered bail, I offered my entire estate.”

“And what did he say?”

“He turned red as a lobster and almost threw me out, screaming that the whole kingdom couldn’t come up with the kind of money it would take for him to set a witch free. That simpleton is truly convinced that Nera is a witch.”

“He has held a grudge against the Contessa for a good while now, due to her revolutionary views on witches. I would love to save her, but unfortunately I have no jurisdiction.”

“The Queen still has more power than the Judge. I am going to Vienna. Please, tell me how long this process can take?”

“Several weeks. Get a good lawyer for the Contessa, and I will delay the proceedings so that you have time to reach the Queen and for her to give the command to free Nera.”

“All right! If you can draw this thing out for as long as I need to get the Queen to issue the command, I will reward you with twenty thousand forints!”

“I ask for nothing.”

“But it will still be yours!”

The Count bid Dvojković goodbye and went to the Governor, who was visiting Count Drašković at the time. He asked him to help Nera, but the Governor stated that there was nothing he could do to influence the Judge. Nevertheless, he promised the Count that he would write to the Queen in Vienna himself, since he was convinced of Nera’s innocence. When Count Petar left, Countess Drašković said to the Governor:

“Listen, Count, don’t get involved with this matter. After all, you can’t be sure that the beautiful Contessa is really innocent. It was certainly wrong of her to provide shelter to the witch. The Contessa won’t burn at the stake, because she is a Countess, but Skerlec is left a widow before his very wedding anyway. Do you understand? After what has happened, he won’t marry the Contessa, so I have hope that he might marry my Ženka.”

“It’s a pity to put the young girl through this ordeal,” Nadaždi replied, “but the Queen will acquit her even without my recommendation.”

“That’s right,” the Countess confirmed. “Leave everything as it stands. Skerlec will leave her, and this will be in our favor.”

Count Petar decided to go see Ivo Skerlec, who was already in his palace. Skerlec knew what had happened, and he calmly heard Count Oršić out. When asked what he would do for Nera, Skerlec replied:

“I tried to help her, and I advised her to recant her testimony before the court, but she stubbornly refused to do so. I loved her sincerely, and I still do, but seeing as she ran to her own doom there is nothing I can do for her now. You know that the court makes decisions in these matters. I pleaded with her to correct her testimony while it had still not been made public. What can I do now that the whole town is talking about it?”

Oršić arose, looked at Skerlec with loathing and said sternly:

“Shame on you, Ivo! You’re no knight!”

With these words the old man parted from Baron Ivo Skerlec, Nera’s ex-fiancé. The Count met the Baron’s mother in the great salon, who said to him:

“Suzana was always hard-headed, doing things she shouldn’t have done. This is precisely how she brought misfortune on poor Nera, too!”

“Baroness, your mind is not equipped to judge your sister-in-law’s deeds. She is so high above you that you have no right to state an opinion about her.”

By the time he reached Countess Ratkay’s castle, he was devastated. His large body, unaccustomed to long walks, was exhausted. He found Father Smole and the Remetins in the salon. They gathered together in a heated discussion. Father Smole covered his face in his hands to hide his tears.

“Calm down, Father,” the young people consoled him.

“Escort Nera to the stake? I can’t do that! I’d rather die!” Father Smole spoke, emotionally.

“Father Smole,” Francesco said, “all is not yet lost.”

“I am a pathetic pauper who never had the courage to stand up for those unfortunate women. If you only knew how many times I watched honest, ill-fated women or crazy women who claimed to be witches burn at the stake. One day, when I couldn’t stand to witness the misery any longer, I tried to protect Kušenka’s daughter, and I ruined the Contessa! I can’t get over this, I can’t! It’s all my fault. Mine alone!”

“Calm down, Father Smole,” the young people encouraged him. “You must bear this, because we need you. We can’t save Nera without your help.”

Smole lifted his head, as Count Oršić stood up.

“What is the meaning of this? You plan to save Nera?” the Count asked.

“No one can escape from the tower,” Smole sighed.

“But we must save her nevertheless. There are fifteen of us. We are young, courageous, and we lack neither intelligence nor courage.”

“There is nothing you can do,” Oršić said. “The woman who could have saved her with one word lies there, unconscious. But for Nera’s sake I will try to replace her. Tomorrow at dawn I leave to see the Queen, and I hope she will receive me and prevent this great injustice from happening to Countess Ratkay’s granddaughter.”

The young people talked for a long while, arranging something in secret as Count Petar sat by his unfortunate friend who kept staring at the ceiling, crying like a small child.

Meanwhile a select group of people gathered at the City Hall. The City Judge, Council Commissioner Dvojković, the notary Lacko Sale and Count Vojkffy, who had just appeared in public for the first time since his illness, were there.

“I assure you, Magnifice, that you are mistaken,” Count Vojkffy was animatedly telling Krajačić. “This young girl can’t possibly be a witch, no one will believe this. Bothe the burghers and the common people love her, and this will just result in damage to your reputation.”

“I appreciate your concern!” the Judge said, “I know how to protect my reputation. If Kušenka admitted to Nera being a witch...”

“Did she admit this voluntarily?”

“Under torture.”

“Then this is understandable. If you were to put me on the Judas cradle or the rack, I would confess to casting a spell on you too.”

“If you wish, you may report as the Contessa’s lawyer,” the Judge said. “I arrested her because the law commands me to do so. There will be an investigation, and if her innocence is proven she will be released.”

“Count Vojkffy is right in regard to the respect we should give to the aristocracy,” the Council Commissioner said. “The girl does come from the most elegant of circles, and it must be terribly embarrassing for the nobility to have a Contessa imprisoned!”

“The burghers elected me as the Judge,” Krajačić said. His emasculated body shook with subdued rage. “I only answer to the civil law.”

“You are right,” Sale took the opportunity to say. “You really were elected by the burghers and you must count on their support, but I would dare counsel you that it wouldn’t be a good idea to alienate the aristocracy, either.”



“What aristocracy? Only the Counts Oršić took it upon themselves to speak on the Contessa’s behalf. Her own fiancé never came to see me, probably because he is well aware of the fact that she is a dangerous witch.”

“What on earth are you thinking?!” Vojkffy interrupted. “How is she dangerous?”

“Even if she didn’t do anything other than spread the word that the witches don’t exist, and that it’s all folly, she is dangerous. This basically accuses the court of condemning innocent women to death. This means that she had attempted to rally the masses against the law and against me.”

“I am warning you, Hon. Judge, you will get in a lot of trouble. The Queen won’t let you burn Countess Ratkay’s granddaughter at the stake!” Vojkffy said.

“The Countess has lost her mind, she can’t reach the Queen.”

“But Oršić is headed to Vienna!” Sale said.

Krajačić was somewhat surprised to hear this. He considered the news for a moment, then he sat down at his desk and said calmly:

“I am not sure whether it suits you, Hon. Sale, to defend a witch so much? And the Council Commissioner seems to have forgotten that he is the protector of the law and that his only duty at the moment is to put together a trial.”

“Forgive me, I have nothing to base a trial on.”

“Very well. The investigation will be completed within a few days,” the Judge said and, without looking at his guests anymore, started writing.

When Dvojković, Sale and Vojkffy left the City Judge’s room, Dvojković whispered to the Count:

“There’s nothing we can do for her now, dear Count! This old madman ruined everything. Nera is lost to you!”

“No, she’s not! I won’t let her go, especially not now. She won’t burn at the stake, but on my breast instead!”

### **Chapter 33: At the Torture Chamber**

Hours passed one by one, like an eternity, and Nera still awaited her freedom. The silver rays of the moon peeked through to her from high up through the tower bars. Nera's spirit was strong, her hope for liberation revived.

"It's impossible to imagine that Ivo would desert me in this moment!" she thought. "If he ever loved me, he will do what he can for me now."

She was used to sitting on silk sofas, and now she stood on the cold dirt floor, at the bottom of the witch's tower. She kept staring at the iron bars, thinking of the room where her grandmother lay all alone and deserted, unable to comprehend that her beloved Nera was imprisoned in a cold, dark dungeon. Who would nurse her today? Who would give her her medicine? Who would offer her milk? "I will be freed tomorrow, surely, and I will make it up to her," she kept saying to herself. She envisioned those dear rooms so vividly that she forgot for a moment that the dungeon surrounded her. Something rustled in the corner. Nera peered into the darkness, but she couldn't make anything out. Something rustled again, as if a living creature moved there. Nera listened more closely. Yes, something was moving, something was crawling across the dirt. Now something brushed against the straw that padded the floor, which rustled as if something were crawling through it. Nera listened intently. Suddenly, the thing in the straw jerked, squealed. Nera felt it jump on her, and her hand touched the disgusting animal. Animals chased each other across the dirt floor, squealing and multiplying as if they had sprouted from the earth. They bumped into her time and time again. "My God, they're rats!" Nera felt a nauseating revulsion.

The rats crawled into the straw and spread across the dirt, jumping over Nera's feet while performing their wild chase. Nera felt that they moved by command. Suddenly she heard footsteps in the hallway.

"Finally," Nera thought. "They are coming. They'll get me out of this awful place now."

The lock on her door screeched. The light of the torch illuminated Nera, who had pressed herself against the black wall, wrapped in chains. A guard entered the dungeon and freed her.

"Didn't I tell you that I am innocent?"

"Hold on, beautiful! Don't think you'll get out of this so easily, my dear Countess!"

The tone of voice as well as the words filled her with an unpleasant foreboding, but she followed him calmly just so that she could escape that terrible chamber where she had spent half the night. She passed through a narrow space, squeezing between cold walls. The damp ceiling hung over her like the top of a tomb, when the man carrying the torch turned left. Nera stepped over the threshold of a horrifying room, and halted. The sight she saw made her freeze in place.

There were no windows or bars in the four-cornered space that she stepped foot in. Four torches burned in the middle, filling the room with pungent smoke. Judge Krajačić sat to the side, with the City Senator, City Captain, Notary Sale, and the Superintendent beside him, while the clerk Mikica sat separately at a small desk, giving himself airs. The inquisitor Matija Puncer stood in the middle of the room, his sleeves rolled up to his shoulders, and his rawhide apron tied at the waist. Four strong, bony lictors<sup>108</sup> huddled around him, their faces afire with alcohol, their shirts torn open, their sleeves rolled up. They looked like butchers preparing for slaughter.

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<sup>108</sup> Torturer of women accused of witchcraft. In ancient Rome, an attendant on chief magistrate who executes the sentence of criminals.

Nera looked over the terrible room and knew straight away that she was in the torture chamber for the witches. But why had they brought her here? This question filled her with quiet fear. When she saw Krajačić, she approached him hurriedly and asked loudly and sternly:

“You brought me here to confront me with Kušenka, Hon. Krajačić?”

“I will confront you with her,” Krajačić said calmly. “Just be patient!”

“What right do you have to keep me in the dungeon and to have me chained?”

“Your protégé Kušenka will answer that,” the Judge replied, ordering the inquisitor to bring Kušenka in.

“Didn’t you bring me here solely as a witness?” Nera asked again. “Or did you resort to an artless deception that smears your judicial honor?”

“What nerve!” the City Senator said.

“She’ll get over it quickly,” the Judge replied.

“And Hon. Notary Sale!” Nera asked, “You remain silent?”

“I have no say in here,” he replied quietly.

The inquisitor brought in a female; Nera thought she looked more like a phantom than a human being. Still, it was Jelica Kušenka. Her body was covered in a torn linen shirt, her hair was messy, her eyes sunk deep into her face. The inquisitor dragged her by her hands, and she followed him unfeeling, limping.

“Jelena Kušenka,” City Judge Krajačić said, “I call on you to renew your testimony regarding your former mistress. Say the things you told us to her face. Tell her how she sat at Manduševac every evening after Vespers gathering the witches about her, tell her you are a true witch!

Jelica faced Nera eye to eye. When she recognized her benefactor, she fell at her feet and started to cry.

“No, no—these things are not true! It’s all a lie! The Contessa is not a witch—I lied about everything. She was never a witch, I never saw her at Manduševac.”

“So you deny the accusations you made so far?” the Judge asked furiously.

“I lied, it’s all a lie—a lie! My good mistress never did anyone any harm. Never, never!”

Krajačić waved at the inquisitor, which then approached Jelica, grabbed her by her hair and dragged her across the dirt to the middle of the torture chamber as if she were dead weight. Nera stared at the inquisitor. She fearfully watched his bony hands as they dragged Jelena. Then two lictors approached Kušenka, tied her hands behind her back, and fastened her bonds to the iron clasp that hung on a thick rope attached to a wheel. The girl grew silent and directed a glazed stare at Nera.

“Pull!” the inquisitor commanded.

Two men grabbed the other end of the rope and started to draw the girl up. She let out a piercing scream that froze Nera’s heart. The girl’s shoulders popped out, and her arms stretched over her head.

“You beasts! What are you doing to her?!” Nera screamed, leaping in front of Krajačić.

But no one listened to her. Everyone watched as Jelica hung in the air. Her body rose up and up, and her bones popped out as if they were about to pierce her skin and flesh. Nera leaned against the wall, her body shaking with fever. Jelica screamed. Suddenly her screams turned feebler and feebler, until they died out completely. Krajačić and his retinue jumped off their seats.

“What’s this? Yesterday she gave a full testimony under these tortures? And she’s silent today!”

Krajačić turned to Nera who stared stiffly at Kušenka.

“Look, gentlemen!” Krajačić pointed at Nera. “Look at her gaze! She is giving her the strength of the devil. She took away her sensations with her eyes, and this is why Kušenka is silent.”

“You are mad!” Nera screamed, jumping away from the wall. “Can’t you see that she has lost consciousness! How can she speak when she is unconscious?”

The coarse laughter of the inquisitor and his lictors pierced the horrific room. The inquisitor turned to the lictors and ordered:

“Fasten the weights to her legs! Pass the candles!”

The lictors lifted iron weights, straining under their mass. Then they lowered the girl to the ground and tied the weights to her legs. They lifted her back up and lit a candle each. The candle flames were then placed under Kušenka’s feet and under her armpit so that her skin started to burn. The girl’s body jolted, she screamed twice or thrice, and then grew silent and limp again as if she were dead.

“Beasts, you are beasts!” Nera screamed. “How can a man with a soul watch calmly as another suffers this horrendous pain? Has human compassion all but died within you?”

“She won’t let her speak!” the Judge yelled, his voice shaking as he pointed at Nera. “She brought the devil in with her.”

“You have lost your mind!” Nera shouted.

“Shut your mouth, you damn witch,” the inquisitor roared at her, “or I will fry your tongue!”

Nera realized that Puncer was in charge in here. He tortured his victim with a kind of peace that suggested he was going about some mundane business.

“Get her on the horse!” the inquisitor ordered.

Jelica’s body slammed onto the ground. She lay there as if the life had drained out of her body, and the Judge was still incensed at her not having repeated her accusations.

“The devil entered her and won’t let her speak!” Puncer said, looking proudly at the Judge like a man who knows how to conduct his business. Then he ordered the lictors:

“Get some holy water and let’s chase out the devil!”

And they started to pour the water out of the pail by the torture device over her. Jelica was revived by the cold water, so she got up and looked at Nera who stared at her with eyes wide open.

“This one has Lucifer’s eyes!” the inquisitor warned the Judge. Have her turn to the wall and you’ll see that the devil will no longer be able to put Kušenka to sleep.”

Krajačić ordered Nera to turn around, which she did gladly to avoid seeing the fear-inducing scene. The lictors lifted Jelica up to place her on the third torture device. They pulled out a horse-like wooden plank that rested on four beams. On the plank’s back was a pyramid-shaped mound on which the lictors lifted Jelica, forcing her to mount it. While two of them lifted her and forced her onto the wooden mound, the other two fastened iron weights on her arms and legs. Jelica turned deathly pale, her face contorted and her eyes popped out. She bent and twisted grimacing terribly, and the sounds that bellowed out of her breast resembled those of a beast being slaughtered. Judge Krajačić started to question her:

“Jelica Kušenka, tell us whether Contessa Nera, your former mistress, used to go to Manduševac every evening? Is she a true witch?”



“Yes,” she mouthed with difficulty.

“Do you admit that she murdered your two brothers who disappeared from the village?”

“Yes, yes!” she screamed.

“Tell us, did she murder the newborn babe and left it by the Stone Gate?”

“Yes!”

“You had a prophetic dream that showed her give her grandmother, Countess Ratkay, a potion that would cloud her mind and allow Nera to overtake the estate?”

“Yes. I saw it, I saw everything. Just in God’s name get me off! Everything, everything is true! Jesus and Mary help me!”

The inquisitor signaled and the weights were taken off the girl. She was taken off the horse, and she collapsed on the ground and started panting, writhing with pain.

“Didn’t I tell you that she would confess as soon as the other one stopped watching?” the inquisitor said proudly, ordering the lictors to take Jelica back to her dungeon.

“It’s clear to you now why I detained you here,” Krajačić said to Nera.

“You are a mad man! This is unworthy of human intellect! One day you will release me from this dungeon, but I swear to you that will be the last day that you spend as a Judge.”

Krajačić snapped:

“Only a diehard witch could speak this way!”

“She’ll mellow out once we put her on the wooden horse!” the inquisitor laughed.

“Countesses are used to riding! I’ll tack up the white horse!”

Nera froze, her head abuzz. Her ears still reverberated with the moans and the terrible, unheard-of sounds that Jelica let out when they sat her on that horse. It made her physically ill to

hear that she would be next. They brought another woman into the torture room and strapped her to the wheel, but she was silent as if she didn't feel a thing.

“Katica,” the City Senator asked her, “do you admit to bewitching your sister-in-law? Do you admit to shriveling her arms and legs, blinding her in one eye and growing a bump on her neck?”

“No-no!”

“To the torture wheel!”

And they started to torture her, at which point she shouted:

“Yes, I did it! I surrendered my soul to the devil. I'll confess to everything, just get me off. Help me, Lord!”

“Why were you silent before?!” the City Judge asked. “Did the devil forbid you to speak?”

“Yes, the devil instructed me not to divulge any information. He promised to suffer in my place.”

Mikica dipped the quill in the ink and started to write:

“How did your association with the witches come about?” Sale asked again.

“The night before my wedding I went to Manduševac to fetch water. An old woman met me there and convinced me to join the witches so that I would never have to work again, while still having enough money, silk kerchiefs, golden earrings and fine foods. That is when I followed her to the crossing, where we met other witches.”

“Was this woman among them?” the City Judge asked, pointing at Nera.

“Yes,” Katica Dolenc answered quickly.

“And where did you go from there?”

“The devil sent a carriage for us and we went up to his estate in Medvednica. We saw many devils there, beautifully dressed in red and green silk. Then we ate venison, beef shank, boiled and roasted veal, as well as honey-sweetened coq-au-vin. Then we danced and a devil embraced me.”

“What were those devils’ names?”

“There was Matek, Filip, then Karl Lucifer, and I can’t think of the rest. The beautiful Lady Captain was there as leader of the witches. She is beautiful, young, sophisticated and smart.”

“Look here, was it this one?” Krajačić pointed at Nera.

“Yes, it was her!”

“And what was she doing there?”

“She was the head of the witches! She made cakes, distributed food and drinks, commanded the rest of us, laughed and danced, and she always wore a white silk dress that shone like the sun. Her head was adorned with a white cap on which a white owl’s head was perched.”

The young woman stopped her storytelling, collapsed onto the ground and remained there, immobile.

“The devil made her faint,” the inquisitor said, “so that she wouldn’t tell us about the Lady Captain.”

The judges decided to halt the torture for the day and made to leave the torture chamber. When Nera saw them leaving, she started shouting at the judge:

“Untie me and let me go home while you still have a chance, or this will cost you your life!”

Krajačić took out his škapular, kissed it and said to the others:

“Do you hear this? She’s threatening me! She hopes that the devil will avenge her. But I am protected by my holy amulets, miss witch.”

“What should we do with the aristocratic witch?” the inquisitor asked the Judge.

“Leave her, let her feast her eyes on the torture chamber. Perhaps she’ll confess of her own accord.”

The City Judge and Sale, who used to visit Countess Ratkay and her granddaughter in the illustrious rooms of the ‘Red Castle,’ now left Nera chained in this awful underground torture chamber. The lictors and the inquisitor opened a small door in the wall that led to a storage room and left her alone with the half-dead woman. Mikica approached her and laughed:

“Did you see how we conduct our investigation? Now tell me, honorable Countess, to vanish before your pretty face just like you did that time before Cindek’s store. What goes around, comes around!” he laughed, and went out after the lictors.

He left the door slightly ajar. Nera could hear the raucous laughter and crude remarks that the lictors made. She heard them eat, drink and engage in a show of bravado.

“Tomorrow we’ll place chains instead of golden gloves on the Countess’s white fingers, and thumbscrews instead of rings.”

“That girl is damned strong! We’ll need an extra serving of wine and bacon!”

“We should ask for a nice roast for the occasion of torturing a Countess.”

“Don’t worry, the old Countess will send us a roast turkey and some cheese pie.”

The lictors laughed, and the inquisitor said:

“Ha, we’ll damn well charge double for the torture of such a fine witch.”

Mikica’s head peeked into the door of the torture chamber; he wanted to see what Nera was doing. The Contessa started at the ground, as if she were lost in terrible anticipation of what would happen next.

“Is it possible that they would leave her here? Could it be that she won’t be freed from this horrid place? Where are all her friends and contacts? Where are those who showered her with romantic words and swore to their love for her?”

Katica Dolenc, who had been lying on the ground unconscious, woke up and looked around. She tried to rise up but couldn’t, so she crawled, pushing herself off the ground with her arms, until she reached Nera.

“I don’t know you,” she started to whisper, her voice breaking, “but don’t curse me for accusing you. When they start torturing you like that, you will accuse whomever they wish, too.”

“How could you have talked about the feast, the Lady Captain, the devils in red and green suits?! Where did you hear this?” Nera asked.

“I didn’t hear this anywhere. This is how it happened.”

“Woman, you have gone insane. What devils? What feasts? These are figments of your imagination.”

“No, no they’re not. I let the damned Babe<sup>109</sup> seduce me, I went to their meeting and I had a devil for a lover. He was handsome, tall, and a sophisticated gentleman.”

“That’s crazy! Where did you see him, when?”

“Twice in one week I went to his estate on Medvednica for a feast.”

“It’s as if you are hallucinating in your sleep. There is no estate at Medvedgrad, the city is in ruins.”

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<sup>109</sup> Plural form of “baba.”

“I don’t know about that, but they told us we were at Medvednica. The devil gave us a ride and we had a nice time. But not all the witches had it easy. The ones whom the devils didn’t want anymore had to serve us. They washed the dishes and carried the firewood, worked like servants and only ate the leftovers. It was beautiful in the devil’s mansion, there was so much light! Gold shone like the sun.”

“You are delusional. This isn’t real.”

“It’s all real. I just lied about you being there, pretty miss. The Lady Captain was another girl, as pretty and tall as you are. Oh, the Lord punished me for allowing that damned Baba to talk me into this. One day I came home and I was very drunk. My husband went into the woods, and I kept jabbering in my drunken state and so my mother-in-law accused me. Now they’ll torture me to get the names of my friends. But let them! I will spite them all. Damned mother-in-law! They’ll burn me to death, but her fiery bed won’t be far behind.”

Nera couldn’t tell whether this woman was crazy or hallucinating. The things she had said seemed to her to be impossible madness, but she couldn’t discern what it was that made the woman tell these stories. An hour had passed by the time the lictors and Mikica reentered the room. They were crass and boisterous.

“Aren’t the judicial representatives coming?” a lictor asked.

“That would be me!” Mikica said.

He sat at the desk and started muttering: “The hearing of the witches Katica Doleneć and Marija Vugrineć, conducted before the City Notary Sale, City Senator Pavlo Puškarić, and the great Judge Petar Krajačić at two o’clock in the morning. Now that the representation is officially recorded, we may begin.”

So they started the session. The inquisitor looked around for Katica Dolenc. When he saw her by Nera, he said:

“Look how far she crawled. She’s pretty strong. Should we sit her on the horse?”

“No, for God’s sake!” she pleaded. “What do you want me to say?!”

“Who were your friends in the witch’s coven?” Mikica asked, puffing out his chest. He was terribly arrogant, now that he was in charge as the representative of the court. “Did you hear me?!” Mikica repeated himself. “Give me the names of the women you were with in the witch’s coven?”

“There was my mother-in-law, Barbara Dolenc. She is a real witch and she gave up her baby to the devil. She made me join the witches and she threatened to blind me if I didn’t come (with her) to the devil. One morning, after communion, she brought the holy Host home in her mouth, spat it out and gave it to the devil, who trod on it and gave my mother-in-law a silk kerchief.”

“Who are the other witches you saw in the coven?” Mikica asked, writing her statement down carefully.

“I saw Bolašinka, the shoe-maker, Dorotea Mlinarić, who used to be my husband’s lover before she went back to Pavlek, the shoe-maker. Also, my father-in-law Ivek Dolenc is a real wizard.”

“You’re still not done! Keep on going. Look, the inquisitor stands at the ready!”

“Then, then...” Katica continued, trying to think of all the women who had ever harmed her, gossiped about her or berated her. She gave the poor women’s names: Lucija Žitarička, Jaga Sobička from Nova Ves, Margareta Dumbović, Magda Krvarić from Trnje, Barbara Tordić from Remete and the clergyman Pulingar’s landlady, Helena Škrvarić.”

“What about Barica Cindekovka? She’s in the coven, too.”

“Cindekovka? I don’t know her.”

“Are you lying? She did business with all the devils.”

Katica was silent, pondering who this Cindekovka could be. This upset Mikica, and he winked at the inquisitor who reached for Katica, but she started to plead with them:

“Wait a moment! I can’t remember her straight away. There were so many of us that I can’t think of everyone’s names. There are as many witches as there are leaves on the hills.”

“So, you admit that Cindekovka, the young widow from Stone Gate, was there with you?”

Mikica put down his quill and pronounced the end of the hearing.

“We did a good job today,” he added under his breath. “Now we’ve got seven new roasts.”

“That’ll be ten forints for me, six for you, and seven groš for the lictors!”

“They need to raise our wages, my dear man. The Council Commissioner filled his pockets and we get—nil. This Countess should make up for all the times we’ve been underpaid in the past.”

Mikica and the inquisitor lowered Dolenčeva<sup>110</sup> to the ground, tied Nera to the wall and headed to the side room for some refreshment. While they drank, laughed and joked, Countess Ratkay’s granddaughter stood in the witch’s torture chamber in chains.

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<sup>110</sup> Form of “Dolenec.”



### Chapter 34: Unexpected Incriminations

The next day, contrary to his routine, the City Judge rose early and was seated in the City Hall by eight. The hallway was crowded with people, and a shy young girl stood before his desk. Krajačić looked at her with his beady eyes, which peered out of his face like two spikes.

“You’re Countess Ratkay’s chamber maid?” the Judge asked the girl.

“Yes,” she replied, her voice shaking.

“Mind your tongue, for if I catch you lying I will send you to the tower.”

The chambermaid shuddered, and her eyes filled with tears.

“What was your young mistress like? Have you seen anything unusual or evil about her?”

The chambermaid’s body shook with fear. No knowing what to do, she fell on her knees in front of the judge:

“Your Grace, I don’t know what to say. All I know is that Nera hid Kušenka the witch in the castle’s small tower, and that she got a loaf of bread for her birthday from the baker woman Barica Cindek which was woven so marvelously that it didn’t look like the work of human hands. I know that she was buried alive in a coffin and that she came back to life. May God blind me, make me a hunchback or let worms eat me alive if there’s anything else I know.”

Since the chambermaid had nothing else to say, the judge let her go, and Countess Ratkay’s doorman was ushered into the room. This was the same doorman that Nera had let go that evening he allowed the two masked men to enter the castle. The doorman told the judge how he had always been convinced that Nera was a witch, and how he often used to see a man pace under her window.

“I always thought that was the devil himself,” he said. “One evening, when I was in the garden, two figures wrapped in red capes broke in through the locked gate. They commanded me to keep quiet and stay still. I wanted to run, but I couldn’t; it was as if something held me firmly in place. I don’t know what it is that they did in the garden, but I would swear to you even now that they must have been demons. Also, one evening the Contessa rode off somewhere below Sljeme. A storm came in and the wind picked up, and we had to go in search of her. We found her at the serf Miško’s. Baron Skerlec was with us—he could tell you more than I can.”

After interviewing the doorman, the Judge invited the serf Miško and his daughter-in-law in. A girl of about fifteen walked in with them. The Judge asked them about Nera’s visit during the storm, and the old man told him:

“I never imagined that our mistress could be a witch. That evening when the fire burned out in our hearth, the ashes rose and curled in the air, and the room was filled with smoke. Something squealed and howled on the roof, the house shook and we hear a terrible rattle which must have been the witches dancing in the attic. We all knelt down and prayed to God, after which the witches left.”

“But the Countess never knelt down or crossed herself!” the little girl interjected.

“This is my granddaughter,” the serf said. “As soon as the Contessa left, she pointed out to us that she had not crossed herself. I didn’t believe it at the time, but now I see that it’s true.”

“And the Contessa came from below Sljeme?” Krajačić asked.

“Yes, Your Grace!” the young daughter-in-law answered. “Then a terrible storm appeared. Besides, Your Grace, the day after Contessa’s visit one of our calves died, and then hail destroyed our harvest.”

“I was most surprised by the fact that the Contessa healed my granddaughter,” the old man said. “You Grace, do you see his little girl? She used to be skin and bones, on the brink of death. The Contessa sent for a physician, but he was not able to help either. Then she started to heal the child herself. She would send her soup, venison and wine daily, and she kept telling us that the child would recover if she only ate well. The entire village knew that a witch had cursed my granddaughter. And Your Grace is well aware that only another witch, and no one else, can remove a curse. So a month and a half later my granddaughter recovered—as Your Grace can see for yourself.”

The Judge asked the serf a few more questions, and then he dismissed him and called in Countess Ratkay’s coachman.

“She was braver than us men, and she was never afraid of anything, and if you please, we all know that women are more timid. She used to ride out at night a lot, and early in the morning. Then she would command the servants to wait for her, and she would disappear somewhere. Once I went with her to Remete early in the morning, and I heard that this is where she would secretly meet up with some young men who turned out to be devils. This is what the people at Remete say now. And Countess Čikulini’s chambermaid saw the Contessa gather dew in the morning to make love potions for the young gentlemen.”

When the coachman completed his testimony, they called in the Countess Čikulini’s chambermaid. She confirmed his statement and added that she was always convinced of the Contessa’s use of love potions, since she found it curious that all the gentlemen were in love with her. There were many prettier girls in town and not everyone was in love with them, after all.

They finally brought in the convent gardener and tailor, Pavao Galović, who had accused Kušenka two weeks ago. He told them how Nera had instructed him to revoke his accusation against Kušenka when she saw him at the Stone Gate. Then he started to tell them about Jelica:

“Your Grace should just look at what Kušenka has done to me. I haven’t had a single night’s rest ever since she was imprisoned. I can’t sleep; I keep reliving that scene where she was dragged into the tower. And when sleep finally overcomes me, she comes to me in my dreams along with her mother. The old woman threatens me and shouts: ‘Just you wait, you’ll suffer for what you did to my daughter.’ Then she beats and tortures me like the devil himself, with Jelica’s aid. Yesterday Jelica came to me in my sleep and said: ‘I will haunt your conscience.’ She was pale and her hair was disheveled, and I felt so sorry for her I started to cry. I was so tortured in my sleep that I could barely get out of bed this morning. The Hon. Priest said that I needed to pay for a mass per day and give the church one chicken and two turkeys for the Lord to deliver me from these awful dreams.”

Finally, Galović was dismissed as well. Mikica diligently took down the statements as the Judge waited for Baron Skerlec, Count Vojkffy and Captain Siniša to answer his summons. The three men met at the City Judge’s chamber. Siniša was the last to arrive. He was surprised to find there the two men he had dueled and sent on bed rest last month, so he greeted the Judge and ignored Skerlec and Count Vojkffy. Mikica bowed to him thrice, but Siniša didn’t deign to acknowledge his presence.

“I have invited you, noble gentlemen,” Krajačić said, “to speak as witnesses honestly and openly before this court. The Hon. Vojkffy was recently ill, and it has come to my attention that your illness was very mysterious. I hear that the illustrious Count was cursed, and we have

reason to believe that Contessa Nera, who is under trial for witchcraft, had cast those spells on him.”

“Mine is quite an ordinary illness, Hon. Judge,” the Count said. “Since the honor of a lady is at stake, I will reveal my secret to you: I had fought in a duel.”

The Judge opened his eyes wide.

“You might wish to protect the Contessa, but I must warn you...”

“No, I am telling you the truth.”

The Judge looked at Vojkffy crossly and turned to Skerlec, who stared at the space before him. He posed the same question, but Skerlec responded:

“I had a duel as well.”

The Judge was even more shocked and he exclaimed:

“Your Grace, this is impossible! Duels are forbidden, and you surely didn’t engage in criminal behavior!”

Skerlec was silent and embarrassed. Seeing as he would not get a reply, Krajačić continued:

“Your Eminence found Contessa Nera Keglević at Countess Ratkay’s serf’s home. There was a big storm and the Contessa had ridden out alone, at night even...”

The Baron hesitated, and then he said:

“Yes, this is true.”

“Didn’t Your Grace find it odd that so many gentlemen were in love with the Contessa?”

“No!” the Baron said. “I had no idea.”

“Do you think that the Contessa may have drugged Your Eminence with a love potion?”

“I can’t tell,” Skerlec said, in a half-whisper. “I suppose not.”

Krajačić ordered Mikica to usher Baba Urša into the room. She came in wrapped in a large shawl. She squinted an eye at the Judge and clicked her tongue waiting to be questioned.

“Did Nera Keglević ever come to see you for a love potion?”

“Your Eminent Grace, neither my hands nor my home ever dealt in any spell-casting. I am an old woman, I have suffered a lot in my time and people often come to me for advice. This is all. But one evening two young women and a man came to my home in search of a love potion. They were very aggressive and I tried to chase them out, when some young hooligans barged into my house and accused me of ill doing. They said I had given shelter to some villains. But I am an honest burgher woman, and they never found anything in my house to suggest otherwise. Notary Sale will attest to that, since he was the one who conducted the search. I found out later that one of the women who had come for the love potion was Countess Ratkay’s granddaughter.”

Skerlec looked at Baba Urša with surprise.

“And did she say who she needed it for?” Krajačić asked.

“For Baron Skerlec.”

When she uttered those words, the Baron felt thunderstruck. He jumped out of his chair and asked Baba Urša:

“Can you swear to this?”

“A hundred times over, Your Eminence. I swear on the living God that it was your name she spoke.”

Krajačić dismissed the old fortune teller, and then turned to Skerlec:

“Does Your Grace think that perhaps it’s possible the Contessa had used a love potion?”

Skerlec was pale and excited.

“Maybe,” he replied, and asked the Judge to excuse him. Krajačić granted him leave, and Skerlec departed. The Judge now turned to Count Vojkffy and asked him the same question. The Count replied:

“No, Hon. Judge! It’s true that I fell madly in love with the Contessa, but not because of a love potion. She doesn’t need such tricks—her eyes are much too beautiful for a man to be able to resist them.”

“That is precisely the magic, Hon. Count. You are still enthralled and enchanted by the love potion.”

“If you claim that beautiful eyes are a love potion, I can’t prove you wrong. But I will always claim that the Contessa is no witch,” the Count said.

Krajačić dismissed him hurriedly, since his answer displeased him. As the interviews progressed Siniša stood by the window, looking out onto the street. Krajačić finally called on him:

“Hon. Captain, I must ask you an important question. Do you remember that evening when we gathered at Countess Čikulini’s for dinner in honor of Contessa Nera? It was then that you, Hon. Captain, told us a story about an incident with a young witch in the woods by the crossroads. That witch had shot your arm and you said she was an elegant lady.”

“But, Hon. Judge, I was simply entertaining the crowd with a story about my dream.”

“Excuse me, dear Captain, but I don’t believe that it was a dream.”

“You are going to have to take my word for it.”

“Very well. If this was truly a dream, give me the name of the elegant lady you saw waiting for the witches in your dream.”

“It was your dear departed Baba!”

Siniša's tone convinced the Judge that the Captain was mocking him. This upset him tremendously:

“I am convinced that it was Contessa Nera and you are attempting to protect her.”

“Forgive me, but no one will force me to say whatever is convenient for them to hear. I tell it like it is.”

“Hon. Captain, I am conducting an investigation as Her Majesty's Judge and I beseech you to give me the name of the women you dreamt had come to the crossroads.”

“His Majesty's Officer has better things to do than to give you accounts of his dreams like some matron! It's dishonorable that you should even ask such a thing.”

“Fine, I'll tell you why I ask. The event you speak of happened on the night when Baron Skerlec found the Contessa at Countess Ratkay's serf's house, and he justifiably suspected that everything you spoke of was the truth, and that the lady was Contessa Nera herself.”

“It was neither her, nor any other.”

“I don't believe your honor...”

Siniša shouted at him, enraged:

“You have no right to judge my honor, Hon. Judge! I was first introduced to Contessa Nera that evening at Countess Čikulini's, and if you fail to write down precisely what I said in this testimony I will find a way to inform Vienna of the manner in which you conduct investigations around here.”

The minute Siniša mentioned Vienna, Krajačić rose from his chair and approached the Captain:



“Don’t be upset, Hon. Captain. I must be somewhat more tenacious as a Judge, but you can rest assured that your statement is treated with the utmost respect. Here—my secretary is writing it down as we speak.”

Siniša carefully read what Mikica had written, and then left the City Judge’s chamber.

### Chapter 35: The First Sign of Solace

Thick yellow brambles climbed over the mill not far from the Bloody Bridge, and stretched all the way up to the Stone Gate. It was dark under the Gate, with nothing but the light of the votive under the statue of the Mother of God to shine on the small space around the painting. Something moved in the corner, by Palačić's store. A quiet whisper travelled from wall to wall.

"Perhaps he won't come?"

"He will! This is the path he takes every night from Kaptol to Grič."

All was quiet, but for the votive by the Mother of God, which shivered as if it were afraid of the ghostly darkness. The sound of footsteps coming from Kaptol resonated under the Stone Gate. Someone was coming up to Grič.

"There he is!" a shadow whispered under the Stone Gate.

"Watch out!"

The steps approached and grew louder. A man entered the Stone Gate, breathing heavily and faltering a bit. He passed through the darkness that was thick under the heavy ceiling of the tower. He halted for a moment to look at the painting. Then he approached it, revealing his face in the light of the votive. It was Mikica Smernjak, unsteady from wine.

"Praise and honor unto you, Great Lady," he bowed to the Mother of God, just as two men jumped out in front of him. Mikica didn't run. He turned to stone and stared at them. All he could see were two masked heads, one dagger and a net purse full of shiny coins. It took him a while to notice that one man had pointed a dagger to his chest, while the other placed the bag

filled with the gold coins right under his nose. Mikica opened his eyes wide as his body started to shake. What was this? Was this reality, or an apparition? Was he so drunk that he was hallucinating?

“Not a peep out of you!” he heard a man whisper.

It was clear to him then that these were real man who meant him harm.

“Look! This is a dagger, and these are coins. What would you prefer, a dagger through the heart or coins in your pocket? Choose.”

Mikica was unable to answer, though he was quite sure of the choice he was about to make.

“I’d rather take the coins!”

“Then listen and answer me: is there a hearing in the tower today?”

“No.”

“Where are the lictors now?”

“At home, asleep.”

“And the guards?”

“Standing guard.”

“Can you go to the tower now?”

“Yes.”

“Then pay attention. I know you’re a scoundrel who will serve anyone who pays him.”

“How else would I survive? One has to work,” Mikica started to defend his honor once he realized he wasn’t going to be killed.

“Do you see this letter? You will deliver it to Contessa Nera.”

Mikica was too scared to reply.

“Do you refuse?” the man in the darkness asked.

“Do you mean to save her? That is impossible. The guards...”

“You won’t be required to do anything but deliver the letter. Look here, it’s written in French so you won’t be able to read it. Save yourself the trouble of opening it. When the Contessa reads it, you will give her some ink and paper for a reply. This is all. If you fail to do this or if you warn the guards of our plan, you are doomed. I am not here alone. There, in the corner, are three more men, and down by the gate hiding in the brambles are three more with loaded pistols at the ready.”

“Fine. I will deliver this letter to the Contessa and bring you her response.”

“If you fail to execute this properly or if you betray us, your days are numbered. My dagger will find you even at the altar. If you’re successful, you’ll get this purse / pouch / bag of money (kesa, not just any kind of bag).”

Mikica was sobered a bit by his fear and he understood perfectly what the stranger expected of him.

“After all, why shouldn’t I get the money?” he thought to himself. “There’s no harm in delivering a letter. What’s a letter?”

“Go! Be back in half an hour.”

Mikica went straight to the guardroom, where he found twice the usual number of guards. The supervisor himself was seated there, drinking and gambling with his men.

“Oho! What is this?” Mikica asked. “It’s like you’re guarding a sultan.”

“Krajačić ordered increased security because of that Countess,” the supervisor said. “And what are you doing here at this time of night?”

“The devil messed with my mind! I forgot my keys in the torture chamber today at the hearing, so I am locked out of my house. I had taken them out of my pocket and placed them on the table.”

“You’ve been to see Janica on Kaptol, right?”

“Ah, to hell with her. Open up,” he said to a guard, “and give me a candle.”

The supervisor didn’t object. Mikica was a trusted associate and no one would think of preventing him from entering the tower at any time of day or night. He went down the stairs, candle in hand, passing quickly through the cold hallway into the torture chamber. There he found Nera, who had been purposely left there to witness the tortures. As soon as Mikica entered, she lifted her head.

“Quiet,” Mikica whispered. “I have something for you, from a friend of yours. Swear that you won’t betray me.”

“If you’re delivering a message from a friend, I would be crazy to betray you.”

He felt that was reasonable, so he handed Nera the letter. The girl opened it, her heart beating fast. It was written in red blood, like the rest, except it was written in French, which surprised her. She started to read by the light of the candle that Mikica had brought in:

“Nera, await your freedom calmly! I can hear your desperate voice through the thick walls of the tower! I hear your pleas for freedom! I can’t hear anyone or anything else anymore, only you! Stay calm, Nera! Oršić has rushed off to Vienna to see the Queen, and the whole of Grič and everything alive in it will burn before they succeed in tying you to the stake!

From now on I will celebrate every villain in this world, because one of them has helped me reach out to you now! Wait for me—I will come.”

“Have you read it?” Mikica asked the Contessa.

“Yes.”

Mikica took some paper and a quill from the table he used to write down the witches’ testimonies.

“Wait, here’s some paper and a quill dipped in ink; that man wants an answer.”

“Have you seen him?”

“I have seen him, but I did not recognize him. He was masked.”

Nera lay the paper on the straw and took the quill. She wrote back in French:

“You have resurrected my hope in the midst of this terrible isolation! Thank you! Thank you. I will wait for you every moment, and every second.”

The Contessa dried the paper over the candle, folded it and gave it to Mikica. She couldn’t figure out how the stranger had got Mikica to deliver the letter to her. But the letter was truly his; that unknown man was the first to send her comfort and a sign that he was thinking of her freedom. She now felt twice as grateful to that man and wished to find out who he was. She had started to think that everyone had deserted her, since she could not understand why no one had signaled his support for her thus far. She now learned what had happened with Count Oršić, who had gone to Vienna to see the Queen. Lord, who was taking care of her grandmamma—her poor, beloved grandmamma? As she pondered her situation Mikica took a bunch of keys out of his pocket and, leaving the Contessa behind in the darkness, went up to the guardroom.

“Well, have you found your keys?” the supervisor asked him.

“Yes. The devil himself hid them to torture me at this time of night. I am tired, I can’t wait to get under my sheets.”

Mikica left the guardroom. He stood outside it for a bit to see if anyone would follow him, but the door remained closed. He then quickly descended to the Stone Gate. Two shadows moved under the painting of the Mother of God. One of the approached him and asked:

“Where’s the response?”

“Here it is.”

The man snatched the letter forcefully, went up to the votive under the Mother of God and peeked at it through his mask. His hands shook gently... When he had read Nera’s words, he folded the piece of paper and tucked it in his chest. Then he handed Mikica the silk purse.

“Here you go—you’ve earned it. Count it; you’ve never been paid this well before.”

“That’s the God’s truth.”

“Did she say anything else?”

“She asked me if I saw you. Nothing else.”

“How many guards are in the tower?”

“Six guards and a supervisor. They watch her like a Queen, you wouldn’t be able to save her!”

“You idiot! I wouldn’t think of it. Now go home, and if you ever babble about this you’d better bite your tongue because you might lose it.”

Mikica took the coins and climbed up to Grič satisfied. The two masked men stayed behind at the Stone Gate.

“Do you think we could bribe the guards?”

“Probably. But the supervisor?”

“All of those bastards dream of money like donkeys dream of hay. Let’s go.”

The two of them disappeared into the darkness.

Nera couldn't fall asleep. Dirty straw rustled under her, and she was used to lying on clean pillows embroidered in silk. Cobalt silk curtains draped over her bed fringed in white lace, and now she lay under a dark, damp ceiling from which water dripped down on her. But the excitement over the letter that Mikica had brought overpowered the stiff bed of dirty straw, the moldy air and the squeaking of the rats. Was it possible that she would ever see sunlight again? That she would breathe fresh air, and sleep once more in her silken bed?

How did her friend plan to free her from this terrible place? It seemed to her that deliverance was all but impossible. Still, she felt such a strong desire for freedom. She had lost all hope, and now this letter restored it to her. She spent the night listening to the squeaking of the rats and the flutter of a bat that wandered through the underground dungeon trying to find a way out. She found his eerie rustle echoing in the impenetrable darkness pleasant, because it disrupted the deadly silence that was more dreadful than the flight of the bat or the squeal of the rats...

She hid her unknown friend's letter in her bosom and felt as if she were no longer so terribly alone...She felt as if someone had spoken to her from that parchment to console and encourage her.

In the meantime, Countess Čikulini and her friend, the lady-in-waiting Auersperg, were engaged in a vivid discussion.

"Count Oršić is attempting to save her any way he can," Čikulini said. "Besides, I've noticed Ivo is downcast. He's still in love with her."

"Have patience. He will forget all about her soon."



The butler announced Mikica Smernjak, and the Countess received him in front of Countess Auersperg. Mikica gave the Countess a detailed account of what had happened the other day in the torture chamber, and what the witnesses had testified.

“Siniša defended her,” Countess Auersperg cried. “I had not hoped for that.” Her expression soured.

“Your Grace, I await further instructions,” Mikica said, having completed his report.

“Your task now is to make sure that the burghers know what a terrible witch she is. Here’s your first installment, and you’ll get the rest when I see results.”

The Countess gave him a few coins, and Mikica bowed and stepped out.

“Are you sure Oršić won’t be able to see the Queen?”

“I instructed the lady-in-waiting as to what she must do. She is reliable, and I am sure she will find a way to keep the Count from the Queen.”

In the meantime, Mikica went to see Priest Pulingar and asked him for some books about witches. He spent the day reading them, and then headed to Manduševac in the evening. The sun was setting and its blood-tinted glow dyed the little clouds that drifted across the horizon. Clear water filled the well and flowed over the stone spout. Burgher women came with their wooden bowls to fetch water. They descended the stairs, sat down on the stone benches around the well and leaned against the fence, gossiping about the town’s events and asking for the news. Soon a whole horde of women had gathered at the well. Baba Jana and Baba Urša were there, along with Andrija Palčič’s wife and the inquisitor Puncar’s wife. The only man among them was the bell ringer of Sv. Marko, Franjo Žajler. He was a famous town gossip, and in that he outperformed all the Grič produce vendors.

Mikica appeared to come down to the well inadvertently, and asked a young wife for a jug of water. As soon as the women saw him, they started to barrage him with questions about Countess Nera's whereabouts and the accusations against her.

"Yes, it is true!" Mikica said, forcing himself to drain the jug. Everyone stared at him.

"Is that not the beautiful granddaughter of Countess Ratkay? So she is a witch?"

"Yes, yes, she's the one" Mikica said with chagrin.

"Good, good," the old vendor Benkovička said maliciously. "Why should they only put poor witches in the tower, and free the well-to-do girls to live long and serve the devil in peace?"

"Why did she have to surrender her soul to the devil? Wasn't the old Ratkay's estate enough for her?"

"You're not using your brain, bell-ringer!" Mikica said. "The poor women become witches for the money, and the rich women become witches so that the devil would grant them all the power!"

"Lord, oh Lord, what a beautiful young Contessa—and for her to be a witch!" the women wondered.

"What did you think," Mikica said, "that the devil only chooses old hags? This Countess is a greater witch than all the ones we have burned up to now. The Contessa has all the powers that the devil himself has. The powers he wouldn't give any other witch, he gave to her. She turned her servants and her serfs into oxen and had them plough the fields."

The women grew silent. They had never heard of such a thing before, and the wondrous nature of it had them feeling defeated. But suddenly this helplessness turned to rage, and they started to curse Nera from the top of their lungs:

"Only aristocratic witches can do such things!" Benkovička said.

“Damned witch,” Jalža Puncer blazed. “We should roast her at the stake for three days straight.”

“We still don’t even know if they will burn her,” Mikica said, boasting. “The nobility will do all they can to rescue her.”

“What? To rescue her? Let’s see them dare interfere,” the women were fired up. “If you won’t burn her at the stake, we’ll burn their houses down. You can tell this to the City Judge.”

“If she’s not at the stake in eight days, we will turn against all the nobility, whether they deserve it or not,” the butcher woman Regina Suhar threatened.

“We sure will! None of the gentry will walk into a church again unless they build her a fire under the Mesnička tower.”

“We must conduct an investigation first,” Mikica said seriously. “The first hearing will be held before the court tomorrow. She will be questioned in the house adjoining the tower, since some of the noblemen might attempt to rescue her if we were to take her to the courthouse.”

“They won’t, they won’t,” the women shouted. “She will burn like the rest of them.”

“The laws apply to everyone equally!” Žajler yelled.

“Yes, yes, she never prayed,” Benkovička said. “I saw her at church. She never moved her lips. She would always look at the altar, but her lips were still. How could she have been praying?”

“She would go to church just to avoid suspicion.”

“I just remembered: when she was receiving her First Communion, I saw her bend down and place a kerchief on her mouth,” Puncerka said.

“She must have taken the Host out to give it to the devil!”

“And do you remember her riding past us that time right before the storm?” Benkovička asked Baba Jana.

“And what about the time when she died and came back to life?” Mikica asked Baba Jana.

The old woman frowned and started to tell the people how they had found a coffin with the Contessa in it in a ditch and how she had come out of it alive.

“No one can convince me that the devil didn’t have his fingers in this mess!” the bell ringer nodded his head.

“You’ll hear many more stories,” Mikica said. “I regret not being able to speak of it now, because the investigation is still ongoing. But I can tell you this much: she is solely responsible for all the evil that has come to Grič. The devil has had his witches on Grič for four hundred years now, but we have never seen the likes of her before.”

Mikica spoke to the Babe and the bell ringer for some time, and then he left. The Babe and the bell ringer followed suit and flew across Grič to share the news with all of their friends and acquaintances.

## Chapter 36: Before the Court

Nera's hearing before the Court was scheduled for early morning. Krajačić was frantically working to complete the process and deliver the guilty verdict against the Contessa as soon as possible. The hearing was to be held in the guardhouse by the tower. They had placed a long judges' table inside to accommodate them, as the crowds gathered outside in the Stone Street discussing the ill doings of the Countess witch. They raucously awaited her confession.

At ten a.m. Judge Krajačić, Senator Brajdić, City Notary Sale, Judge Babić and four witnesses entered the room. They agreed to address Nera as an aristocrat to avoid the nobility's complaints, and then they took their seats. The supervisor went to the tower and a few moments later, opened the iron door behind which stood Nera. Her hair was tangled and in disarray, her silk dress was muddy and wrinkled, her face was pale and her hands were chained. She stood before the judges' table calmly, looking at the gentlemen. These men used to bow to her grandmother. Now they had chained the hands they used to kiss with respect.

The first question came from the Senator.

“What is your name?”

“Nera Keglević.”

“Have you received a court summon?”

“I have not. The City Judge used a blatant lie to get me into the tower. He did not have the courage to call me to court as the law demands.”

Krajačić looked angrily at the Senator, wishing he had skipped that question. Her answer put the senator in an awkward position, but he disregarded it and continues:

“Do you know why you stand before us now?”

“Because human reason has been crippled and you have trampled over the laws.”

The answer agitated the gentlemen. But they continued:

“Do you know who accused you?”

“No, so I ask you to tell me who accuses me and what of?”

“This court does is not required to answer that.”

“So, this court won’t give me a chance to defend myself? And you call this a court? This is criminal!”

“I am warning you to stay calm and answer only with a ‘yes’ or a ‘no.’”

“You invited me here to accuse myself, not to defend myself?”

“We invited you here so you would tell us what you were doing one night and on a Tuesday, in the woods at the cross roads, when you charged at Captain Siniša with a loaded pistol.”

She was taken aback by this question. “Could it be that that man brought such a terrible accusation against me?” she thought. The hatred that she felt for the Captain and that she had all but forgotten about arose again in the depth of her soul.

“I had ridden out for a walk, like I do every day,” she responded.

“And why was the entire region of Sljeme engulfed by a storm that evening?” the Senator asked.

“Only the Lord can answer that!”

“Why did the fire burn out and the ashes fly across the room in the hut of your serf that gave you shelter that night?”

“Because the wind hit the fireplace through the opening in the roof.”

“Why didn’t you kneel down and cross yourself as your serfs did the evening when thunder struck?”

“I am not afraid of the wind or thunder. Only superstitious fools fear the wind and thunder.”

“How come your grandmother lost consciousness one day with no prior warning, fell ill and lost her mind?”

“That wasn’t my fault.”

“Have you dabbled in medicine?”

“I attempted to cure one disease only, and it’s name is: stupidity! As far as I can see, I have failed.”

“So, then, you admit to it,” the Senator noted and continued: “Why did you go to Baba Urša’s one evening to look for a love potion, and who did you plan on using it on?”

“That was just an excuse to investigate that woman’s house.”

“So, you admit to it as well!”

“And I would like to call on two witnesses, Francesco and Count Čikulini, to vouch for me.”

The Judge did not write down the witnesses’ names and everyone ignored this part of her testimony.

“Do you admit to being a witch, as well as the Lady Captain of the witch’s coven?”

“Witches don’t exist, and they never did. You’re the ones who create them, and your pockets know the reason why.”

The judges were fuming, and ordered heavy chains to be placed on the accused hands and feet. Nera withstood the weight, though it was almost unbearable.

“You are shackling the truth, but you cannot shackle the mind. Some day people will come to see that all of this was nothing but lies and illusions. And your children will be ashamed of the mistakes you had made,” she told them.

The gentlemen were so livid they jumped out of their chairs. No one could keep calm, and some of them even took out their amulets so that the witch wouldn’t be able to cast a curse on them.

“Get her on the torture devices!” all of them shouted at once.

The supervisor pulled Nera to the tower so forcefully that she almost fell on the stairs. The court immediately summoned the Council Commissioner Dvojković and asked him to pen the warrant for Nera’s torture. Two hours after the hearing, Council Commissioner Dvojković submitted the following warrant:

“The accused Contessa Nera Keglević has been charged of witchcraft based on indisputable testimonies, but she insists on her innocence without offering any legal or coherent argument in her defense or in support of her claim that she had been unlawfully arrested and imprisoned. She cannot be exonerated of the kind of serious and grave crimes that she is accused of based simply on her denial of guilt, which further incriminates her since the laws of this kingdom do not allow for non-admission of guilt to serve as evidence. Further evidence of her guilt included: the accusations of other accused women made of their own free will as well as under torture, to include assertions of her keeping company with the witches, causing harm to



people, cattle and crops, creating hail and other inclement weather and finally, of making a revolting pact with the devil who in turn bestowed great powers onto her. Therefore, she should be immediately convicted and burned solely based on these facts, but in the service of the law and for the purpose of learning about her other evildoing and to reveal the names of her accomplices, I hereby request and demand that she be tortured according to our laws.

Blaž Dvojković, legal representative of the city of Grič, m.s.”

The Judges waited for the warrant in the City Hall. As soon as it reached them, they agreed to it unanimously and scheduled Nera’s torture at the city torture chambers to begin at two o’clock in the morning the following day. When Dvojković returned to his residence he told Vojkffy about what had happened, and concluded:

“There’s nothing I can do for you now, my occupation demands that I act a certain way. If there is anything you can do for Nera, do it. I will help you as much as I can without compromising my position as representative of the law. The public can’t see me break the law or they will cry out for me to step down, but I can do whatever you wish on the sly. The law itself is mute.”

### Chapter 37: On the Sava

Little Sanda tiptoed carefully and stealthily, closing all the doors that led to her room. Then she took a small pink lantern and placed it on the table by the window, walked to the second window, opened it and peeked into the garden. It was dark and quiet outside.

Sanda leaned out the window and listened, then drew back into the room and waited, looking at the painting of her deceased mother that hung above the great divan. She sighed a few times and went to the window again. She could hear footsteps in the garden, soft and cautious. A man extended his arm through the window, and Sanda silently handed him a key. Then she quickly closed the windows, lowered the curtains and opened the door.

A dark-complexioned young man with wistful eyes stood on the threshold. He walked up to Sanda silently, took both of her hands and kissed them with ardor.

“Sanda, have you been thinking of me?”

“You know that, Francesco...”

“My darling, my sweetheart.”

The young man looked devotedly at the girl who appeared child-like in her blonde curls and white dress.

“Where are the others?”

“Here they come right now.”

Count Čikulini, the Remetins and finally Father Smole quietly tiptoed in. They stole into the room, greeted Sanda in a whisper and sat at the table like conspirators preparing for a grand deed. Everyone was serious and determined, only Father Smole seemed weighed down by the

situation. His hair, which until recently was peppered with gray, was now completely ashen: he looked old and defeated. Everyone sat quietly, without saying a word, when they suddenly heard firm and resolute steps in the hallway. The young people lifted their heads and stared at the door, which opened as Tito came in. Everyone moved toward the incomer.

“What happened?”

“I made it!”

Everyone’s face cheered up, and the young people grew restless.

“Was it hard?” several voices asked.

“It was very easy. After Nera’s hearing I went to the City Hall to see my father. The judges had been deliberating and had decided to torture Nera at dawn tomorrow.”

Sanda squealed quietly, her eyes filling with tears.

“And then? Then what happened?” Čikulini asked impatiently.

“I sat down with my father and told him this: even though you conducted this hearing, many still refuse to believe that Nera is a witch. This time, the burghers don’t support your actions.”

“Unfortunately, they do,” Sanda said. “The servants tell me awful things about Nera.”

“I know,” Tito interrupted her, “but I convinced father that a faction of them are Nera’s staunch defenders. I said to him: ‘This party is trying to turn the people and the court against you. You are my father so I advise you to secure your position.’”

“My old man stared at me with fear and concern.

“‘Yes,’ I said to him, ‘I know many who don’t believe the Contessa is a witch and I must admit that the lady-in-waiting Auersperg’s circles already gossip of her innocence and the illegal manner in which you incarcerated her.’”

“You should have seen my father’s face! The poor man turned pale and fretted in his seat.

“‘I will prove to them that she is a witch,’ he threatened.

“‘I have an idea,’ I said.

“He looked me questioningly.

“‘It is no longer customary to take the witches to Sava, but this would be the best proof of all. Do this on the sly. Before you torture her, take her to Sava and submit her to trial by water.’

“The old man looked at me wide-eyed.

“‘You know how everyone used to believe in this proof! If the accused woman sinks, then she is lost, since everyone will know that she is a true witch. If you do this today, you will convince all the doubting Thomas’s that Nera is indeed a witch.’

“The old man stared at me for a while and then said:

“‘You would have me do this tonight, before we start the torture?’

“‘Of course,’ I said. ‘She will surely sink and tomorrow the people will hear about it, and everyone who doubts you now and claims Nera’s innocence will be silenced.’

“The old man grabbed my hand excitedly. I was so uncomfortable with this deception at that moment, but I knew that we are trying to save an innocent life, so I was firm.

“‘Help me arrange this,’ my father asked. ‘Find someone reliable who knows how to do it.’”

“You are an excellent trickster,” Francesco said to the young Krajačić.

“I don’t deserve such praise! My unfortunate father is so gullible, you can get him to do anything. This is the only reason I managed to persuade him to go along with our plan.”

“What’s the time?”

“It just turned nine.”

“Wonderful. We have some time to arrange everything.”

“When will Nera be brought to Sava?”

“At eleven tonight. The moon won’t be out yet, so we’ll have an easier time of it.”

“Tell me, what is the meaning of this trial by water?” Sanda asked. “I am worried about Nera.”

“There’s no need to worry. It used to be customary to take witches to Sava, tie them onto a plank and suspended it with a rope, then lower it down into the water. If the accused woman sank, the world was convinced that she was a witch.”

“They will lower her into the water? Of course she will sink!”

“Don’t be afraid,” Tito consoled her. “We arranged this just to get Nera out of the tower. Once she sees the clear skies, she won’t be taken back to the tower again.”

“God willing,” Sanda said softly, “but I am so anxious.”

“Go to bed and wait to get word from me that Nera is in Slavetić.”

“You have arranged for a sanctuary for her at Oršić’s estate?”

“Yes. Francesco was there earlier today and he made the necessary arrangements.”

“Then hurry. I am developing a fever over this,” Sanda said.

“And now, lads, let’s go to Sava,” Tito called to them.

Father Smole was the first to leave. He never said a word, and appeared to be in a daze ever since this misfortune had befallen Nera. He approved of the young people’s plans and he supported them, but he was always silent and in a kind of stupor. The young people followed him out the door, walking out as silently and stealthily as they had come in.

Francesco gave his fiancée a warm kiss on the hand, and was the last to leave. Sanda closed the door behind them and stood there, listening to their retreating footsteps as they faded away.

Sava glistened in the dark of the night, rushing down the wide valley that resonated with its pleasant ripple. Four men lay on the sandy shore under the tower. They were sprawled on their stomachs, but they were not asleep; they were waiting in ambush. Suddenly they heard a rustle of leaves by the hedges that grew on the shoreline. They lifted their heads to see a man step forth wearing a long black cloak:

“Vivant Remetins!”

When they heard the greeting, the young men jumped to their feet.

“What is it?”

“They have just taken Nera out of the tower and into a coach.”

“How did she seem?”

“Silent and apathetic. I was unable to send word to her; they did not let Father Smole see her.”

“Shall we?”

“Let’s go. It’s time.”

The four men in serf clothes and hoods that covered their heads followed the man who came in a black cloak. They went up the coast in silence and quickly reached the wooden bridge propped up by thick poles.

“Is the raft ready?”

“Everything is as arranged.”

The strange villagers disappeared under the dark bridge, and the fifth one in the black cloak walked to the road that led from Zagreb. He stood waiting calmly for some time, when he heard the rattle of the coach from afar. Then he gathered his cloak and walked to the bridge. When the coach arrived at the bridge, Krajačić, Sale, and the little Judge Babić exited it. Another coach came to a halt behind them and Nera stepped out followed by two guards. Everyone went to the bridge. The two guards carried torches.

“You’re here already, Tito?” the City Judge asked.

“Yes!”

Nera stared at her friend Tito with surprise. He approached her and gave her hand a squeeze. Nera realized that she didn’t have a full grasp of the evolving situation, but she suspected that whatever was about to happen would be in her favor. The guards grabbed Nera and leaned her against a plank that was fitted with cuffs for hands and feet; they almost crucified her on it. Then they hung her from a thick rope and lowered her over the bridge railing down into Sava.

“Someone should go down there to see if she sinks,” Sale said.

“It’s alright, there is a man down there in a dinghy,” Tito responded.

Nera saw that she was being lowered into the deep, cold darkness. She felt a void under and around her, as if she were levitating. Cold, wet air circulated around her body, and the further they lowered her the colder she grew. Then she saw the rushing Sava under her, and felt the water droplets from Sava’s waves spray her face.

She thought she saw enormous, long arms reach for her like dragons out of the deep darkness. Then those arms grabbed her and she felt their touch, as well as the firm ground under her feet and the whisper of familiar voices. She realized now that she was on a raft. Two hands

cut the rope that lowered her, and hung a heavy weight on it instead. Then the raft took off on the rushing stream. Nera felt herself propelled into the distance with people surrounding her, covering her with shawls and whispering softly:

“You’re with us again, Nera, you are free now!”

She made no response. As she lay on the raft she stared at the darkness through which cold drops of Sava splashed and dampened her face. The Remetins freed Nera from the plank and removed her hands and feet from the iron cuffs as the raft floated downstream speedily and smoothly. They heard shouting and a racket coming from the bridge upstream; the torches moved and flew through the darkness. The guards were running, followed by curses, arguments and commotion.

Nera’s friends, Francesco and Stiller, were on the raft with her.

“For God’s sake, I feel as if I am dreaming!” Nera said.

“Thank God it’s not a dream!” Francesco said. “We will disembark shortly. Čikulini awaits us on a prearranged spot with our friends, and then we’ll head straight to Slavetić where we will hide you in Count Petar’s castle. Tito came up with this plan.”

“Tito?” Nera thought to herself. And she remembered the letter she had received in the dungeon.

The night was dark and cold. Sava rushed as if she were also in a hurry to take the raft to its destination. Nera was saved, and as the dark shadows of the shoreline brush passed them by she folded her hands and whispered quietly:

“I felt that someone would save me!...I was not afraid of death, but the torture! That was terrible.”

Just as Nera and the Remetins exchanged a few words, they grew restless and stood up:



“Here we are, at our destination! Do you see that red light? That’s Čikulini.”

They halted the raft dexterously and then helped Nera onto the sand. Up on the riverbank several people stood around the red lantern. Nera and her friends walked up the river to meet several people whose faces were indiscernible in the dark.

“Čikulini!” Francesco called.

Instead of a reply, two strong arms grabbed him from the back. He jolted and attempted to free himself when he saw two guards take hold of Nera and drag her just as some men seized the remaining three of his friends who had disembarked from the raft. For a few moments they stared at the men who had captured them and who had tied them up in the blink of an eye. They had carried weapons, but were so unprepared to be greeted by anyone other than their friends that there were utterly confused by this development.

Čikulini and his friends were not there. These were Notary Sale’s men that awaited their arrival.

“What is the meaning of this?” Francesco thought to himself. “Only treason could have caused us to be captured by Sale’s men in this way. The traitor must have been one of the Remetins. No one else knew about their plan, the arranged meeting place or the red lantern. The young man was disheartened. “So, there was a traitor among them? Where was Čikulini?” They knew that the young Count was in love with Nera, and they also suspected that Tito loved her. Could it be that jealousy was the cause of this treason?

As these thoughts plagued Francesco, Sale’s men ushered the students onto the coach. The guards were already escorting Nera to Grič to that terrible tower where she was to be tortured that very night. Nera was overcome with despair when the guards closed the door of the terrible tower at the Stone Gate behind her. It took her a while to grasp how she had fallen back

into the guards' hands. When she started to think about it, she realized it must have been treason. But who could have betrayed Tito's clever plan? The City Judge's son tried to snatch her away with the Remetins.

"Tito?" Nera thought. "Could he be her unknown friend who had announced her freedom and would have succeeded in his plan had he not been betrayed by a heartless traitor? If it was Tito, he wouldn't back down now. Perhaps he will still rescue me," Nera hoped. "He knows of his father's ideas, and he knows what the judge planned to do with her."

Nera remembered that she was to be tortured that very night, and was terrified by that thought. She recalled the torture devices that she had seen and she shivered. God, there is no saving her now! Early hours of the night passed; they will torture her at two o'clock in the morning. She now understood that the Remetins had tried to avoid this by rescuing her tonight.

"Will they really torture me? If they crucify me on those devices, I am lost. My spirit might be able to withstand it, but my body won't. They won't hear a peep out of me, but they will mutilate my body. It would be better if they burned me at the stake at once," Nera thought.

A cold sweat poured from her body. The very thought of having her body maimed in an hour or two filled her with greater horror than the thought of death itself. If only she knew what time it was! She listened to the world around her with fear. She kept thinking that the lictors would show at the door at any moment with their sleeves rolled up and their faces twisted into evil grins.

But everything was quiet, only the sigh of a witch who was tortured the night before reached her from time to time through the darkness. She lifted her head up to the bars through which the moon cast its shiny, silvery light.

“How near this light is,” Nera sighed. “This means that the moon has risen. Two o’clock is about to strike, and there is no help in sight.” Nera threw herself onto the straw. The rats that had hid there squealed and dispersed. She didn’t fear them anymore: the terrible torture devices hovered over her now.

Hours passed. She could hear voices outside the dungeon door. The time for her torture drew nearer...

### Chapter 38: Rafael the Saint

The moon sailed high up in the sky, shining down on all of Grič except for Benetička Street, onto which the protruding roofs of houses cast a dark shadow. A tall man in a leather cape sneaked in that shadow past the houses. His head was covered by a hood that he drew down to his nose. His steps were slow and he was careful to advance, constantly looking around to check if he had been seen. He halted in front of a small wood shack, leaned his head to the window and knocked: once—twice.

No one stirred inside. The man knocked for a third time. A few moments later the window opened, and a dark shadow peeked from under the thick curtain.

“Who is this?” the voice from the window asked.

“A man who is in need of your help,” the voice under the window replied.

“Serf or gentleman?”

“I have as much gold as you require.”

“Hold on, I will open the gate for you!”

The man drew his hood down further and wrapped his cape around himself more carefully. The wooden door opened and the night visitor came in. A small, withered man led him through the wooden foyer into a room. A small lantern on the ceiling cast some light on the scantily furnished little space: a small desk stood in the middle with a cross on it, a clay bowl filled with holy water and a sprig of green leaves. A straw bed was in one corner, with a chair next to it on which stood a pitcher of water. The rest of the room was empty but for the holy

paintings that were pasted on the walls so that none of the original finish was visible. These paintings made a strange impression in such a bare space.

The caped man looked around the room and then at his host, who looked like a midget in comparison to himself. Small, withered, with a pointy head and sharp facial features, very shrewd eyes and a long blonde beard, he looked like a church saint. It was only his nose, unusually long and hooked like a Jew's, that looked as if it mocked his holy face.

“What do you want?” he asked the visitor.

“Are you Rafael, the man who is considered a saint and whose words everyone believes as if they were scripture?”

“Yes, I am—this is God's will.”

“I must tell you in advance that I don't believe in your prophecies or visions.”

“Then why are you here?”

“You will still be able to help me with your holy trade.”

“If you don't believe in God and the holy power that he grants his servant, I can't help you.”

The man in the cape reached into his pocket, took out a bag of coins and threw it on the table in such a way that the room reverberated with their jingling.

“But you also believe in this God,” the man in the cape laughed, pointing at the coins.

The small man's face gaped, and his shrewd eyes cast glances that bounced off the coins like those of a voracious animal.

“Listen here, Rafael. You might wish to feign offense at my words, but the glow of the coins tickles your soul. You don't have to pretend before me—I am familiar with your holiness and your prophecies.”

“What are you saying, sir?” Rafael asked, confused.

“I am telling you what I know.”

“How would you know this, even if it were true? My life is a riddle.”

“Not for me,” the caped man laughed, and proceeded in a harsher tone: “Come, come, I don’t have time for this, I am in a rush. Let’s sit down and talk straightforwardly.”

The stranger sat down on the table covered with coins, and Rafael sat on the only chair in the room, which he had drawn closer to the stranger.

“Listen, Rafael,” the stranger said, crossing his legs. “Don’t think your nose is your only incongruous telltale. The two of us have met before.”

Rafael grew pale and asked:

“What do you mean by this? Tell me at once! Will you betray me to the world?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, it suits me well that the people trust you.”

“Sir, don’t think of me as a common conman,” Rafael started to apologize. “I am simply a man who has some more intelligence than the rest, and I am cashing it in. One day I prophesied to my landlady that she would have a good harvest, which is an easy thing to do. The day after they announced to the town that I was some supernatural creature. When I saw the extent to which people would believe all sorts of prophecies, I started a business. This is all quite mundane; a person needs boots so he goes to the shoemaker, the world wants mass and they need a priest, the people are looking for superstition so they have me, the saint Rafael. Since they need me, I must exist for them. Whatever people want is the commodity that will be traded, and I am selling a product that’s in demand. It’s clear as day,” Rafael concluded with a sly smile.

“That’s right,” the stranger confirmed, pounding the table with his fist so that the coins skipped across it again, clinking before the ‘saint’s’ titillated eyes. “I need some of your holy

goods—immediately. If you do as I say, these coins will be but a down payment, and if you fail, I will hang your holiness on Savska road gallows. Why are you looking at me like that? You'd like to know who I am?"

"Your voice is familiar, but your hood hides your face too well."

"Don't worry about my identity, worry about fulfilling my request."

"Then speak, Sir," Rafael said quietly.

"You are familiar with the City Judge Krajačić; he consults with you often."

"He asks for my advice in conducting his judicial duties."

"Excellent!" the stranger cried, jumping off the table.

Rafael turned pale with fear, and the caped man smiled maliciously, crossed his arms and said:

"Listen, Rafael. You have never sold your holiness as profitably as you are about to sell it to me now. You will get so much gold that you will be able to wed the beautiful Sida who at one point stole your holy heart."

Rafael quivered and stared fearfully at the stranger who seemed to effortlessly peck through his innermost secrets.

"Calm down," the stranger said, "but absorb this information well. Judge Krajačić bows to your holiness. Your prophecy is his scripture, you're the man writing the law for him to execute."

"Such is the Lord's will," Rafael crossed his arms over his chest.

"Save that nonsense for Krajačić. Go to him right now, look for him no matter where he is, do you understand me?"

"I understand."

“If he’s in bed, get him from under the covers, if he’s in the witches’ tower, get in there by force or by the power of the cross if you must, praying or cursing, no matter how, but make sure you speak to Krajačić within the next fifteen minutes.”

“Don’t worry, I can reach him in the confession booth if I need to.”

“When you see Krajačić, your honorable holiness must turn into the holiest of shrines. You will convince Krajačić that Nera Keglević, the witch imprisoned in the tower, is different from all the other witches. The devil made her so that she would never admit to anything under torture. Tell him that there is only one way to get her to admit to all the witchcraft she had done, namely: she has to be sentenced to death without torture and sent to burn at the stake. Once there, they must pray the litanies that I had brought here for you. When that’s over, her power will be broken and she will admit to everything. Tell him that the Virgin Mary came to you in a vision and gave you these litanies and advice. She will admit to her witchcraft, and all kinds of other misdeeds the likes of which the world had never heard of before.”

“I don’t know what your intentions are, but I understand what you want of me.”

“You don’t need to know anything other than the fact that you’ll be getting twice the sum of coins that you see on this table; but only if Krajačić does as I say. It’s almost one o’clock in the morning, and they are planning to torture her at two o’clock. You must accomplish your mission by then. Watch out: Nera Keglević must not be tortured.”

“I understand,” Rafael said. “Where shall we meet?”

“At the Stone Gate, before the Mother of God’s statue at three o’clock in the morning.”

“Alright,” Rafael said. “I’ll go straight away.”

“Make sure you’re punctual, or you might lose a holy rib or two.”



The stranger exited the room and went into the yard, and Rafael opened the gate for him that led onto the street. Once there, he pressed his body against the fence and looked around: the street was deserted, but for the moonshine that shivered across the walls and roofs of the houses.

The stranger walked down the street quietly. He passed uphill through Benetačka Street, turned into Opatička and walked down onto the road that led from Grič onto Kaptol. It was deserted, not a soul in sight. Tall acacia trees cast a wide shadow onto the green by the road. The stranger sat down. Grič and Kaptol lay before him, covered in a silver veil of moonlight. He turned his face to the Stone Gate tower. It seemed as if all of Grič was at peace, succumbed to magical slumber in the silent moonlight; but from that one tower, sighs pierced the night.

The caped stranger rose suddenly and started to pace the green. He kept glancing at the moon the way serfs glance at the sun to tell time. Then he walked down the street again to the stone Gate, took shelter under the shadows of the trees and stared at the black tower, lit by moonlight. Darkness peered through the bars on its windows, suggesting awful happenings on the inside. The stranger grew more restless by the minute. He kept walking back up to the acacias, throwing himself onto the green, staring at the world before him and then rising again, pacing the street, pulling the hood over his face. It was as if he feared the moon would recognize him.

### Chapter 39: A Message from Heaven

Everything was ready in the torture room. The judicial representatives had taken their places, and clerk Mikica was already holding a quill in his hand, self-importantly eyeing the gentlemen jurors: senator Babić, Notary Sale and Judge Krajačić. In the back of the room the lictors were gulping down some old wine that Krajačić had sent them to energize them for the torture session. Everyone felt somewhat unusual, as if expecting to witness a torture more interesting than the ones they had seen before. Everyone had an expectation that the lictors would have to put in a lot of effort to get the strong, firm Contessa onto the torture devices. Judge Krajačić couldn't wait to see the despised witch brought in. He reminded the gentlemen jurors several times to liberally sprinkle themselves with holy water and to take their škapulars out from under their vests so that the witch wouldn't curse them. Finally the lictors set up the wheels, prepared the Spanish boots, dragged the wooden horse from the corner to the center of the room and placed the thumbscrews on the wooden desk. Krajačić signaled, and two guards went to the dungeon to get Nera.

She was still lying on the straw. She had lost all hope. The Remetins were unable to save her, and word that the Queen would free her did not come true either. The guards opened the iron gate and walked into the dungeon.

“Get up!” the guard shouted.

Nera arose.

“Why should I fight them?” she thought to herself. “It is all over now, anyway. Let them do with me as they wish. Perhaps I have enough strength to resist them, and perhaps I will die.”

She followed the guards through the dark, moldy hallway and walked calmly across the torture chamber's threshold. She looked around the room and knew at once why the judges were seated there, why Mikica was present, why the torture devices were prepared and why the lictors and the inquisitor had pulled up their sleeves. Judge Krajačić told Nera to step into the middle of the room. One of the guards spread a white raincoat before her, and Judge Krajačić asked:

“Is this your raincoat?”

“Yes,” Nera replied.

“Do you admit to wearing this raincoat when you visited the tower under the Stone Gate and killed a newborn there? Do you admit to being the white witch that we had been searching for in vain?”

“What do you want from me?” Nera screamed. “Why ask me these questions when we all know it is futile for me to try to defend myself?”

“But you had also embroidered this hood for your lover, the devil,” Senator Babić said, showing her the hood that Filip had stripped off the attackers who tried to enter Nera's castle one night.

Nera observed those pieces of evidence with apathy. Had she been faced with a jury of reasonable people, she would have told them about the course of events that led to her ownership of that hood, and she would have explained to them why she wore the white raincoat on her visits to the tower. But every word would be in vain before this jury. Why should she defend herself when they had already sentenced her to burn at the stake?

“To the torture devices!” the jurors shouted, almost unanimously.

“Lictors, prepare the fire pliers!” Krajačić screamed, enraged.

“Take your clothes off,” the inquisitor commanded Nera.

“Never!” Nera yelled.

“Grab her,” the inquisitor commanded the lictors, “two by the legs, two by the head, and lay her on the ground.”

As they pulled her to and fro, her unbraided hair was unpinned and it fell down her shoulders, covering her naked body.

Everyone was astounded at the gorgeous ashen-blond hair that hid most of the girl’s strikingly beautiful body from their gaze.

“How come her hair fell down like that all of a sudden!?” Krajačić asked his neighbor in a whisper.

Mikica arose from his desk, approached Krajačić and warned him:

“Your Grace, it is my honor to warn you of this hair. If you recall, the Contessa always wore in braided in a way that no other noblewoman does these days. Old books say that the devil always grants long hair to his favorite witches, because this is the easiest place for him to hide. Furthermore, Your Grace should just look at the color of her hair: have you ever seen anything like it on any other of our women?”

“Yes, she has some sort of ashen hair!” Krajačić whispered, staring at Nera.

“Yes, it’s ashen, and Your Grace knows that the witches always meddle with the hearth and the ashes, and they also pour ashes over other people’s homes: it is the witches’ seal. It’s odd that she in particular should have ashen hair.”

Krajačić looked at Mikica gratefully and whispered to himself:

“Yes, yes, this is true! I should have realized this long ago! The Lady Captain of the witches, of course, would have to have ashen hair.”

Then he turned to the inquisitor and said:

“Cut off her hair and throw it into the fire.”

Nera was startled and she took a step forward.

“What has my hair got to do with this?” she yelled at Krajačić.

“You carry the devil in your hair! There, he covered you in it so we wouldn’t be able to see your naked body.”

“I had no idea the devil was so shy,” Nera said with loathing. “Gentlemen—“ she turned to the rest of the company “—can it be that you are all as blind as this man here, and that you all share this madman’s views?”

Everything was silent for a moment. But the jurors cut her off soon enough, protesting.

In the meantime, Krajačić arose and recited a prepared speech:

“Since the accused Nera Keglević refuses to admit voluntarily to the accusations that were brought forth against her, namely: that she has made a pact with the devil and committed evil deeds against people, crops and cattle, I hereby order her to be tortured immediately.”

Nera gritted her teeth, and felt cold shivers run down her body.

“So, the moment has come!” Nera said in a voice that cut through to the heart. “No one can help me now. Before me stand senseless jurors, a ruthless inquisitor and his lictors are behind me, and we are surrounded by thick walls as black as hell itself! Not a sound will penetrate these thick, stone walls and no one will hear my cries. They will tear up my young body, they will crush me alive, and fry living flesh with their torches. They will mutilate me, and Nera Keglević will disappear. Nothing will be left of her but a pile of flesh and broken bones. But you won’t hear that which you are looking for come out of my mouth. I will never admit to a falsehood just to stop the torture. I tell you once more: I am not a witch, because there are no

such things as witches. There are only evil people and idiotic judges! And now do with me what you will. I will be silent, suffer and die.”

For a few moments everyone was impressed by Nera’s words. Then Krajačić waved for the inquisitor to bring the thumbscrews. As everyone’s’ astonishment, Nera held out both of her hands to the thumbscrews. The judges looked at each other, and Krajačić whispered:

“This is a sign that the power of the devil is making her insensitive to suffering!”

Then he commanded the inquisitor loudly:

“Thumbscrews will be of no use here, it would be best to put her on the wheel immediately.”

The lictors grabbed Nera and started to tie her onto the wheel when something thundered through the tower. It sounded as if thunder broke from clear skies; everyone was taken aback. They had barely composed themselves when they heard it again. Everyone was startled.

“Get the holy water,” Krajačić whispered. “That was the voice of Satan trying to scare us.”

Mikica jumped to get the holy water that stood on his desk, and handed it to Krajačić. He and the rest of the judges started to drench themselves in it and cross their chests. A loud rumble reverberated across the thick walls for a third time.

“Don’t be afraid,” Krajačić heartened them feverishly. “Get to work, inquisitor. Let’s call on God to help us withstand the threatening devil.”

At that moment the guard ran up to the door and, out of breath, announced to Krajačić:

“Your Grace, the holy man is under the tower. He is banging on the door and wishes to speak with the City Judge immediately.”

Krajačić arose quickly.

“Gentlemen, this must be an important matter if the holy man came for me here,” he said.

“I will be right back.”

“And should we continue in the meantime?” the inquisitor asked the judge.

“Let’s not do that, Your Grace!” Sale advised. “We can’t conduct such an important hearing and torture without you. We will wait.”

The representatives agreed, and Krajačić ordered the inquisitor not to do anything until his return. Nera stared before her almost unconscious, while the representatives gathered to discuss the nature of the news that the holy man Rafael had come to convey.

Krajačić entered the guardhouse by the tower in which Rafael was waiting. He was bareheaded, wearing a white shirt with a sheep’s skin tied over it. He had sandals on his feet, and he carried a staff. His long blonde beard, handsomely groomed, reached down to the middle of his chest, while his long hair, with somewhat of a red tint and very curly, fell over his shoulders. A cross carved out of common wood hung on his chest. He stood there gazing at the ground, as if he were lost in meditation. The whiteness of his robe reflected ghostlike against the dark walls of the guardhouse.

“Saint, what are you doing here at this time of night?” Krajačić asked with the sort of deference that he failed to show anyone else in the world.

The ‘saint’ lifted his hand and his gaze and replied in a ceremonial, prophetic voice:

“I bring you word from heaven, judge of the sinners!”

“I am humbled to hear the Lord’s message!”

“The Lord knows that you have dedicated your life to purging the world of the devil and his servants. You have put yourself in danger to save the world from the cursed women who

mingle with the devil in a conspiracy against the Lord. But no matter how wise you are, I have advised you how to proceed with the witches many times before.”

“And you gave me good advice!”

“My advice is word from the heavens. Listen to me, Judge. You never had a witch such as Countess Ratkay’s granddaughter in your power before. She is a witch above all others, and without her the devil wouldn’t be able to keep his company on Grič. She is the Queen of the witches, because the power of hell is embodied in her. You must destroy her.”

“I will,” Krajačić said.

“But how?” Rafael asked, raising his voice.

“We put her on trial just like any other.”

“Do you truly believe that you can destroy the Queen of the witches in the same way that you have dealt with any other witch before her?”

“We sentenced her to torture.”

“Do you think that the Queen of the witches who harbors all the hell power would admit to her evil-doing in torture? Mark my words, Judge. Cut her up alive, crush every little bone in her body, but she will stay silent. You won’t hear anything from her.”

Krajačić’s face turned pale, and his lips whispered unwittingly:

“For God’s sake, she said herself that we could do what we wish with her, but that she wouldn’t admit to any crime. You are right, saint. You know everything.”

“Yes, and I also know that she has so much power that the devil will kill her during torture just so she would stay silent. And then how will you prove to the world that she was not wrongly incarcerated? You must get her confession, so that you won’t be accused of wrongly



convicting her and of murdering her in court. You know she is an aristocrat. So you have to be careful.”

“So what should we do, saint? How should we proceed? I can see now why she is silent and why she cold-bloodedly offered her hands for the thumbscrews. She knew that the devil would save her from torture. What can I do?”

“I will give you some advice. This is no ordinary advice, Judge, but word from Heaven!” Rafael said, raising his arms to heaven. “As I was saying my prayers tonight, the Virgin Mary came to me and said:

“Hear me, Grič hill saint! If you wish to do a good deed for your burghers, hurry to Judge Krajačić and say to him: ‘The Countess witch must not be tortured, because the devil would take her life immediately and she would die without a confession, at which point the aristocrats would storm the court and accuse it of torturing an innocent women. This would destroy your reputation, Judge, and if you hold it dear you can’t let Nera die without a confession. If you torture her, the devil will kill her first.’”

“Oh Lord, thank you for sending the saint!”

“Listen carefully. The Contessa will confess to her evildoings if you face her with a burning stake.”

“How can I put her on the stake before the conviction? I can only sentence her to burn once she has confessed to her crimes.”

“If you prepare any stake at Zvezdišće and bring her before it, and if you start praying this litany here with the judges, the devil will forsake you and she will throw herself to her knees before you and confess her crimes for the whole world to see: the kind of crimes a Grič ear never

heard before. The Holy Virgin gave me these litanies, blessed me and vanished. I ran straight to your house where they told me you were in the tower—so here I am.”

“Thank Sv. Marko you got here in time.”

“So, what will you do?” Rafael asked the Judge.

“Kušenka confessed to everything so I will hold a hearing and deliver the death verdict tomorrow. After five o’clock in the afternoon we will take her to Zvezdišće, and we’ll bring Nera Keglević along. As soon as we light Kušenka’s stake, I will tell Nera that it is meant for her and we will start to pray the litanies. This way, she will confess to her crimes before the Grič burghers, and everyone will see that I was right to call her a witch.”

“You are wise,” the ‘saint’ said, “and you came up with a good plan! I will come myself to hear her confession and to celebrate the discovery of the principal of all Grič witches with you. Just make sure your men don’t torture the Contessa on their own accord! They’ll resent you for not going through with the torture because of the fees involved.”

“That is true, I will take care of it. How can I repay you for your troubles, saint Rafael?”

“It’s alright, God will give me my reward!”

“Your timing was pure providence.”

“It was God’s will!” Rafael said, lifting his hand to the sky again. He took the cross that hung on his chest and let Krajačić kiss it, after which the Judge bowed deeply before the ‘saint.’

“The Lord sent you to me, saint, and may the Lord protect you!”

Rafael lifted up his head and exited the guardhouse with dignity. Krajačić went back to the torture chamber. He halted at the threshold looking very pleased with himself and commanded:

“The accused should be taken back to prison immediately. We shall continue with the torture another time. Something important has happened and I must request the judicial representatives to go home and await my summons.”

When he noticed Puncer’s irate face, Krajačić whispered to him:

“You can submit an invoice for yourself, the lictors and Mikica, too, as if the torture had taken place.”

No one understood Krajačić’s orders, but everyone did as they were told. The guards took Nera back to the dungeon. When they brought her back to her small, narrow chamber, they followed Krajačić’s orders and gave her some bread and a piece of cheese though she had only had bread and water before. At that point the City Judge locked Nera’s dungeon chamber himself and took the key with him, leaving Nera in complete bewilderment as to what had happened and why they had stopped the torture.

When Rafael left the guardhouse, he found the street to be deserted and empty. He walked down to the Stone Gate; it was dark, but he could still see the man in the dark cape standing before the statue of the Mother of God. The man came up to him and asked:

“Did they torture her?”

“No,” Rafael replied. “They had just hung her by her hair, but the Judge heeded my advice and had her taken down immediately. No other torture device touched her body.”

“And the stake?”

“Tomorrow at five o’clock in the afternoon they will light a stake for Kušenka at Zvezdišće, and they will take the Contessa there for her to see its flames and confess to her crimes.”

At that point the judicial representatives, along with Mikica and Puncer the inquisitor who got permission to leave, exited the courthouse.

“There, you see, they are leaving,” the saint whispered. “I must hide quickly.”

“Alright,” the stranger said quietly. “Tomorrow at three o’clock in the afternoon, once I am sure that you have done what I asked, one of my men will come to you with a bag of coins. Just so you know it came from me, the man will say that the money is ‘for the Grič witch.’ Goodbye now! I might still have reason to look you up in the future.”

The stranger left Rafael, who was not entirely pleased at not having received the money already. But he had to admit that the stranger had the right to assure himself that the job had been done well. Rafael started down Grič streets toward his house. In his white robes aglow with moonlight he seemed like a ghost that had just descended from heaven.

A man in a long, dark cape crept by the tower at the Stone Gate. He walked quietly casting an occasional glance at the iron bars, and his steps grew increasingly more agitated and unpredictable. He would stroll away from the tower one minute, then return the next, and then he would lean against the thick wall and raise his head to the bars as if he were restless. As if something were torturing him, pushing him and taunting him so that he couldn’t stay put.

The moon serenely sailed westward. Nera lay on the straw completely shattered, her hands clenched, staring at the moonlight as if she felt in its silver rays the proximity of a friend who stood there, under the tower, staring up at the bars of her dungeon.

## Chapter 40: A Terrible Day on Grič

Grič was in the grip of feverish excitement since the early morning hours. News of the impending burning at five o'clock that afternoon of the terrible witch Jelica Kušenka spread from Grič to Kaptol to Mesnička and to Stone Gate. But Grič was even more animated by the news that Mikica spread through the town: that the greatest witch of Grič, the Contessa Nera Keglević, would witness the burning. The Judge had given the order seeing as how the hardened witch kept refusing to admit to her ill doings.

The agitated mob that had spent the past eight days discussing nothing but Nera, the terrible witch, was overjoyed to hear the news. There was a commotion among the produce vendors at Marko's square because the burger women did not come there to shop, but to stand in front of the Magistrate's office and eagerly await Mikica's arrival. When he came, all self-important and burdened with files, everyone rushed to him and barraged him with questions:

"How will they arrange the proceedings? What is going to happen? Will they drive the Countess or will she walk? What will she wear and who will escort her?" and a hundred other questions. No one asked about Jelica Kušenka; she had vanished from the burghers' collective imagination. Everyone talked of nothing but Countess Nera who would be made to walk through a crowd of hundreds of people to escort a witch she had once sheltered to the stake. The people filled the space from the Magistrate's office all the way to the Stone Gate. They passed from Marko's square to the 'Red Castle,' peering curiously at the deserted castle where the unfortunate Countess Ratkay lay senseless, ignorant of what was to happen to her granddaughter.

Here and there an aristocrat's carriage would ride through, filled with members of the nobility who were leaving town. The people whispered after them:

“Look, look, aren't they running away so they won't have to watch one of their own walk to Zvezdišće?”

Count Vojkffy, Notary Sale, Council Commissioner Dvojković and Priest Pulinger met in front of Marko's church and engaged in a heated discussion. The passers-by started to observe them curiously, mingling close by in order to hear some of the conversation. Shortly after that Captain Siniša and Lieutenant Branko arrived at the square. The female vendors stared at the captain, whispering:

“My God, look how tall he is! Like St. Kralj tower! God have mercy on the man who falls into his hands.”

The Captain passed the group that included Count Vojkffy and responded to their greetings in a curt, military manner. The place was so crowded that one could barely move. A coach raced into Marko's square from Plebanuška Street. Lady in waiting Auersperg, Countess Čikulini and Baron Ivo Skerlec sat inside. When they noticed Siniša, they halted the coach and invited him over.

“Come with us,” Countess Čikulini said, “we are going to Šestine. We won't stay in Grič this afternoon.”

“Join us,” the lady in waiting asked, as Skerlec looked down in apparent embarrassment.

“I will,” Siniša replied. “My soldiers will keep the peace at the witch burning today, so I have to stay for a while to give instructions to my lieutenant, and I'll follow you right after that.”

The ladies cheerfully bid him farewell, and Countess Čikulini, who was seated opposite Skerlec, smiled happily as the coach sped on. Siniša went to the Magistrate's office . No one

seemed to have done any work that day due to the feverish excitement and anticipation that gripped Grič. Everyone waited impatiently for the clock to strike noon, when the Countess witch was due to walk out into the streets.

Nera was not aware of any of this. Her soul was riddled with questions about what had happened and what was to come, but there was no way for her to find an answer. She could plainly tell that something was afoot, because they had brought in some warm food and a slice of bread for her before noon, along with a simple, burgher patterned white robe sewn in durable cloth. They also gave her a comb to brush her hair. This filled her with a premonition of things to come: “Is it death at the stake?” she wondered.

None of the Grič burghers stayed home that afternoon—everyone dispersed around town. The town serfs built a stake at Zvezdišće under Mesnička tower as the mob shoved around them, observing the proceedings. They told hundreds of different tales about the witch they would see at the stake that day, and the pleasure they would get at the pain she would feel watching her friend being burned alive. Others lined the streets starting at Mesnička Gate all the way to Capuchin Square and the ‘Red Castle.’ Its once adored owner would today be forced to walk this way as a despised prisoner, a reviled witch. Just a few weeks ago they had thrown parties and feasts in her honor, and the world had gathered around her castle to catch a glimpse of the celebrated aristocratic debutante. And today they gathered to watch her humiliated, loathed and forsaken.

People also gathered in front of the Capuchins’ Church, and down the rest of the streets the witch procession was to pass. The biggest crowd was in front of Marko’s Square, and people couldn’t move from St. Uršula chapel to the painting of the Mother of God at the Stone Gate. They were crammed like sardines, and Andrija Palčić and Barica Cindek’s stores were jam-

packed like bazaars. It was even worse in the street at the Stone Gate, from the St. Uršula chapel to the guardhouse that led to the tower.

The mob did not consist only of burgher women in brown skirts and cobalt kerchiefs, but of those in silk dresses as well, their hair braided and pinned up with gold barrettes. On the other side of the street worn out *šubaras*<sup>111</sup> peeked through and mingled with black and flamboyant coven hats of proud artisans, as well as the white wigs of the town gentlemen, the tricornered and an occasional nobleman's cap. A horde of curious maids, tradesmen, apprentices and vendors charged the streets. The masses kept looking at the tower. The sundial showed that the judicial representatives were about to exit the tower with the witches soon. The people passed the time by gossiping about Nera's involvement in any conceivable evil act they could think of. The stories that Mikica had told the women at Manduševac and the witness testimonies that people made before the judge spread like wildfire, and as word travelled, malicious people added such monstrosities that the townsfolk grew agitated, and in the minds of the people who considered her their own personal enemy Nera Keglević's name became the most disgusting word couched in vitriolic hatred. They hated her all the more not only for being a terrible witch who destroyed people's lives and poor men's crops and cattle, but for being a Countess to boot. And as the crowd waited for her to appear, packed tight from the stake Zvezdišće to the tower at the Stone Gate, they spoke of nothing else but the terrible things she had done.

The magistrate's gentlemen paraded out a few minutes before the tower dial showed five o'clock. Lieutenant Branko followed them on horseback, leading the Slavonian battalion. Everyone looked at their navy surkas with their shiny buttons: the army had never before witnessed a witch burning, so the crowd was now even more convinced that this exception was due to the terrible nature of Nera, the witch the likes of which the world had never seen before.

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<sup>111</sup> *Šubara* is a cylindrical folk winter hat made out of lamb wool.



The Trenk men divided the crowd into two sections, keeping the peace. Notary Sale came over dressed in black velvet and wearing a white wig.

“Aren’t Count Vjokffy and Dvojković here yet?” Senator Babić asked Sale.

“No, I don’t know where they are.”

“What about the young people? Are they not here either? Are they protesting?”

“They’re still locked up at the City Hall. You’re surely aware of the stunt they pulled two days ago!” Sale snapped at the Senator and moved forward.

Suddenly, the door to the guardroom opened. The masses undulated like the sea ravaged by a furious gale. The guards stepped forward first, followed by the lictors and the inquisitor Matija Puncer, who walked behind them proudly and collectedly. The witches came out after him. Jelica Kušenka was the first to come out, slowly, limping. Her face was gray and green, her eyes dimmed and sunken, her body was tortured and she had hidden one of her hands under her apron. Her pale, miserable, battered face didn’t move the crowd—they did not feel sorry for her. The people were consumed by ill will and malicious delight. Some of the braver ones started to shout:

“Limping, are you? Did you break your legs flying on the broom?”

“Why are you hiding your hand? Are you trying to cast a spell?”

Kušenka lifted her hand up to the people, showing her fingers that were almost completely crushed. But even then, she found no compassion.

“Why didn’t the devil help you?”

“Why didn’t he have his fingers crushed instead of yours?”

“You gave your body and soul to the devil! Shame on you! You bitch!” the women shouted.

“You witched with the Countess. You were lusting after the aristocratic devil!”

“Now, now, they’ll roast him out of you in no time!”

Jelica kept silent, her eyes downcast and her head bowed. Suddenly someone in the crowd screamed. Two women held on to a man who had lost consciousness. It was Pavao Galović, the nun convent gardener. He had come to see Jelica, whom he had accused so terribly. But once he saw her beaten body, he fainted. The people started to shout harshly:

“She took revenge on him. She cursed him.”

“Strike at her!”

Everyone grew rowdy. The mass of people surged to the cart behind which Kušenka stood. All the Trenk men kept the people back, withholding the threatening curses of the angered mob.

Marija Vugrinec was the second witch to come out. She stepped forward determinedly, strong, unbreakable and agile, as if her nerves were made out of steel. Her fingers were crushed by the thumbscrews, but it appeared as if she paid them no notice.

The yellow cart in which the witches were to be transported stood on the road in front of the guardhouse. The mob pushed toward them, but Lieutenant Branko gave orders for his soldiers to hold the people back. He stayed by the cart himself, protecting Kušenka and Vugrinčeva against the mob’s harassment. The witches who stood by the bullock cart were exposed to a barrage of admonishment, swearwords and curses. The guards ordered Kušenka to get in the cart first, but she was so injured that she was not able to do it. The people looked on and mocked her:

“Call on the devil to help you!”

“He helped you make hail, he should help you now!”

They forgot all about Kušenka in a minute; Nera showed up at the door of the guardhouse in a long white robe that resembled a shirt, and her hair down per Krajačić's order, so that Grič could see the Queen witch's hair. Her big black eyes were emphasized by the paleness of her face coupled with the dark circles under them. She stared straight through the mob, as if asking them:

“Could it be that you've all gone insane? That you believe us to be witches, and that I committed evil deeds?”

But her gaze fell on the people like a spark into hot oil.

“She stares at us with no shame!”

“She isn't even trying to avoid us!”

“No shame, the devil's concubine!”

“Look at her hair! She dusted them with ashes from hell's furnace!”

The others grimaced at her, their faces filled with rage and their eyes clouded with hatred.

“You sent hail and winds,” Nera's former gateman shouted resoundingly, “whip up the wind now and fly away!”

“Transform into an owl and fly if you can!”

“Where's your devil and his help now? Huh?” a vendor woman yelled, foaming at the mouth.

“Heal Kušenka now like you did my cursed daughter!” screamed the daughter-in-law of the villager Miško, Countess Ratkay's serf.

“Where's the bastard you conceived with the devil?”

“She strangled it and planted it under the Stone Gate!”

“Damned poisoner!”

“Piece of devil’s shit!”

“She poisoned the old Countess!”

“Here’s your horse!” an apprentice shouted, throwing a broom at her. “Mount it and fly away!”

“How would you like some fancy braided bread now?” the baker woman Palčić yelled, casting a livid glance at Barica Cindek who had pressed her lips together and watched the beautiful, humiliated Contessa with sympathy. In the meantime, Kušenka struggled to climb on the cart, and Mara Vugrinec stood behind her, waiting. Nera was last in line.

The city gentlemen and judicial representatives mutely observed the bitterness of the masses. Father Smole, his face pale and decrepit, his hair grayed, stood to the side and stooped like an old man. Nera did not even notice him; she was so bewildered by the screams of the mob. He was allowed to hear Kušenka’s confession, and after he had done that, he was to escort her to the stake. He kept trying to meet Nera’s eye, but failed. Notary Sale circulated around the witches, too. He found a moment to approach Nera without being noticed and to whisper:

“Stay calm, not everything is lost yet!”

Nera was very surprised by these words, but her face remained composed. She watched the people charge at her incensed, hissing poison at her from their unsheathed stingers:

“You still haven’t had enough?” men and women shouted.

“She’s still looking at us shamelessly!”

“You are the devil’s hideosity!”

“A toad from the hell swamp!”

“Shame on you, you aristocratic beast!”

“May three hundred of the Lord’s arrows blow you away!”

“Into the flames with her!”

“Why does nobility wait? Why aren’t they burning her today?” some young men shouted, their voices already hoarse.

“Because noblemen went to Vienna to beg the Queen to have mercy on her,” a shoemaker’s apprentice shouted. “That’s why she raised her head so brazenly! That’s why she does not hang her head in shame!”

His words fell like flames onto a dry stack of wood. Some started to shout demanding that the judges burn Nera at once, and others inched closer to her. But the Slavonian soldiers kept the incensed people at bay. Some berated the soldiers, while others tried to convince them not to defend such a monster, but the soldiers heeded Lieutenant Branko’s command and encircled Nera, pushing them back. The City Judge reveled in the crowd’s rage. Sale signaled for Mikica to hurry getting the witches onto the cart. Father Smole tried in vain to approach Nera and protect her like a living shield, but she stood there unflinching, pale and resolute, her head held high and ready to die.

“Look, God’s people! She raised her head up even more!”

“Someone throw a rock at her muzzle.”

“Let’s tear up her dishonored body!”

“Let’s kill the witch!”

“Let her die here like a dog.”

“You will bathe in your own blood!”

Men and women shoved and pushed forward, trying to reach the witch. The kerchiefs fell off their heads and the men lost their šubare as sweat dripped down their frenzied faces. The mob shook their fists and threatened with clubs, and a few of the rocks that flew through the air hit

Nera across her chest, her head and her shoulders. Her eyes flashed and she yelled an angry retort at them, but no one heard what it was she had said.

At that moment a hundred desperate screams shook the air from behind the tower's mob. The people were ravaged by the horror that struck above St. Uršula's chapel. Some huddled into an immobilized ball, some started to run, and some fainted on the roadways with horror and dread. A maddened black stallion raced down hill over their bodies. Its eyes were ablaze, and its jaws foamed. A terrible rider sat on it: red from head to toe, as if red skin grew over his body. His neck, face and head were red too, and a long red horn protruded on the top of his head. The red skin only gave way to two eye slits, through which two fiery, threatening, terrible eyes surged like scorching embers.

As if he sprouted from hell itself he sprinted over the crowd straight down the road to the Stone Gate. The people screamed, pushed forward, fell to their knees, covered their eyes; the ladies fainted, the young people heedlessly ran away, and the elders crossed themselves. One apprentice lost consciousness while trying to run away, and was trampled under the horse that charged forward as if aided by the wind.

The terrible rider reached the witches. He reigned in the horse that reared by the scared Contessa, and then he grabbed Nera under her arms with one calculated swoop and pulled her hastily onto his horse. Then he kept riding over everything that was in his way, sprinting under the Stone Gate and disappearing like a flash of lightning before the eyes of the crowd.

A cry dried on the multitude's lips, breath halted in their lungs. They stood there mutely, terrified, frozen, as if an arrow had just whipped past their faces. They were shaken to their bones by the sight that they had just witnessed.

They had just seen the devil right there, before their very eyes! The very devil that they had heard about and talked about on a daily basis. No one doubted that the man was Satan. That wild stallion could have only come from hell. That terrible rider, with his long red arms and legs, his red head and his red cape that fluttered in the wind like wings, could only have been the very real devil. This is what the devil looks like! This is how the witches described him, too. He was dressed in red or green, but mostly red! So, this devil was red, just as they had always imagined!”

At first the people were more impressed by his appearance than by the kidnapping. They had heard so much about the devil who gives the witches supernatural powers! They knew since childhood that he is dressed in red, that his eyes are terrible and that he drives the witches in a fiery stallion four-in-hand.

And now, here, they had seen the devil in broad daylight, in the middle of the street, passing them like a bullet on a fierce steed. Yes, he bent down, grabbed his Lady Captain, pulled her onto his horse and sped away. He went back to hell in the blink of an eye. This scene played out before their eyes like a vision—a dream. But it wasn’t a dream.

--There—the witch was gone!

Everyone stared in vain at the place where she had stood. Kušenka was the only one in the cart, almost unconscious, and Marija Vugrinec was the only woman standing by the cart. The Queen of the witches had disappeared; the unholy one had snatched her and saved her from the stake. Now the crowd started to come to and realize what had happened. Now they started to move. They looked at each other as if asking:

“Have you seen this?”

Their souls suffered this ordeal in the course of a few moments, and they found that they could still hear the clumping of the demonic stallion's hooves on the road over the city walls. Finally, the low murmur of the judicial representatives and the lictors was heard, and then of the people as well. They were snapping out of their delirium. They realized what had happened: the people, the judicial representatives, the lictors, the guards, and even the agile Trenk men were scared to witness the appearance of the devil. No one even thought about stopping him from kidnapping the witch!

As they came to this realization, the people eased back into their former state of mind. Their hatred toward Nera flared up, and even doubled. They now felt that the accusations against Nera were blatantly true, so they were twice as incensed and they raised their fists and their clubs and shouted even harder, threatening and cursing at the place where they last saw Nera.

“The devil kidnapped his Lady Captain!”

“Go after him, people” inquisitor Puncer shouted.

“You go and chase him!” a tailor barked at him.

“Why didn't you guard the witch better?”

“Jesus!” the Judge cried, “God have mercy, the devil fooled the holy Mother of God! Who dares to chase after the devil?”

Lieutenant Branko suddenly shouted to the judicial representatives:

“I will go after the devil! Boys, charge!”

And the Trenk men rode out the Stone Gate, a cloud of dust trailing after them. The people were not appeased.

“The Trenk cops won't catch the devil.”

“Why did they let him kidnap the witch?!” the burghers screamed.



“We were also surprised and unprepared!” Mikica defended his men. “Even if Trenk himself were here, he would be powerless! Who could have expected this?”

The people accepted Mikica’s opinion, and directed their rage at Kušenka and Vugrinčeva, who sat on the yellow cart scared and astounded.

Judge Krajačić deliberated with the judicial representatives and gave an order to the supervisor:

“Take both of the witches back to the tower!”

“Your Grace, please,” the inquisitor reminded the Judge, “the stake has been set up, and the wood will burn out and be wasted, not to mention that I’ll have to continue to feed Kušenka at the city’s expense. We can’t sell her anything.”

“This is not the time to take her to the stake. This embarrassing ordeal is enough for the day. Lock the witches in the tower and double the guards!” the Judge ordered the supervisor. The judicial representatives tried to get away as soon as possible, in fear of retribution for allowing the devil to snatch the witch so easily. They heard the following screams: “why don’t you take the witches to the stake in chains, why weren’t they protected by armed guards or lictors, why were they allowed to stand alone and board the cart without an escort?” In a few moments, Judge Krajačić and the judicial representatives disappeared and the lictors hurriedly escorted the witches back to the tower.

“Oh, Lord,” Krajačić sighed, “perhaps I misunderstood the saint. We should have prayed the litanies immediately—we surely should have prayed the litanies on the way to the stake!”

At first, the people didn’t notice the witches being taken away, but when they did, the tower was already closed and the gentlemen and Mikica had disappeared.

This angered the mob. They went up to the Magistrate's office and started to protest, shout and demand that Kušenka be burned at the stake immediately.

"You should be ashamed of yourselves! You're scared of the devil! To the stake with Kušenka!" the crowd yelled.

Mikica was the only one who dared leave the Magistrate's office and who tried to reason with them, explaining that they would first send guards to retrieve the witch, and that they would burn Kušenka another day.

"Aren't you ashamed that the devil stole a witch right in front of the court's nose!" a burgher yelled. "This had never happened before!"

"In broad daylight! What kind of damned guards are these?"

"We lived through plague and famine, but we never saw the unholy devil ride down our streets before."

"Is the Judge to blame for that?" Mikica retorted, his arms flapping in the air. "Is Krajačić to blame for this damned Countess witch's presence in Grič? None of this would have happened if she weren't around."

"It's true!" several women shouted.

"That's right," people affirmed.

"That Countess witch, damn her blood! Why didn't the devil save the other witches?"

"Now she'll continue to kill our cattle," the shoemaker's apprentice was enraged.

"And she'll pour hail over our hills like chaff," a fat-headed apprentice said.

"Watch out. She'll turn into an owl this very night and fly into her castle to concoct a misfortune for us," Mikica said.

About a hundred people looked up at the 'Red Castle,' which appeared red and emblazed as if engulfed in the flames of sunset. The hatred that simmered in the crowd and the rage that seeped from it reflected in their gaze and was directed at the castle.

"She won't be mistress of that hall anymore," several young men shouted rabidly.

"The devil hides in every little thing that the witch has held in her hands, and every thread that she has worn on her body," the fat blacksmith hollered.

"Every inch of this castle is the nest of the devil," another added.

"She won't be witching here anymore!" the young, women and the elderly shouted.

"Let's tear down the witch's home!" a voice was heard, and a hundred others answered:

"Let's tear it down!"

As if a hurricane, the mob arose toward the castle. They teemed like a volcano ready to erupt. In a few moments, the hatred and rage surged like boiling, devastating lava, destroying unmercifully, nonsensically, rabidly, irrationally. The 'Red Castle's' windows burst, the doors were broken down, the fence was torn. Axes flashed as if they had been arranged eagerly in anticipation of the incensed mob.

"Burn the witch! Burn the nest!" a hundred voices yelled.

"The Judge won't do it, so we must fire the stake."

"Let the owl's nest burn."

"Pass the straw!"

"Get the embers!"

And someone's hat was enflamed in no time; its owner threw it through a broken window into the castle. Then people came carrying straw they had gathered in the Countess' granary, and everyone started to light straw torches and throw them into the castle. The servants began to

scream, run and hide, leaving behind all their belongings. Countess Ratkay's gray haired old servant showed up at a window, begging the crowd with his hands crossed:

“People, be merciful! The old Countess is bedridden; she suffered a stroke and can't run. Have mercy!”

“Huh, she should burn in place of the young one!”

“Quickly, quickly—it's God's will.”

“Let the old witch burn.”

“If you carry her out, well throw you both into the flames,” the people shouted.

Flames hid the loyal old servant's gray head and started to rise and engulf the entire castle with frightening speed. It was as if the castle's walls were eager to burn down: it looked like a terrible stake. All the silks, the gold, the valuables and the riches that once adorned the ‘Red Castle’ were now devoured by the greedy flames in front of the crowd that felt at peace and satisfied with the turn of events. Their awful hatred toward the Countess witch was now appeased to an extent. Suddenly someone screamed in the horde around the burning castle:

“People! Where is Countess Ratkay?”

The people turned and saw the great District-Prefect of Zagreb, Count Krsto Oršić. They responded with a malicious snicker.

“She's frying at the stake in place of the young witch,” a vendor woman yelled.

Krsto Oršić surveyed the situation and realized that it would be unwise to argue with the wild mob. He sent his men to reach the castle from the back, through the vineyard, but the back of the castle burned even more fiercely than the street-side. There was no question of saving anyone at that point.

“What will my Petar say?!” Krsto wailed to himself and covered his face with his hands. He couldn’t stand the sight of the fiery flames in which the old Countess was dying, while he was helpless to save her. The sky darkened as night set in, and the news spread triumphantly through Grič:

“The ‘Red Castle’ is on fire!”

Everyone rushed to Grič from Kaptol, Bukovac and Trnje to watch the terrible embers. The crowd encircled the castle, laughed and shouted cruelly:

“The devil’s nest burns like dried resin!”

“Let her Grace the witch Countess come now!”

“The tower is collapsing!”

“Ha-ha-ha, the devils roll around the embers.”

And with that, the beautiful, charming tower built out of carved wood that flames had gnawed through collapsed onto the fireside, along with the castle’s roof, and to the wild cheers of the crowd. The night came down, and the fire blazed even brighter. Clouds gathered on the horizon. A wind started from Sljemen, pushed against the burning planks and raised a multitude of sparks, toying with them over the crowd’s heads and carrying them further, to Mesnička Street. The ‘Red Castle’ burned and flickered, and the wind intensified, blowing the sparks across Grič...

“Holy Christ! Mesnička Street is on fire!” someone cried desperately.

A butcher’s cry stirred up the mob, and everyone who lived there ran to see what was happening. And truly! Flames burned in Mesnička Street on three straw roofs, threatening to engulf the neighboring houses.

“Oh no, my home is on fire—my home!” the wife of Cestar the butcher screamed and collapsed. She never rose again; the fear caused her to have a stroke...

“The witch took her revenge” the women screamed breathless, heated and sweating from all the screaming and raging.

“That’s right. Now we reap what we sowed,” a burger cried, running from Mesnička Street. “All the butcher shops will burn down.”

“The witch put fire on them!”

“The witch wants to kill us all!”

“Why did they let her escape? It’s the gentlemen’s fault.”

The angered mob started to raise their fists and threaten the witch, the judges, the lictors, the Magistrate’s office and all the gentlemen, blaming the devil for kidnaping the witch who now had the chance to take her revenge and burn their houses down.

Nera’s rich and beautiful home, the famous and proud ‘Red Castle’ turned into a bloody sea of embers and sparks, and the mob rushed around electrified, cursing the girl and threatening a terrible vengeance.

## Chapter 41: The Red Horseman

The clapping of horse hooves resounded through St. Žaver valley. The red horseman flew like an arrow, holding Nera in front of him. Whoever saw him was petrified and ran or fell to the ground, praying and crossing. Nera felt as if she were flying. Trees raced before her eyes like shadows, the air whistled in her ears and the setting sun flickered before her eyes. She tried to sit up, but the red man had pinned her down with his right arm. He had lifted her head up several times to make her more comfortable, and she felt the rise and fall of his broad chest, and the beating of his heart. She was overcome with fear and anxiety.

Who was this red man? Why had he kidnapped her and where was he taking her? Those two questions consumed her and filled her with growing fear. She tried to move, but he held her close with his plier-like grip, pinning her to the horse.

The lictors had tied her arms behind her back, so she was incapable of resisting or freeing herself. She turned her head back to try to guess the direction in which they were riding, when she saw the Trenk men about two hundred feet away, chasing them. Lieutenant Branko led his troops, frantically spurring his white stallion. "They're chasing us," Nera cried to herself, and stopped looking backward. Then she noticed another horseman following the Trenk men, but this one was not dressed in a uniform. She was shocked to recognize her servant Filip, and, stunned, felt her body stiffen.

They had crossed the entire Žaver valley when the red horseman turned to Sljemen. Nera was gripped by anxiety, but she was hopeful that she was being saved. When they reached a pass between two hills, Nera noticed one of the Trenk men halt his horse and turn back. What was

that? Why did they stop? Why didn't Filip try to catch up with them? Only the red horseman pushed his black stallion with the same ferocity. Nera looked up at her kidnapper. Two fiery eyes blazed under the red skin, and gave her goose bumps. Then she made up her mind and asked:

“For God's sake, where are we going? Who are you?”

But the red horseman made no reply. Instead, he intensified his hold on her and spurred his horse to run faster. If he was a friend of hers, why was he silent? Nera was overcome by anguish. The horse leaped over fields, meadows and babbling brooks that descended down the hills, and then he turned down a narrow pass. She could see the blue tops of the mountain in the dusk. Cold air whooshed around them as the horse increased its speed, as if he couldn't wait to reach his destination. Suddenly Nera saw her grandmother's castle rise in the forest clearing in front of her.

“What's this?” she wondered. “Did this wild horseman and his stallion mean to take her here? Or was this a coincidence?” She was still reeling with surprise when the horse jumped over the fence and stood in the expansive yard under the tree crowns. A man ran out from the castle and took hold of the horse, which was biting its reigns and breathing heavily. The man didn't express surprise at seeing the odd horseman there with Nera. It was as if he had been expecting them. The red horseman took hold of the girl and lowered her slowly and carefully off the horse.

Nera felt weak, and summoned all her strength to try and stand firmly on the ground. No one said a word as the kidnapper got off the horse and untied her hands. Nera suddenly felt dizzy. Everything she had lived through—the past eight terrible days in the tower, earlier in front of the mob and then the kidnapping—shook her strong body to the core, and she almost collapsed. The red horseman caught her, lifted her with ease as if she were but a little girl, and carried her into the castle. He went up to the first floor and carried her into a grand, spacious



room that was lit by a beautiful lamp and pleasantly decorated. He laid her down on the divan and covered her with a throw he had grabbed off the table in an attempt to warm her up. However, Nera's fainting spell was transient. She opened her eyes, arose and looked around. She saw the man in red standing before her, tall, striking and broad chested. "Who was this man?! Was he the one who had sent word about her rescue, the one who had written those love letters—was this the man himself or a paid hand, a friend or a helper?"

"Why did you bring me here?" she asked, exhausted.

"Would you have preferred to be burned at the stake?" he asked in a mysterious near whisper. Nera was startled—she had heard this voice before... that voice, with its mysterious tremor. Yes, she had heard it before. Nera arose abruptly and asked:

"Who are you? If you are a knight, show your face!"

He lifted his hands, unbuttoned the leather mask and threw it to the ground. The red horseman stood before her without his mask. Nera's gaze stopped at his face, and she gasped, words stuck in her throat. It was only in her mind that she managed to cry out in fear: "Siniša? Captain Siniša?!..."

It was completely clear to her now where she had heard his husky voice before—it was the night that she met him in the woods and was forced to shoot at him. Now that she saw who her kidnapper was, the old hatred rekindled in her soul. She forgot that this man had just saved her from a tragic end, whether of his own initiative or under someone else's orders, and she burst at him:

"I would appreciate it if you had let the mob kill me or Krajačić burn me at the stake!"

Siniša bowed as if he were engaged in a salon tête-à-tête and said:

“If I had only known, I would not have disturbed Your Grace. I was certain that you wouldn’t object to being rescued from the stake.”

“Yes, but not by you!”

“Yes, Your Grace. Certainly, Baron Skerlec should have done it, but he didn’t, and I thought anyone would be indifferent to the identity of the man who were to save her from death.”

“There are worse things than death.”

“Well, then, forgive me. But it can’t be helped now, Your Grace! You are now forced to stay alive, but that’s not even the worst of it!”

The girl’s anger, hatred and loathing toward the Captain grew; all she wanted to do at that moment was to insult him. She approached Siniša and asked sternly, staring him down:

“Who sent you? Speak honestly, if you have any respect for the military honors you’ve been awarded.”

“Captain Siniša!”

“So you did it of your own free will?”

“Please forgive my audacity. You were so intent on dying, and I went ahead...”

“I waited for someone else to rescue me. Now tell me: what made you do it?”

Siniša’s face remained firm and cold.

“With pleasure,” he responded chivalrously, in a nonchalant tone of voice. “I adore adventures, and I particularly enjoyed this one. Besides, I did a good deed. I figured: why let Krajačić burn his stake with such pretty fuel as you, and I am sure that the many handsome cavaliers who pine for you will be grateful. So I decided to get to work, and over the past five days my soldiers acted as my seamstresses. We sewed this red outfit in the manner in which people depict the devil! You can imagine my euphoria when I burst into the crowd dressed like

that. I knew that everyone, from the apprentices to the judges, would be so scared that kidnapping you would be a piece of cake. The mob would fight the soldiers to death, but everyone was afraid of the devil—no one even chased after him. And so everything worked out exactly as I had envisioned it. Did you notice Lieutenant Branko pull you to the right as I showed up? He helped me get a better hold of you. And then, as you could have seen for yourself, he promptly chased after me!”

Siniša laughed heartily and continued:

“I pulled a prank on the whole of Zegreb. Let them remember the time when they asked the Trenk men to guard witches under Sljeme. And now, be my guest and get some rest, and I will take the liberty of offering you some supper. It’s not terribly fancy, but it must be an improvement over the meals that Krajačić had sent to the tower.”

“I wish for nothing else but to leave this place immediately,” Nera said determinedly.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, but this is a wish I am unable to fulfill.”

“Then you will leave this castle.”

“I would love to, but again, I am not able to do as I wish since I am under orders to seek out witches at Medvednica. So, we are both staying here.”

“You speak as if you think me your prisoner.”

“It would appear that way. But, in fact, you must acknowledge that it is necessary for you to hide. You know what would happen if anyone were to recognize you.”

“You are concerned about me? You?” Nera said crossly, staring him down with utmost loathing.

“Your Grace is correct in assuming that I have no interest in your wellbeing, but for mine. If someone were to catch you, they might find out that I had played judge and kidnapped

an accused woman from the reach of the law, and I would be stripped of my military honorifics and the judicial representatives would fuel the stake with my body. And you can be damned sure that I won't be giving them this satisfaction."

"You're lying. You're not afraid of anyone and anything, you're just lying to me."

"So, you don't believe me?"

"Why should I trust a man who attacked me in the woods, a man who accused me before Krajačić!"

"I accused you?"

"Yes, you did. You are the cause of my misfortune."

"Contessa..."

"You put me in the tower."

"Who told you this?"

Nera exploded and screamed at him furiously:

"Will you deny that you told the court that I had come to the crossroads that night, when I was unfortunate enough to run into you? Can you deny this with a clear conscience?"

"I can."

"Then you are the worst degenerate in the whole world. This is the accusation the judge brought against me."

Siniša turned pale, but his face remained constant and calm. He kept looking into Nera's eyes, filled with rage and hatred. This gaze frightened her, but she concealed it and bravely continued:

"The only decent thing you can do is let me go."

“As far as I can see, you’re afraid of nothing, Contessa! Here, take my pistol. You’re used to handling one—it should help you feel more comfortable and prepared to have such a weapon by your side.”

Siniša pulled the pistol out of his red suit, handed it to Nera and said:

“I will let you go, but only to deliver you to one of your relatives. Count Petar is in Vienna, so I will ride to Grič immediately and ask Baron Skerlec to come for you.”

“I no longer have a fiancé. I am my own person.”

“But the Baron is still your blood relative, he will protect you.”

These words fell on her soul like heavy irony. “Yes, Skerlec should protect me,” Nera thought to herself. “But still, he would be the first to surrender me back to Krajačić. And this man is mocking me on account of that.”

“No!” she said out loud. “I don’t need anyone’s protection.”

“Would you want to venture into the woods on your own?”

“I have never been afraid of anything.”

“I know, but I am not about to let you leave. Please get some rest and collect your thoughts. Perhaps you will change your mind. Here—the entire first floor is at your disposal. This used to be my room, but you are welcome to it.”

Siniša placed the pistol on the table and said kindly:

“Au revoir, Contessa!”

He exited the room and closed the door behind him. Nera listened tensely to the sound of a key turning in the lock, but it never came. To the contrary, she noticed the key in the lock on her side of the door. She quickly went up to it and locked it, but this failed to calm her nerves so she took a lantern and opened the adjoining room’s door. Everything was as she and her

grandmother had left it the last time they visited. She walked through the other rooms, feeling herself at home. It was as if someone had gone through and tidied the rooms.

To feel safer, she locked all the rooms and returned to the first one, where she sat on the divan and became lost in thought. Siniša had given her the pistol and he left, leaving her on her own, but he did say: ‘au revoir!’ This disturbed her tremendously; she was convinced of Siniša’s lewd intentions based on their first encounter in the woods.

“He brought me to be his lover! Yes, nothing else would have inspired him to kidnap me so daringly. He said it himself—he did it for his own enjoyment. But why did he give me his pistol? Where are the Trenk men? Where is Filip?”

The thought of being alone with him in this castle frightened her and spurred her hatred and loathing of him. She heard a knock at the door. She shuddered, and did not answer it. Someone knocked again.

“Who is it?” she finally asked.

“Your loyal servant Filip!”

Filip? Yes, she recognized his voice! The girl went to the door and unlocked it, and Filip came in, knelt before her and kissed her hand.

“I am so happy, Your Grace! You’re saved!”

“Tell me, Filip, how did you get here? What happened?”

“I hid among the crowd and I saw the devil pull you onto his horse and kidnap you. Of course, I don’t buy into all that nonsense so I realized that this wasn’t an actual devil but someone’s attempt at rescuing you. I raced back to your castle and saddled a fast horse on which I was able to catch up with the Trenk men, but they wouldn’t let me speed ahead of them, and I wouldn’t have been able to anyway since the Captain’s horse flew like the wind. I followed him

to see where the stranger would take Your Grace, in order to be of help to you. I just got here and I told the Captain that I was your servant, and I begged him to let me speak with you.”

“Why were you the only one to follow the Trenk men?”

“I was the only one who refused to believe that he was the devil. And even if I thought that he was, I wouldn’t have deserted you.”

“Filip, you put your life on the line for me once before.”

“Do you need me to do it again?”

“You must help me escape this castle, today. I refuse to stay under the same roof as that man.”

“The Captain?”

“Yes, him!”

“If Your Grace would please allow me to speak my mind...”

“Go ahead. I am in need of a friend’s council.”

“You won’t be able to find a safer place than this.”

“The Captain asked you to speak on his behalf?”

“So God help me, he did not. But you see, Your Grace, it would be best for you to stay here until Count Oršić returns. He will bring the Queen’s orders that will prevent the court from pursuing charges against you, and you will be free to return to your castle.”

“What about my grandmamma? My poor grandmamma!”

“Countess Oršić, the Principal Prefect’s wife is taking care of her.”

“No, no, I need to get out of here. I won’t stay!”

Siniša entered the room at that moment so he heard what Nera had said. He had taken off the red suit and put on his officer’s uniform.

“Go downstairs,” Siniša told Filip. “My chef will give you dinner for the Contessa—bring it up.”

Filip left before Nera had a chance to protest.

“I would appreciate it if Your Grace would resist referring to me with such loathing in front of your servant,” Siniša said. “I would much prefer it if you saved your pleasantries for our private conversations. When I entered the room you were expressing a desire to leave this place no matter what. But it would behoove you to take this to heart: no matter what, I won’t let you leave this castle.”

“So you intend to keep me prisoner?” Nera was incensed. “Do you think that I have not guessed your vile intentions?”

Siniša laughed, bowed mockingly and said brazenly:

“Don’t misunderstand me, Contessa. Sure, you are beautiful, but you only caught my eye once, and just for a few moments. Today I couldn’t care less about you. I assure you, there will be no need for you to defend yourself against my advances a second time.”

Nera gave him a scathing look. Filip entered the room with her dinner: there was soup, roast venison, wine and bread on the wooden platter. He set the table quickly and dexterously, and served Nera dinner. She stared at the floor as Siniša poured two glasses of wine.

“Allow me to humbly welcome you as my guest,” Siniša said, clinking Nera’s glass, which she only accepted on account of Filip. He drained his glass, and offered Nera her meal.

“Stay here,” he told Filip, who had attempted to leave. “You will serve Her Grace at dinner.”

She tasted a few spoonfuls of soup, which she enjoyed. As she ate, Siniša stood by the window, looking out. He suddenly noticed the sky light up toward Zagreb. He quickly opened



the window, sticking his head out to get a better look. Nera noticed this, arose and looked past him into the darkness.

“Dear God, something’s ablaze.”

“It must be a pretty big fire,” Siniša noted.

“It’s toward Zagreb,” Filip added.

“Don’t be upset,” Siniša told Nera. “Please finish your dinner, I believe our chef is quite capable.”

But the girl had lost her appetite. A bloody cloud of flame reddened on the horizon. Nera could not take her eyes off it.

“You will know presently. My men are due to return soon. They went back to the city to inform Krajačić that the devil had fallen off the face of the Earth along with the witch!...”

Nera still stood by the window, looking at the sky. Then she heard the sound of horse hooves.

“Here they are!” Siniša said. “I’ll go and see what had happened.”

He went downstairs to meet the Trenk men. Branko jumped off his horse and ran to Siniša:

“Terrible news!”

“Quiet—she’s by the window.”

Siniša led him into the castle, to the first room off the foyer.

“What is it?”

“The mob was so upset that the devil kidnapped the witch, they burnt down the ‘Red Castle.’”

“Damned idiots!”

“Countess Ratkay burnt down along with it.”

Siniša bowed his head and started to pace the room silently. Then he stopped before the lieutenant and said quietly:

“So, this is all my fault...”

“Yes, this adventure cost us dearly.”

He started to pace the room again, and Branko told him how the butcher shops in Mesnička Street had caught fire, too.

“Have the boys come in,” Siniša told Branko.

In a few moments, a small army of Trenk men entered the room; all vigorous, striking heroes, broad chested and with handsome facial features. Siniša tapped the shoulder of the man next to him:

“Boys, you did an honest and chivalrous deed today. You saved an innocent girl, and thus did every hero’s duty. I am sure you are aware of the need for discretion, and for our protégé’s further protection. I don’t want any one of you speaking openly about the fire at Countess Ratkay’s and about her death. And now, go get some supper. You’ve earned it!”

The boys left their Captain, thanking him with warm, sincere glances. Siniša then went back to Nera’s room:

“Someone’s hay-filled barn caught fire. Our men were at the scene.”

“But it looks as if the whole of Grič is ablaze?”

“It only appears that way from this vantage point. The fire looks twice as big at night,” the Captain responded and turned to Filip:

“Would you like to stay with Her Grace permanently?”

“I wish for nothing else.”

“If you please, Contessa, allow Filip to stay by your side for as long as you are forced to live here. He seems to be a loyal servant, and he is familiar with your habits so he will be of better service than my boys. Good night, Contessa.”

The Captain bide her adieu in the military fashion, and left Nera with Filip without waiting for a response.

## Chapter 42: Escape

The enflamed cloud slowly dimmed over Grič, until it was put out altogether. Grič and the proud hills of Sljeme sunk in the deep darkness. The small hunting castle was engulfed in silence; all the lights were out. Nera had snuffed out her light, too, but she did not fall asleep. She had locked all the doors and Filip lay in the hallway outside of her room like a faithful hound. He said he would stay up and keep watch, but Nera still could not relax enough to fall asleep. She sat by the window, staring at the dark and thinking up ways to free herself from this new captivity.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps in the yard...slow, determined, firm footsteps. She tried to discern who was walking outside the castle in the dark. She could make out a black silhouette, but she did not know who it was. The footsteps made her suspect that it was the Captain walking up and down, the spark of his cigar burning in the dark. She listened carefully, anxiety gripping her soul. An entire hour went by, and then the Captain finally threw away the rest of the cigar and went into the house, carefully shut the door, and walked quietly through the house, down the hallway and up the stairs. Nera froze with fear. The footsteps grew fainter, and all she could hear was him blowing out the lantern at the top of the stairs. Then he went back downstairs and closed the door to his room.

The sun was high in the sky when she awoke. She opened the window to let in some air. Filip was in the yard, and when he saw his mistress he went into the house and soon appeared in her room with breakfast, the same as she was used to taking at home in her castle. She didn't even notice it, she was so consumed with her thoughts.

“Filip, I trust you,” she said to her servant.

“Your Grace, I will sooner die than betray you.”

“You will tell the Captain that I have calmed down and decided to stay here for as long as is necessary.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Then you will go to Grič and check on my grandmamma. Try to reach Countess Oršić and gauge how she feels about me and the way in which I was kidnapped. Do you understand? But don’t tell her where I am. I want to see if she has cast me off too. When you get to our castle, go to my bedroom. You will find a small basket with thread. There are a few gold coins at the bottom—take them and come up with an excuse to buy a burgher dress from my chamber maid, then go to the store and buy a burgher *surka* and a wool kerchief. Then try to find out what happened to the Remetins who were imprisoned on my account, as well as what the judicial representatives decided to do with my case.”

“I will, Your Grace.”

A few minutes later, Nera saw Filip ride out toward Grič. While he was away she noticed the Captain walk into the woods alone, leaving Branko in the yard. She was alone throughout the morning. Filip returned in the afternoon.

“How is the Countess?” Nera asked, eagerly awaiting news of her grandmamma.

“Your Grace, Countess Oršić took the Countess to Slavetić this afternoon, so I wasn’t able to speak with Her Grace. But our servants tell me that the old Countess’ condition remains unchanged. The Remetins are still imprisoned, and the judicial representatives announced to the area that anyone who was to meet with you or learn of your whereabouts is to report it to the court under penalty of death.”

Nera listened without interrupting, and then asked:

“You have been to the ‘Red Castle’?”

“Yes,” Filip lied.

“And you found the money?”

“Yes—here, Your Grace, the dress, the kerchief and the money that was left over.”

“Alright, thank you. This is for you,” she handed Filip a gold coin.

“Your Grace shouldn’t distress me this way,” he said, refusing to take the money.

“I have something else for Your Grace,” he added.

“What?”

“A letter.”

“A letter? How? Who knows of my whereabouts?”

“When I went to your room at the ‘Red Castle’ to look through your sewing basket for the money, I found this letter in it.”

Nera looked at it.

“A red letter?” she wondered. “This is the same kind of letter I had received before.”

This time she did not berate Filip for bringing the unknown man’s letter to her, but asked instead:

“Tell me, Filip, do you know who has been writing these letters that I rebuked you for and that once almost got you dismissed?”

“I don’t know, Your Grace. Trust me! How could I keep something like that from you? I truly have no idea where they’re coming from.”

The Contessa had to believe him. As she was opening the letter, Filip left the room, giving his mistress some privacy. Nera read it again and again, thinking it over:

“I don’t believe in devils, Nera! The one who snatched you from death’s jaws is a man! He’s either a knight or a bastard, but I hate him for doing what I should have done.

If only I knew you were safe! The dungeon would be heaven for me, the jingle of chains angelic song!... Silence and loneliness surround me, two of my only dear confidants. We sit here alone, listening to the fire in the young man’s heart, to the dissolution of a young life burning up with the heat of passion and endless pain! Let it burn, let it die out. Early springtime must wilt when its longing for the sun proves to be in vain.”

“Longs for the sun in vain? He must think that I could never love him back,” Nera thought. “He senses that my heart, my youth and my life have been destroyed by the superstition of men. From whence in my hollow heart should I draw love? How can I regain my faith in people, when it’s been shattered and dispelled? Yes, I now know where to look for the man who has been writing these letters. He speaks of the dungeon and chains, so he must be one of the Remetins. But it would be better if I didn’t learn who he was. Why should I? Love requires happiness, and I am pathos, misfortune and vengeance. I will live only for vengeance, as I promised grandmamma.”

Filip distracted her from this train of thought when he brought her meal up. Nera sat down to eat, and Filip served her as he used to at Countess Ratkay’s rich table in the ‘Red Castle’

“Filip,” Nera said quietly, “We will escape from this place tonight.”

“But you sent word to the Captain that you would stay...”

“I only said that so he would stop watching me.”

“Your word is my command.”

“You know that there are small wooden steps in the back that descend vertically straight into the woods?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“We will escape that way.”

“And where does Your Grace wish to go?”

“To Slavetić, to see my grandmamma.”

“And what if someone were to recognize you on our way there?”

“I will put on the dress you had brought. You will come with me.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“I wanted to leave tomorrow night, but I heard through the window that the Captain is planning to patrol with his men tonight. This will make tonight more opportune for escape.”

“I am sure he will leave a few men behind at the castle.”

“You will try to get them drunk so they’ll fall asleep.”

“I will do as you wish.”

“Now tell the Captain that I wish to get some fresh air, if there’s no danger that I will be caught.”

Filip went to fulfill Nera’s requests, and she took off the white dress that Krajačić had given her and put on her chambermaid’s outfit, pinned her long braids on her head and tied them with a dark kerchief. The Captain sent word that she could walk around the property with Filip.

The sun was high in the sky as Nera passed under the wide tree crowns. Filip stayed by one tree, leaned onto its trunk and watched as small white clouds gathered on the horizon. His mistress walked up and down the fresh moss, lost in thought. Lieutenant Branko stepped out, greeted her and started a conversation. Siniša came out as well, addressed her in a military fashion and joined the conversation. Nera spoke with him indifferently, watching him from under the dark kerchief that brought out the paleness of her face. The Captain and Branko shortly



bid her adieu, and Nera went back inside. That evening she watched as Siniša, Branko and a part of the troop rode out. Everything was quiet in the hunting castle when Filip knocked on his mistress' door.

“I'm ready,” she whispered as she opened it.

“The soldiers are sleeping like the dead.”

“Then we can go.”

She buttoned up her long burgher coat and stepped quietly into the hallway. Filip led the way, and Nera followed him. They slowly opened the door that led to the wooden stairs. Cold air wafted into Nera's face; they were engulfed in darkness, with the black of the forest before them. Filip climbed down the stairs, followed by Nera. He awaited her under a tree, and then they both proceeded forward together. Nera sped up to cross the yard and reach the forest as soon as possible. Suddenly, someone dashed before her and grabbed her by the shoulders. She jerked and screamed faintly.

“Who is this?” a man's voice asked in the darkness.

The girl made no reply. She recognized that voice and the hands that held onto her tight.

“It is us, Hon. Captain,” Filip said quietly.

“Please return to the castle,” Siniša ordered the Contessa.

Nera did not move, nor answer him.

“If you don't make your way back voluntarily, I will take you back by force,” the Captain threatened her.

She now saw that she had no choice but to return. The three of them went back to the castle in silence. When they entered Nera's room, Siniša sent Filip out and stayed with her alone.

“You are very cunning and stubborn, Contessa. You appeared to be resigned to staying here, but you planned an escape.”

“Why do you keep me here by force? What do you want with me?”

“Did I not tell you that I want to deliver you to Count Petar?”

“I don’t believe you!”

“Contessa! You are a smart girl. Why do you let your hatred cloud your judgment? Can’t you see that I mean you no harm?”

Siniša spoke these words like a friend.

“Hon. Captain, you know very well what I think of you!”

“Of course I do, too well.”

“If you let me leave today or tomorrow, you will convince me that I was wrong to judge you so harshly.”

“I would, naturally, be happy to have you change your opinion of me, but I won’t be buying that favor. You will stay here whether you wish to or not, for your safety.”

“A man who testified against me is all of a sudden concerned for my safety? You are lying! You are a bastard for treating me this way.”

“Please consider calling me a crook, a rascal or a scoundrel from time to time—change it up a little!”

The girl’s blood boiled. She felt as if she would love nothing more than to shoot this man on the spot. His brazen words and the audacious tone of voice he used had her fuming.

“We shall see which one of us will prevail—you forcing me to stay or me forcing you to let me leave.”

“You will stay, even if I have to lock you in here like a prisoner.”

With these words, Siniša left Nera and walked out of the room. The Contessa invited Filip back in, looked him sternly in the eye and asked angrily:

“Filip, how come the Captain came back without our knowledge?”

“I don’t know, Your Grace.”

“Filip, you betrayed me.”

“You do me wrong, very wrong. May happiness betray me as I betrayed you!”

“Go, leave me alone.”

The following morning Filip knocked on the Contessa’s door and didn’t get an immediate reply. He had brought up her breakfast, but Nera refused to eat it. He took it away untouched.

The same thing happened around noon. Filip begged Nera to eat in vain.

“I won’t eat a bit until I am out of this house.”

Filip was distraught. Nera ceased to speak with him confidentially and kindly as before. He noticed her voice was tinged with suspicion. He begged her to eat something for supper, but she determinedly told him that she would rather die than touch the food. So the servant left.

### Chapter 43: Captain Siniša

The door to the Captain's ground floor room opened quietly.

"Siniša!... Siniša, can't you hear me?" someone whispered in the dusk.

"Who is this?" the Captain answered grouchily.

"It's me, Filip. Why don't you light a lamp?"

"I don't need it."

Silence reigned for a few moments.

"Why are you here? What if she were to notice you coming here to see me?"

"She doesn't trust me anymore anyway..."

"Quiet!... Do you hear it... the rustle of a gown."

Both of them listened intently. They heard quiet, fast footsteps on the first floor stairs.

"She surely heard us now. Dammit, why are you so careless?" the Captain riled. Then he continued:

"Did she take her supper?"

"No."

The room was silent again, but not for long.

"It is really strange that she would rather face danger than stay here," Filip started. "If she were to leave, Krajačić could get a hold of her..."

No response.

"She is as kind as the clear skies, but so stubborn. Perhaps you offended her in some way?"

Siniša made no reply.

“How could you have harmed her, Siniša?”

“Let me be,”

“Still, you can tell me.”

“Listen, Filip, have you ever behaved wildly, rudely toward a young girl, and on further thought felt as if you didn’t do anything wrong and yet, perhaps you are to blame after all?”

“Sure, I’ve had that happen.”

“And did the girl hate you for it?”

“Depends on the girl.”

“See, that’s the problem.”

“You weren’t boorish to her, were you?”

Siniša made no reply.

“Oh. Now I can see why she is so intent on leaving us. I understand now. But still, you saved her from death, so she might believe that you have some plans with her.”

“What could she think?! I saved her from death because I thought it would be fun to laugh at the world and nothing else—do you understand me?”

“Yes, yes, and so why did you send me to serve her while she was still in Grič?”

“You ask too many questions. Didn’t she blame me for kidnapping her from the capuchin’s church because I wanted to keep her as my lover? And didn’t I tell you to keep vigilant and watch the place nightly to catch the real kidnappers? I wanted to seize the bastards and prove to her that I might be young and crazy, but I am not a scoundrel!”

“Sure, sure, you want her to think well of you!”

“Her and everyone else!”

“But why don’t you speak with her about this? Why don’t you make your case since you care so much about her...”

“Stop prattling nonsense. I care about my honor and nothing else. You sound like a gossip Baba.”

“You should be more honest with me.”

“What the devil kind of honesty do you want? What do you want to know?”

“There’s no point in berating me, I can see that this agitates you.”

“I hope you understand that I can’t be insensitive to Countess Ratkay’s terrible death. Isn’t it my fault that those people lit the castle on fire and that the Countess burned down with it? What will she say when she finds out? This is why I am not letting her leave this place—I don’t want her to learn about this tragedy.”

“You didn’t want to? Have you changed your mind?”

“You can’t expect me to watch her starve to death.”

They were both silent, entertaining their individual thoughts. After a few moments, Siniša said:

“Go up to her and tell her to calm down! We will leave tomorrow night. You and I will escort her to Slavetić, but only if she eats!”

“I don’t know if she’ll believe me. She suspected immediately that I was the one who told you about the escape plan.”

“Curse me and berate me for her benefit, do what you will, just make sure she trusts you again. You must stay with her at Slavetić and keep guard.”

“I’ll stay. I care for her as much as I do for you.”

“It doesn’t matter to me whether or not you care for her, I would just like to get my hands on the bastards who turned me into one. The hawk that’s stalking her will sniff her out. I am sure he is not fooled by the devil act. Now go and offer her some supper.”

“I’ll go, perhaps she’ll eat.”

“Listen, Filip! Have them give her some warm soup and old wine, and then ask her if she’d like the chef to prepare something else for her.”

Filip left to fulfill Siniša’s command. He returned shortly, beaming and cheerful.

“So, she had some supper?” the Captain asked.

“She will, but she wants to hear it from you.”

Siniša said nothing, but left Filip and went upstairs. When he came into the room, he saw Nera’s supper untouched before her.

“Your stubbornness is much greater than I had imagined,” he said after greeting her. “So, you are forcing me to allow you to leave this place. Alright, but I will escort you to Slavetić myself.”

“That is perfectly unnecessary.”

“I won’t have Count Petar rebuke me upon his return for not fulfilling my responsibility, which is incidentally a responsibility that any man would have toward any woman in your position.”

“You can’t possibly bear any responsibility for my well-being.”

Siniša looked at her for a moment, and then bowed and abruptly left the room. In a few moments Filip was serving Nera dinner while Siniša took his stallion out for a ride in the woods. His horse carried him down the narrow path in a fast trot. They were surrounded by a cold autumn’s night. Stars shimmered in the distance, but not a glimmer of their light reached the

woods. Dense trees hid in the darkness. The horse sped up; Siniša was prodding it the same as when he kidnapped Nera and carried her through Grič streets. He wandered the woods uphill, downhill, jumping over ravines and ditches faster and faster still. The horse stumbled in the dark, would halt and then start again over the pits and the waterfalls that ran down Sljeme's slopes. Racing this way the horse suddenly tripped and fell onto its front legs. Siniša got off the horse and helped it up. The animal breathed heavily and shivered; the fall frightened it. Siniša patted its neck, then held its beautiful head close and said, as if he were speaking to a person:

“Why am I torturing you? You poor beast, you've done nothing wrong.”

Then he led the horse up the ravine and onto the path, got on it and returned to the hunting castle. Everyone was fast asleep by the time he reached it. Nera's window, as well, was dark. Siniša started to rub the exhausted animal, and then he led him into the barn. He sat down under the linden tree and lit a cigar. Nocturnal bugs tweeted around him, birds settled on the branches above, a gentle breeze rustled the leaves now and then, and the dog clanked its chain behind the barn. It was long past midnight when he entered the house and softly closed the door. The lantern on the stairs smoldered. He snuffed it out, went to his room and sat in the dark. In a few moments he lit an oil lamp. The warm yellow light shone on his face and flickered as if surprised at what it saw.

His face was pale, filled with vehement pain, as if suffering from a grave physical illness that had just taken hold of him. He stared at the dark wall like a patient gritting his teeth so as not to scream. His face was completely transformed, drawn in as if gripped by a deathly painful spasm. Then he grabbed a knife off the table and steadily pulled his left sleeve up to cut the forearm. The dark, strong arm reddened as blood spilled across the table. He watched it as if comforted and amused by its spillage, and it seemed as though the hard, intense pain had



softened; a sick yearning came over his face instead. He took a quill, dipped it in blood, brought to the white parchment and drew one letter, then another, and a third.

“Do you know, Nera of cries without tears? Of suffering without sighs? Why can’t these red drops scream? Why do they torment me in silence?... Nera! Do you laugh at me for cutting myself to send bloodied sighs your way? Do you laugh at the delirious wounded man who stands at death’s door on this battlefield, writing to you in his own blood?

Have mercy, Nera! The nightingale cries out to his cold-hearted mistress... The melancholy night can cry its gentle dew, and clouds can sob with thunder, and a thunderbolt finds respite in its uproar. Only my pain is mute, maddeningly mute and terrible. No, don’t laugh, Nera—let the fool scream and jest, it suits him, it soothes his bewildered soul.”

The quill fell out of his hand and hit the parchment, and Siniša lowered his head on his hands. Wind toyed with dry leaves outside the window as branches rustled and spruces softly moaned over the castle. The night sailed on.

Siniša lifted his head, and the dull pain on his pale face met the oil lamp’s warm light. He snuffed it. The room was quiet and dark for another hour, Siniša’s troubled breathing the only sound to be heard. The wind blew eerily over the castle.

The morning sun burst through the windows and filled the room, its warm rays curiously creeping over the white parchment filled with bloody longings. Siniša jerked as if someone had woken him suddenly and looked around. He lifted his left arm and noticed the bloodied forearm. He jerked his head as if unclear about what had happened to it. He rubbed his hand over his forehead, closed his eyes and looked at his forearm again. As if remembering something, he jumped off the bed and rushed to the table, afraid that something had disappeared from there. He found the letter written in blood. He grabbed it, crumpled it, turned on the light and held the

letter to the flame. Then he cleaned his forearm, went up to the large basin filled with cold water and pushed his head in it thrice. When he had dried his face, Filip knocked on the door.

“Why was your light on so late?” he asked the Captain.

“I had some work to do.”

“Do you have a letter for her?”

“What letter? I don’t need to tell her about the threat that her kidnappers posed anymore.”

“This is all your letters are—warnings about her kidnappers?”

“I sure wasn’t writing love letters!”

“You know, Siniša, you’re very bright, but you come across as stupid and ridiculous right now, just like any other man in your condition. The warmer the blood, the greater the folly, and you seem to have topped all the fools of this world.”

“What the hell are you talking about?! Speak your mind.”

“You can’t hide cough or love. And whoever attempts to is exposed to ridicule.”

Siniša muttered a curse and raised his fist at Filip.

“If you weren’t like a father to me, I’d crush you. Don’t come at me with this nonsense, or...”

Filip turned pale.

“Siniša! You’ve never before...”

His voice trembled, the words stuck in his throat. The Captain was unsettled; heavy tears rolled down Filip’s face. He rushed to embrace Filip, saying in a low voice:

“Don’t mind me. I know I am rash but I would never want to hurt you. I feel like I am getting seizures, I bang around and do crazy things... Don’t be upset, but please don’t ask any questions, no matter what. Don’t pry—it drives me insane. Do you understand? Let me be, keep

to yourself and don't ask—I don't know anything and there is nothing I can tell you.”

“I know, I know, I see now that I behaved foolishly. You'll be pleased with me from now on.”

They shook hands and looked each other in the eyes. Shortly afterward Siniša stepped out into the yard and found two men standing there.

“So, lads—did you catch any witches last night?”

“Yes, Captain, and you'll find her very enjoyable! Here she is!” the lad showed him a beautiful, big doe.

Siniša looked it over, sent for the chef and instructed him on how to prepare it, saying:

“Bring the best cuts up to the Contessa. It's only right.”

Nera came out of the house wrapped in a burgher coat. Siniša greeted her and asked:

“Did you get a good night's rest?”

“Better than last night. Some frolicking animals seem to inhabit the attic?”

“Those are rats. We are used to them already, but they're much louder on the first floor. You won't be bothered by them tonight.”

“When do we leave?”

“At dusk.”

Nera left Siniša to take a walk with Lieutenant Branko, and he rode out into the hills.

## Chapter 44: Visitors

The sun was setting and Nera stood by the window. The sky was clear, and the air clean and brisk. It was going to be a beautiful, but cold night—she thought, hardly able to wait for dusk and the journey to Slavetić. She was only concerned about her chaperones; she had seen Filip sneak into Siniša's room, and she was sure that it was he who told Siniša about their escape plan. She now felt as if she were in a wolves' den. Since she was so ready to think the worst of Siniša, she was gripped by an anxiety inducing thought:

“What is they don't take me to Slavetić!?”

She had no time to think about that further. A hunting horn sounded in the distance—one, two, three, and then a whole multitude of hunting horns rang in her ears as they kept getting louder as they approached the castle. The yard filled with commotion; Siniša's men ran around wildly, looking out toward the forest. Siniša, Branko and Filip came out to the fence to see who was coming.

“These people are not welcome,” Siniša said, quickly returning to the castle to see Nera.

“Contessa, some hunters are arriving. You need to hide well and keep away from the window. I will try to get them to leave immediately.”

“What if they linger?”

“I will get rid of them, and you lock the door.”

As Siniša went back to the yard, he was met by screams and cheers of many hunters in opulent hunting suits carrying rifles. Elegant ladies in their charming outfits and even lovelier hats halted their restless horses before the castle. The entire space was filled with young people's

shouts, laughter and cordial cheers. They stormed the yard as if they had fallen right out of the skies. The Captain's men rushed around the gentlefolk holding their horses. Siniša stared incredulously at the unpleasant guests and could hardly contain his ire at their presence, to the point that he did not even come out to greet them. A few moments later a whole horde of young ladies dashed toward him, holding out their hands and cheering:

“Hello, Captain! Good evening, Captain!”

“Did we surprise you?”

“We are your guests today!”

These were no other than Countess Auersperg, Countess Čikulini, Contessa Terka Nadaždi, the beautiful Contessa Ženka Drašković, Baroness Linčika and about ten more young noble girls who had gathered around the Captain like butterflies around a honey flower. Siniša greeted them back, kissed their hands one by one, asked after their health and offered a few kind words to each.

“Like I said,” Count Ivan Drašković lamented as he approached the cheery group of ladies, “as soon as Captain Siniša appears, the rest of us men lose all of our value.”

The Count was right—the other gentlemen were forgotten. Among those present were Baron Skerlec, Count Vojkffy, Council Commissioner Dvojković, Notary Sale, Counts Ivan and Karlo Erdody and many of their friends. The company was joyful and jubilant. The gentlemen's boots were muddied to the knees, and so were the ladies', pointing to a long day's excursion. Other hunters and a horde of game chasers burst into the yard carrying hares, birds and a few deer on their backs.

“We'll stay with you today,” Dvojković said. “I hope you'll give us shelter.”

“I would love to,” Siniša said, “only I am not the master of this house. You know very well whom this castle belongs to.”

“Yes, yes,” Dvojković replied, “but we can consider Baron Skerlec to be the master of this castle now.”

“We will dine here today and spend the night,” Countess Čikulini said.

“O-ho, Baron Skerlec is here as well?” Siniša suggestively asked the Countess in a low voice.

“We convinced him to come along so that he could forget about his troubles and have some fun.”

“I am sure you will do your best to achieve that, my charming Countess,” Siniša replied cavalierly.

The Countess struck him on the shoulder with her whip handle, but the Captain was not perturbed. However, as he was greeting the gentlemen all his thoughts turned to the room in which Nera sat by the shut window. She must have heard the noise and the laughter in front of her castle. The Captain tried to think of a plan of action. Where could he hide Nera? He continued to give orders, though, assigning rooms for the ladies and gentlemen and providing for their horses.

“We will dine on the first floor, in the great room, and the ladies can sleep there as well while the gentlemen take the ground floor rooms,” Dvojković said.

“Is your chef any good?” Drašković inquired.

“Yes, don’t worry,” the Captain assured him.

“So, let’s go inside,” the gentlemen said.

Siniša excused himself and hurried ahead in front of the ladies, climbing up the stairs to the first floor with Count Drašković. Ladies and gentlemen followed them, and shortly the walls of the little castle reverberated with voices and laughter. The ladies and their chaperones spread across the rooms and started to settle in, look around and discuss where each would sleep. They behaved as if they owned the place and everything in it. The ladies eyed every detail critically, mocking Countess Ratkay's and her granddaughter's taste. Small groups of ladies and gentlemen gathered across the rooms, gossiping about the mistress of the house as if she were still alive and responsible for everything they had found to be lacking in the rooms. Baron Ivo Skerlec showed no emotion at all, as if he wasn't reminded of his fiancée by everything in this castle.

They finally came up with a plan that would accommodate everyone, and sent for the Captain's chef to arrange supper. When that was done, the ladies requested that their chaperones escort them into the woods for a walk and a chat.

Countess Ratkay's castle appeared to be under siege. On one side, the game chasers sat down for a respite: some of them fed their hounds and others lay on the ground smoking their pipes. Ladies and gentlemen conversed boisterously, teasing each other and making jokes, as the gentlemen attempted to arrange the belt game that Dvojković had once introduced with Nera's belt.

The chef raced around the kitchen, and the soldiers helped him prepare the dinner as soon as possible. The Trenk men carried dishes from Countess Ratkay's large armoires. She had stocked this castle well, since she used to host many merry gatherings here ten years ago. Siniša and Filip hid in a small chamber for a consult.

"We really could have done without these people!" Siniša said grumpily. "If only I had known, I would have started on the journey with the Contessa earlier."

“What if we could stealthily lead her out of the castle?” Filip said.

“This is impossible now. I wish I knew whose damned idea this was.”

“I bet it was Countess Auersperg’s!”

“Whoever it was, the devil put them up to it. But the main thing now is to hide the Contessa. I stood by Nera’s door the whole time, but luckily no one noticed them. Perhaps they’ll ignore them going forward.”

“In any case, we must let her know that these people intend to stay the night. What do you think of the way in which they stormed this place?”

“It’s really shameful. The others can’t be blamed, but the young Skerlec! How could he have brought them here as if he were the master of the house already? Doesn’t his soul shudder walking through these rooms, which she used to command? I’d love to punch him in the face. I’m only worried about this: Nera might be incensed by this impudence and fail to remain calm.”

“Then go, warn her of the danger.”

Siniša went down the hall and, seeing that there was no one in the vicinity, gently knocked on the Contessa’s door.

“Contessa,” he whispered quietly, “open the door, quick!”

The door was slowly unlocked, and the Captain could see that Nera was shaken. Her face was pale, and her eyes showed deep indignation. The Captain informed her in a few words that the visitors would stay the night.

“I would advise you to remain completely calm and to wait for an opportune moment for me to escort you out of the castle.”

“Will that be possible?”



“Yes, once the men have had enough to drink and the company gets festive. I will lead you out down the same stairs that you planned to use for your escape.”

“It will be best for both of us that I remain unseen. You know what would happen to me if you were to betray me, even accidentally...”

“But for God’s sake, Contessa! Since you have no faith in me, at least trust that I will look out for my own skin. I guarantee that I will get you out of this castle, at least for my own sake. Just leave it up to me. I will only beg of you to remain calm, not to move around the room and not to open the door to anyone. Bar the door to the adjacent room, and allow me to take this key. If I were to knock again, someone might find that suspicious.”

The Contessa nodded in agreement. Siniša realized that she was going through an emotional turmoil. He guessed at the feelings that overcame her when she heard the happiness and joy of the company she used to be the center of, and from whom she was now forced to hide. Siniša knew that there was nothing he could say to comfort her, so he took a bow and carefully left the room, locking the door. He had hardly put the key in his pocket when Countess Auersperg and Count Vojkffy came upon him in the hall.

“I would like to help you bury the hatchet, gentlemen,” the Countess said.

“We are not in a feud,” Siniša replied, “so we won’t be reconciling. We are adversaries, but this is no place to bring that up.”

Count Vojkffy noticed that Siniša was disinclined to speak with him, so he left them. When the Countess and Siniša stepped out into the yard, the Countess took him by the arm and walked away from the youth singing songs.

“Do you know whose idea this was? Mine!”

“I figured,” he said. “But you should have sent word.”

“On the contrary, I wanted to surprise you,” the Countess looked at the Captain suspiciously and said in a low, but passionate and ardent tone of voice:

“What is the meaning of this? Why have you not come to see me for four days in a row? Why didn’t you come to Šestine like you promised? I have a feeling that you’re having a grand time here. I’d say there are many beautiful witches hiding around these parts...”

“Forgive me, my dear, but I am here to do my duty, and not to sit by your side. You’ve got plenty of other company!”

“If you insist on speaking to me this way I will make sure to prove my suspicions.”

“What suspicions? What right do you have to speak of suspicions? I don’t suppose we’re a couple in love! I never kept track of your romantic exploits, and you will give me the same consideration.”

“Watch it, Siniša. I have changed. You must know you’re the only man I love!”

“You are truly brazen to speak of love. Or do you not know what love is?”

“And you do?”

“Even if I don’t, there’s hope for me yet if I were to sincerely fall in love with a woman.”

“Listen, Siniša, I want you to know this: I will not give you up. So I say this to you: be careful. I can destroy your happiness and your reputation if I were to speak but a word...”

Siniša’s brow furrowed and he looked at the Countess, inquiringly.

“What are you threatening me with?”

“I won’t tell you now, because there’s still time for that. But remember that I plan on being your wife.”

Siniša laughed heartily:

“Do you think I will just ignore the hundreds of lovers your diary is filled with? You are

truly mad. I don't wish to be married, and even if I did I wouldn't marry you. You desired to take an officer as your lover, and I fulfilled your wish. I had nothing better to do in Vienna. I can excuse myself from your service whenever I want."

"Your brutality is beyond belief. I am telling you earnestly: if you do not consider yourself my fiancé, I will force you to comply."

Siniša tightened his lips, pulled her arm and asked hoarsely:

"What right do you have to threaten me?"

The Countess shrugged her shoulders, laughed victoriously and said:

"Next time, my dear, there's plenty of time for that yet. In six months, I will announce to the Queen that you proposed."

"And I will promptly tell the Queen that you lied, and that I would rather give up my saber than marry you."

"Well then, I guess I will have no choice but to explain to you how I plan to force you into it. Besides, I can tell by that look on your face that you already know what I am talking about."

The Countess laughed and left Siniša. He stood there, frozen. He was distressed, as if wracked with worry. However, young noblewomen came up to him and had him join their game. He laughed along as if happy and carefree while a dungeon-like darkness weighed on his soul.

The night came down and lanterns lit up the first floor. The scent from the kitchens wafted through the air. The guests started to come upstairs and gather in the dining room. Count Drašković had brought a good number of fancy champagne bottles along for the hunt, so the company was soon playful and good-humored. Siniša laughed and joked, but a dark cloud

shimmered in his eyes. His thoughts wandered, and he loathed and despised everyone around him.

The noise and the laughter reached Nera, since the only thing that stood between her room and the laughter-filled dining room was a small chamber in which some of the guests would come for a chat. And as the company sang, pouring the champagne liberally, Countess Ratkay's granddaughter sat alone in a dark room, her back against the wall, choking with pain and bitterness.

"What impudence," she thought to herself, "what insensitivity! How can they feast here in my grandmamma's castle when she lies at home, deathly ill? Or is she, perhaps, better? Oh, that would indeed be wonderful. But perhaps that is true, perhaps she is healthy again? That's easily possible. How else could these people sing in her rooms? If only I could get away from here as soon as possible to see her, to hold her. When will the Captain come to take her away?"

Suddenly she heard footsteps in the adjoining chamber, followed by two familiar women's voices. It was Contessa Terka and Countess Auersperg.

"Listen, Captain," the Countess said, "we found that we are one room short."

"I am sorry I can't help you, Countess, but we are out of usable rooms on the first floor."

"And what is this room here?" the Countess said, pointing at the door that led to Nera's room.

"This is an uninhabitable chamber."

"Why? Since we're in the woods, we can manage staying in bedrooms without baldachins."

Nera heard the lock click.

"Oh, it's locked?" Terka noted.

“Yes, it’s locked,” Siniša replied.

“Why?”

“We keep our rifles and gunpowder in this chamber.”

“This can easily be removed.”

“Yes,” Siniša said calmly, “but we would have to turn a lamp on, and your lives are precious to me. My men had a bit too much to drink, so I am not comfortable asking them to engage in such an undertaking.”

A servant called Siniša out of the room.

“Please excuse my absence for a moment. I am needed elsewhere.”

“But do come right back!” Terka said.

Siniša left.

“How do you like it here, Contessa?” the Countess asked Terka, looking about the room.

“If I were Countess Ratkay, I am sure I would have taken more interest in furnishing the castle a bit more comfortably.”

“The Countess never cared about anything, and Nera never spent any time thinking about these necessities. Her head was always in the clouds.”

“You don’t mean to say that she flew on her broom? I understand that the poor women might wish to fly on a broom, but she had purebred horses.”

“Perhaps the devil sent one of his black stallions to grab her.”

“Some think he wasn’t a devil after all. I too am convinced that this was one of our ‘Lucifers.’”

“‘Lucifers’? So it’s true what they say—such a society exists?”

“But not the kind from Hell; the kind from aristocratic castles.”

“Then it seems that Nera’s devil is made of flesh and blood.”

“I believe so. I haven’t seen him so I can’t be the judge, though I do believe in devils.”

“I always suspected something special was going on with Nera, and that she was using some spells to drive men crazy.”

“She won’t be doing that anymore. There’s no way back to Grič for her now, so it’s quite obvious that she won’t return.”

“But where did she disappear to?”

“Only the devil that took her knows the answer to that.”

“If the court were to find her, no one would save her from the stake.”

“If the old woman had lived, the Queen would have granted her amnesty. The way things are now, there is no one to look out for her, and I wouldn’t dream of meddling.”

“And what will happen to Countess Ratkay’s estate?”

“It will go to the old Countess’ brother, Baron Skerlec.”

“It’s too bad what happened to the Grič castle. I can’t believe they couldn’t save it from burning down.”

“When the mob saw that Nera was kidnapped by the devil, they were so incensed that no one could have stopped them. The whole castle was engulfed in flames within minutes.”

“But still, why was no one able to rescue the Countess from the flames?”

“The mob didn’t allow anyone to bring her out. They cheered with glee when they realized the Countess would burn to death. I never imagined she would die such a horrible death.”

A muffled cry was heard from Nera’s room.

“What was that?”

“That’s strange. I thought I heard a woman scream.”

“It was as if something had fallen down! Listen!”

“Can you hear anything?”

“Nothing. Everything’s quiet. I must admit I am scared,” Terka said with fear.

“Are you afraid of ghosts?”

“I couldn’t tell you, but I’ve got shivers down my spine.”

Siniša rejoined the ladies and noticed them leaning against the door, listening. This worried him. When they saw him, they walked toward him.

“Your gunpowder speaks, Hon. Captain, and it sounds like a woman,” Countess Auersperg said, with jealous suspicion in her eyes.

“Don’t joke about this, Countess,” Terka said with fear. “We really did hear something. It sounded like a living being; I still have goose bumps.”

Siniša gathered that the ladies had heard something, which scared Terka half to death.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Siniša told them. “Let’s leave this room.”

“On the contrary, I would like to see what’s in there,” the Countess said determinedly.

“You’re right, Contessa. Ghosts don’t scare me, but you would find it quite unpleasant if I were to tell you about all the voices we hear in this castle at night.”

“Are you serious, Captain?” Terka asked.

“Yes, Contessa. I don’t believe in anything, but truly, every night I’ve heard all kinds of voices. Let’s get a glass of champagne and I will tell you all about it.”

Both ladies followed the Captain into the dining room. Siniša had led them there so Nera wouldn’t hear what he was about to say. They stood by Countess Čikulini and Baron Skerlec.

“Every night starting at midnight and until two a.m., my lads and I hear some sort of wailing—as if someone were pacing the attic and moaning. We went up once to see what was happening, but we never found anything. Then when we went back to sleep, something started wailing again! I started to think that someone was in the basement. We searched the entire house again, and we found no living beings in here. There was no cat, or any other animal who could have produced those noises, but still someone was pacing the house and moaning.”

“Did you hear this on the first day you came here?” Baron Skerlec asked.

“No, we started hearing this the night Countess Ratkay burned to death. I laugh at the whole thing and I don’t believe in anything supernatural, but I can’t deny that I hear the wailing nightly.”

“Don’t laugh,” Terka said, “but I will not be spending the night here.”

“Me either,” Countess Čikulini said. “Why ruin our evening? What do you think, Hon. Baron?”

“I agree with you. We are close to the town—why don’t we go home since the ladies will find it unpleasant to spend the night?”

“Alright,” Countess Auersperg accepted the proposition. “Siniša, you will come with us?”

“If you insist, I am ready to go. But I think you’re giving this fear too much credit. It would be interesting to listen to the wailing together.”

“No, no, we will leave,” Baron Skerlec said. “The ladies will think of nothing else but when the wailing will begin, and this will ruin our fun.”

“But what will the others say to this?” Siniša warned. “They will laugh and mock the ladies, and they will stay just to hear the ghost.”



“We won’t tell anyone why we’re leaving,” Skerlec advised.

“That would be best,” Countess Čikulini agreed. “We have decided to leave, and everyone else must follow.”

Countess Čikulini went up to the ladies and gentlemen and told them how uncomfortable she felt staying at the castle; there were not enough bedrooms for the necessary level of comfort. He invited them all to her palace, where the young people would be able to dance in her ballroom. When the young people heard this, they immediately supported her proposition, and shortly no one wanted to stay. The entire company agreed:

“Let’s go to Countess Čikulini’s!”

Countess Čikulini had a remarkable ability to prove her point and recruit anyone to participate in executing her ideas, and so it happened this time. Everyone now wanted to go to Zagreb, and no one knew or wondered why. Siniša couldn’t have hoped for a better reception of his made-up tale. He could barely contain his joy at getting rid of the company standing in the way of his plans. In a few moments, everyone was ready to leave. Captain Siniša and Lieutenant Branko went along with the guests, and Siniša rode ahead to show the way. As they were riding through a narrow canyon, Branko found himself riding by Siniša, who took advantage and signaled for them to separate from the group; they disappeared in the darkness.

“Stay alert now, Branko,” Siniša whispered. “When they ask about me, tell them I rode out to inform Countess Čikulini’s castellan about the arrival of the guests.”

“And what should I say once they realize you’re not at the palace?”

“Whatever you wish, I don’t care. Just don’t tell them the truth.”

Having said that, Siniša moved sideways. When they reached the bend in the road, he led his horse to the left and hid in the dark forest. He waited in the brush for the riders to pass by,

and when the last one had disappeared Siniša spurred his horse back to the hunting castle. He thought of what had happened to Nera the entire way back: what was it that Countess Auersperg and Contessa Terka had heard? The Captain pushed his horse to go faster, feeling anxious and afraid: “What if something awful has happened to her?” Dread gripped his soul as he feared the worst. Preoccupied by these grave thoughts he rode into the hunting castle’s yard. Filip was standing at the door.

“I could hardly wait for your return,” he said timidly.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know, but it can’t be good. I knocked on the door and called to her, but it was in vain. She is not responding.”

“This can’t be! Perhaps she’s asleep.”

“I don’t think so. I called her name so loudly that she would have woken up.”

Siniša was consumed by a bad premonition and he ran up the stairs, with Filip close behind him. When they approached the door, Siniša knocked twice or thrice, but to no avail. He quickly reached into his pocket, where he had placed the key, and opened them. Darkness met his eyes. Still, no one answered.

“Bring the lantern over.”

Filip rushed to the dining room where the candles that had been lit for the guests were still burning and came back with a lamp that lit up the entire room. Siniša looked at the bed—it was empty. He looked at the divan, but no one was there either. He felt a tightness in his chest, and he approached the door that led to the room where Countess Auersperg and Terka had been chatting. He was shaken at what he saw and he paused.

“What happened?!”

Filip rushed to him: Nera lay unconscious on the floor before them, dressed and ready for the road. Siniša lifted her and laid her on the bed, looking at her face. It was pale; her eyes were closed. Her hands were like ice and her body was stiff and cold, lifeless. Siniša stared at her pale and terrified.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know, but I have my suspicions.”

“What do you mean?”

“She must have overheard a conversation from the adjoining room. I fear...”

“Do you think she heard them talk of Skerlec and Countess Čikulini?”

“What about Skerlec?”

“He’s courting the Countess.”

“Nonsense. Fetch some water or grape brandy.”

“Do you think she is unconscious?”

“She must be. It can’t be anything else, it can’t...”

Filip left immediately to fetch something that would revive her. Siniša tried hard to think what others would do in this situation, but nothing came to mind. This upset him so much that he started to bang his head with his fists to try to remember something useful, but it was all in vain! He grabbed Nera’s arm and when he felt how cold it was he felt goose bumps down his spine. Could she be?...

He didn’t dare finish that thought. Just thinking about the terrible word that imposed itself shook him to the core. He was crushed, and he lost all sense and reason. He got on his knees, took hold of Nera’s cold hand and started to whisper:

“Hate me, Nera, despise me all you want, just live, live! What would the poor, wretched Earth do if the Sun stopped shining on it?! Everything dies with the sun...”

She lay there frozen, mute. He pressed his ear against her breast to try and discern a heartbeat, but her breast was cold and silent—like death. This almost drove him insane. He grabbed his hair with both his hands as if he were about to pull it out. Horror glimmered in his eyes, his lips started to lose color and sounds of pain and fear erupted from his chest. Filip entered the room, and Siniša jumped:

“Come, come, help her. We are fools for not knowing what to do to help. We should do something straight away. Do you know what would help?”

“If she’s only unconscious, I know what to do.”

“Stop hallucinating, direct me.”

“Rub her temples with vinegar.”

Siniša did as he was told and started to rub Nera’s temples as Filip rubbed the veins on her arms. In a few moments Filip gave Siniša a small bottle and said:

“Put this under her nose. If she is alive, this will wake her up!”

Siniša took the bottle and did as Filip said. He stared at her face holding the bottle under her nose, eagerly watching if she would wake up. It seemed to him as if an hour went by without Nera giving them any sign that she was alive. Suddenly he noticed that her face lost its paleness, her lips slowly opened and her breast rose and fell.

“Can you see this? Or are my eyes playing tricks on me?” Siniša asked Filip.

“Quiet, quiet!” Filip said softly. “It is just a fainting spell.”

The hand in which Siniša was holding the bottle shook, and he pressed it against Nera’s face. An unusual feeling coursed through his body: Nera’s eyes were open, and she was staring directly at

his. Her gaze was insentient, timid and scared. It was as if she neither felt nor understood what was happening around her. Both men were silent, waiting for her to speak, but she made no sign that she recognized them. Siniša still hoped that she would lift her head and tell him what had happened to her, but she just closed her eyes and fell asleep. Siniša and Filip were both very concerned, tormented by the uncertainty of what had happened and what would yet come to pass.

“What should we do now?” Siniša asked.

“We’ll wait for her to fall asleep.”

“We should turn off the lamps so as not to make it appear as if we were celebrating a holiday. Go, Filip, and I’ll stay by her side.”

Filip went away while Siniša stayed by Nera’s bedside, listening to her breathing. He stared directly at her, watching every twitch of her lips, every tremor of her hand, and counting the heavy sighs she occasionally breathed. Suddenly he noticed her forehead bead with sweat, her lips regain color, and the flames of illness burn through her pale skin. He could tell that she was gripped by fever, and he was frightened. What if she were to fall deathly ill? How would he treat her without revealing her whereabouts? If they were to find out, they’d drag her back to the dungeon. What would he do if she fell ill, stuck in this isolated castle with men who knew nothing of caring for the sick?

A hundred worries raced through his mind, and a hundred plans of what he should do and how. He consoled himself in vain, trying to make light of his fear. With every passing moment it became clearer that Nera was truly burning up with fever.

The castle was quiet; the men had gone to sleep. Only Filip meandered the halls, extinguishing the candle flames and thinking about Nera’s fainting spell. The wind picked up outside, carrying heavy clouds that shortly sprinkled petite autumn raindrops. An hour had

passed since Siniša sat by Nera, with trepidation in his heart, waiting for her to wake up.

Suddenly the girl trembled, lifted her arms in the air as if trying to catch someone then lowered them again and started to smile. She kept moving her lips as if she were engaged in conversation.

She calmed down a bit, but then her desperate scream shook the room:

“Save her, save her! Grandmamma, don’t die... Help, help!...”

She lay on her side peacefully for a few moments but then she lifted her head and stared at Siniša:

“It’s not the devil—there’s no devil! Don’t be angry—my grandmamma isn’t to blame, it’s the Captain...”

She then closed her eyes and threw herself to the wall, but was soon gripped by a new terror. She started to scream: “No, don’t do it, help! Fire, fire, grandmamma is on fire...”

She grabbed her beautiful hair and started to pull it:

“I’ll go into the flames! We’ll go together! Grandmamma, don’t, your Nera is by your side! Mom is here, dad is here, we’ll burn together! Grandmamma, does it burn? We’ll free you straight away...”

She stopped talking, but was breathing heavily. Beads of sweat dripped down her face. Her cheekbones were on fire, her hands were sweaty, and she bent her body in the fetal position. Siniša covered her with a blanket, but she threw it off, sat up on the bed and looked at him so bewilderedly that it made him flinch. She kept bending her head toward him and opening her eyes wider, and then she screamed:

“It’s the Captain’s fault! The Captain burned the castle down! It’s the Captain’s fault!”

Siniša arose. He felt as if the room were spinning. He shuddered, crossed his hands and begged her:

“Please, Contessa, calm down!”

But she neither heard nor understood his words. Siniša must have seen that it was futile to speak, since her words were nonsensical too. But she seemed to have realized that the man who had kidnapped her in the devil suit enraging the crowd was the man who stood next to her now. Nera’s words fell on Siniša’s soul like lead.

So, the thing he feared most had finally come to pass. She had learned that the incensed mob had burned down the castle in which her grandmother, her only support in this world, had perished. “I only thought about saving her, and I never meant for this tragedy to happen. If I could have predicted that, I would have left my men to defend the castle. Damned, hoodwinked mob! Who would have thought that their minds were so poisoned? I was foolish not to have seen it coming. No, I never could have predicted this, not in a million years. I was consumed with thoughts of her and the stake that was to burn her alive. My God, I would have saved her if it had meant that the whole Grič and the whole of Kaptol would burn in her stead. But what am I to do now? My deed resulted in terrible consequences. For God’s sake, what will I do now?”

His gaze fell upon the girl who lay there calmly, breathing heavily, and his heart ached. He had never felt this kind of pain before. He unbuttoned his collar, fearing it would strangle him. Filip stood behind him by the open door, his eyes filled with tears. When Siniša noticed him, he arose and approached him, placing both hands on his shoulders:

“How have I sinned against God that this should be my terrible punishment?!”

“It’s not your fault!”

“But I could have done this differently. I should have torn down the tower at the Stone Gate. I should have shot all of her guards, judges and lictors, and had I kidnapped her that way

my crime would have been lesser than what resulted from my dangerous game of dressing up as a devil. But it's too late now. You see what happened!"

The young man pointed at the bed where Nera was hallucinating again, speaking of this and that, oft repeating the terrible words that tore through Siniša's heart:

"It's the Captain's fault..."

"We have no choice but to decide how to proceed," Filip said.

"Listen, friend, we should primarily find a woman to nurse her to health. But who? There's danger of Nera being recognized, and this would be tragic. We need a doctor, but where should we get one? Everyone knows who she is."

"Wouldn't Krajačić's Sanda be a good person to confide in?" Filip counseled.

"Yes, I have thought about that, but how would Sanda come to us and stay here? It's impossible. Her father won't let her out of the house. What excuse could she give him for leaving? She's not brave enough to go through with such a scheme."

"I just thought of something," Filip cried. "I know a woman who loves Nera and does not believe that she is a witch. She is a smart, practical woman who would never betray her former mistress. I met her at Countess Ratkay's castle. I'll go see her."

"Alright, go, but make haste. And what about a doctor?"

"We can't get Stiller here—who knows if he would keep a secret. Besides, don't worry, I will take care of the necessities. This woman I am bringing knows how to heal people. It will be alright."

"I will anxiously await your return."

Siniša sat by Nera, wiping the sweat off her face and listening to the hallucinations that caused him so much pain. The castle was quiet, only Nera's desperate unconscious words from



time to time disrupted the silence and shook Siniša to the core as he sat there worried and distressed. Autumn rain kept drumming on the windows wistfully and forlornly...

## Chapter 45: Barica Cindek, the Baker

Mikica had spent the whole morning snooping around Barica Cindek's store. She was one of the most respected bakers in Grič. Though she was a widow she had an inviting way about her that, coupled with her baking skills, brought many customers to her door. Countess Ratkay also helped establish her business, having opened the door to aristocratic clientele so that every morning all the Grič castles' servants gathered around Barica with their baskets.

This was cause enough for the other bakers to hate the widow, particularly her neighbor Palčička. Andrija Palčič's store was immediately adjacent to the Mother of God's painting to one side and Cindek's store to the other, which made Cindek's store second in a row under the Stone Gate. Right next door the young Adam Sulić sold his buttons and lacquer. These were small shops; half served as a display window, and the other half was the entrance. Mikica had had his eye on the pretty widow for a while now, since he would see her daily as he walked, self-importantly and laden with files, to the tower. But she would hardly look at him.

Since there had been no hearings or tortures since the day Nera was kidnapped, Mikica had plenty of time to lurk around the store. He finally positioned himself in front of the door that evening lit his little pipe and glanced into the store. Seeing as the widow was alone, he opened the door and entered.

"Good evening, maiden Barica," Mikica greeted her.

The widow was sitting in the corner knitting socks.

"Good evening. What good brings you here, Cleric?"

"I came for some fresh bread. No one in town can bake a loaf like you can," Mikica said.

The widow gave him some bread, and Mikica sat down to eat.

“Have you heard about the devils dancing on the remains of the ‘Red Castle’? It’s the talk of the town,” the widow asked.

“Of course, people have seen them do it.”

“That is madness. People will believe anything.”

“Not so loudly, madam,” Mikica cautioned her. “You know I won’t betray you, but someone else might hear you speak this way and incriminate you.”

“I’m not afraid of anyone. An honest woman has nothing to hide. I have my wits about me.”

“I know that but you see, it’s hardly prudent to be so vocal about such opinions. They will say that you don’t believe in the stories because you are a witch as well.”

The young widow laughed:

“No one in the world could say such a thing about me.”

“But of course. This is why I have come to warn you of something. When we interrogated Katica Doleneč, she mentioned that you were in the coven as well.”

“Me?” Cindekovka was surprised. Her fresh, rosy face turned pale. “May God enlighten her! How could she have mentioned me when she has never even met me? I am an honest and law-abiding woman. And what did the gentlemen think of this?”

“They didn’t hear her say it, since I was the only one at the hearing. And you know, Barica, that I won’t give you away. I didn’t even write it down. I am even prepared to fool a Judge for your sake. You remember what I said to you three days ago.”

“Mikica, let it go. You’re not the man for me.”

His face darkened and he approached the widow.

“Barica, you shouldn’t speak to me this way. Why wouldn’t I be the man for you? Am I not a man of the Magistrate’s office , with more schooling than many others?”

“You’re nothing but an expelled seminary student, my dear Mikica!”

“I was not expelled, I left. That’s just the gossip of the jealous folk, who resent that I speak Latin just like the gentlemen do.”

Barica laughed, but Mikica abruptly grabbed both of her hands, which made the widow jump off her chair:

“Let go of my hands!”

“Place them around my neck, Barica,” Mikica whispered, looking at the widow’s pretty face with his beady eyes.

“Stay back, you fool. This is below me.”

“Barica, you will regret this!”

“I’m not afraid of anyone.”

“I can send you to the tower if I wish. If you’d only listen...”

Barica pushed against the Cleric attempting to free her hands, but he held them in a tight grip and tried to pull her to his chest. However, the widow was strong and fit, so she pushed Mikica away and ran for the door. He managed to block the door and grab her hands again, trying to kiss her against her will.

“Barica, your name is in my files. Choose: will you go to the tower or into my arms?”

“I can’t decide which I despise more,” she said, attempting to free herself.

Mikica started to fight her. The widow’s sinewy arms fought him determinedly, but the cleric was stronger. Mikica had almost pulled her onto his chest completely when the button vendor Adam showed at the door.

One look through the glass door panes made the situation clear to him. Adam pushed the door and entered the store, peeled Mikica off of Barica, pushed him to the door and roared:

“Don’t you ever step in this shop again, you shameless crook!”

Mikica Smernjak was shoved into the street, and the button vendor closed the shop door behind him. Barica stood in the far corner of the room, staring at the button vendor with surprise.

“I hope you don’t mind me coming to your rescue?” Adam asked, his young face blushing. He was considerably younger than Barica, and always felt a bit shy around her.

“That’s a foolish thing to say,” the widow responded, insulted. She sat on the chair and started to rub Mikica’s fingerprints off her hands. The button vendor stood silently before her, and said after a short silence:

“Barica, do you enjoy living like this, defenseless? The world is a scary place, and no one would hesitate from harming a widow.”

“I will marry again, if I find the right man.”

Adam sighed, and Barica looked at him sideways.

“Have you not found him yet?” he asked timidly.

“I have. But he’s being silly and keeping quiet... I have no intention of being the one to proposition him.”

Adam blushed up to his ears. He approached her, leaning on the table so that their faces almost touched:

“Who can figure you out, Barica? You are fickle, and I keep struggling to figure you out. You are either oblivious to this or you enjoy witnessing my troubles.”

“And what would you like instead? Well? Tell me!”

He blushed and stuttered:

“I’d like you, Barica!”

The widow smiled:

“I’m the priciest merchandise in this shop, my dear,” she replied.

“And what’s the asking price?”

“A kind heart and an honest soul.”

The button vendor blushed even harder:

“Don’t I have those qualities?” he asked, dejected.

“I know you’re an honest man, but I don’t know about your heart. Do you really have a kind heart?”

“Only for you, Barica!” He uttered those words so warmly and sincerely that she gazed tenderly upon his handsome, melancholy face that was so close to hers. And, as if the joke was now over, she cast down her eyes and looked at the floor. He felt emboldened by this so he continued, still leaning on the table:

“I’ve been thinking of you for the past two Michaelmas<sup>112</sup> Days. But you have so many suitors who are seasoned artisans, so I felt like my hands were tied. I had to keep quiet and wait to see what you would decide because I had the feeling, Barica, that you were just casually flirting with them without considering anyone seriously.”

“You were right!”

He was perturbed for a moment, but he continued:

“I don’t have much, I haven’t been an artisan for long and my standing among the burghers is still tentative, but I keep thinking how nice it would be to spend my day running the

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<sup>112</sup> Maichaelmas Day, September 29<sup>th</sup>, is a day set up in the General Roman Calendar for celebrating the archangel Michael’s feast.

shop if I could come home to you at night, help you carry the bread basket to the shop in the morning, if I could come speak with you whenever I wished.”

Barica watched him silently, with ardor. Her gaze gave Adam the goose bumps, and he unthinkingly placed his hand on hers.

“Will you always be this good to me, Adam?” she asked softly.

“I won’t give you oaths and long speeches about this. You will see for yourself. I don’t wish for anything more in the world, just you, so how could I not be good to you?”

The room was dark. Barica arose to light a small candle, and just as she did so the door to the shop opened. Mikica stood at the threshold with a cop.

“What do you want?” Adam asked Mikica sternly.

“This is a summons for Ms. Barica Cindek.”

“What summons?” Adam asked.

“How does this concern you?” Mikica said derisively. “What are you to her?”

“I am her future husband, and you’d better get lost if you enjoy the use of your legs. Hand over the summons.”

Adam’s strong fists scared Mikica, so he told the policeman to hand over the summons. Adam read that Barica Cindek was required to report to the Magistrate’s office within the next eight days.

“What does Hon. Sale want with her?” Adam asked.

“Ask him,” Mikica replied, gave Cindovka a malicious stare and exited the store along with the policeman.

When Adam and Barica were alone again, she told him what Mikica had said to her about a witch having accused her of being in the ‘coven.’

“You—in the coven, Barica?!” Adam cried, with surprise. “You?”

This was the first time he addressed her familiarly, and he did so without even noticing.

“You don’t believe that, do you Adam?”

“I wouldn’t believe this if God himself, or a hundred witnesses, or all the witches testified against you! You are the best and most honorable woman, Barica. I will go to Sale in your stead. Don’t worry about anything. I will defend you, just leave it to me.”

The young widow was touched, and tears filled her eyes. The button vendor caressed her face with his strong, bony hands, leaned over, placed his arm around her shoulder and said:

“Don’t be sad, Barica! I will give the gentlemen a piece of my mind. You are mine, and no one can touch you now, not even with a pinkie. Do you know this?”

“If I had only known how happy you’d be to be with me, I would not have shied away from you so much,” she sighed. “The Babe always used to tell me you only wanted me for my shop.”

Adam was hurt by those words.

“And you believed them?”

“If I believed them, I wouldn’t have given you a single glance.”

“Would you like to get married at Christmastime?”

“Yes,” she replied softly.

“You won’t regret this, Barica.”

“Lord willing,” she replied. “But it’s time for me to close the shop,” she said quietly and ducked from under his embrace. “People have malicious tongues...”

“I will escort you home.”



A few moments later Barica and Adam closed down their shops and walked up toward Marko's square. Adam had never before been this happy walking home from his shop. He was kinder than usual to every passerby that the young couple encountered, and he felt prouder, more daring. Adam halted in front of Barica's house:

"I will come tomorrow morning to help you carry the bread basket. May I?"

"Come," she said.

And they held each other's hands before parting happily, contentedly.

Midnight had come and gone, and autumn rain flooded the streets of Grič. Everyone was sound asleep, except for the lighted windows at Countess Čikulini's. Merry sounds of music could be heard through the closed windows, signaling the joy of the company inside.

A horseman clambered up to the Stone Gate and turned on Opatička Street. Once there, he halted before a small house, got off his horse and knocked at the window. He had to knock persistently until a small window opened and a woman's face appeared:

"Who is this?"

"It's me, Filip. Do you remember me, maiden Cindekovka?"

"What in God's name came over you to come here at this time of night? Where are you coming from?"

"I'll tell you shortly, let me come into the yard."

"But for God's sake I am a widow, I live alone. What will people say?"

"Don't worry about the gossip, madam. A life that you may be able to save is on the line."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"As God is my witness. You know I am no liar."

All was silent for a few minutes, as if Barica contemplated what to do, and then a voice was heard:

“Come in.”

Soon the yard gate swung open and Filip entered with his horse. He tied it up, and then faced Barica Cindek who had wrapped herself in a long cloak.

“So, what is it?”

“Tell me, Barica, do you believe that our mistress, Contessa Nera, is a witch?”

“What rubbish! If she’s a witch, then Krajačić is a wizard.”

“Do you still love the Contessa like you used to?”

“Of course I do, how could I not! Grič had never seen a better countess.”

“And what do you think of the devil who kidnapped her?”

“Honestly, at first I believed that it was the devil. But after thinking it over I realized: perhaps someone had just pretended to be a devil so he’d be able to kidnap her.”

“Swear to me, madam, that you will never tell anyone what I am about to share with you.”

“May my tongue dry out if I blabber.”

“I know where our mistress is!”

“For God’s sake, where?”

“She is in harm’s way. She is ravaged by fever and is lying now helpless and with no one to care for her. We men can’t help her, and Barica, if you have a heart, please come with me straight away.”

“You ask too much of me. You know I am a bread vendor and...”

“You will be compensated for your troubles, don’t worry.”

“It’s not just that. I have to let someone know first, but if it’s as bad as you say, I will go. I enjoyed many favors from both the old and the young Countess. They helped me, and if it weren’t for them I wouldn’t have a nice shop like I do now. I wish to repay kindness with kindness. You’re an honest man. Hold on a bit while I write a letter for someone.”

“I know who you’re writing to. Button vendor Adam?”

“I will just explain that I had to go on urgent business to see my sister in Bukovac. He should stay calm and trust that I am away for honest reasons.”

“Alright,” Filip said, “do so.”

Barica got ready and set the letter so that Adam would find it in the morning when he came to help her carry the bread. The baker had a coach with one horse that she used to deliver baked goods. Filip got it ready while Barica picked various herbs in her garden and gathered all kinds of home remedies made out of assorted roots. Barica was assuring Filip that the Contessa will overcome her fever without the doctor’s help. She had experience helping patients recover with the help of the *lord’s sheet*, *sheepie*, and various other clays, greens and roots! A quarter of an hour later they faced rain and wind embarking on a journey to Sljemen. Barica led her horse, and Filip rode by her showing her the way. Having faced great challenges: thick mud, ditches and poor road conditions, they finally made it to the hunting castle.

Barica was surprised to learn that this is where her mistress was hidden, and she was even more shocked to find the handsome Captain Siniša, the fancy of every girl and lady on Grič, by her side. When she entered the room the young man approached her and offered his hand. Barica was surprised by his graciousness and went to check on Nera immediately. She found her consumed by fever and hallucinating. The baker felt her hands and examined her face like a doctor.

“It’s a fever, my dear sir,” she said. “I am familiar with the symptoms. If only I had as many forints as there are people whom I have cured of it!”

“I wouldn’t presume to question your expertise, my dear woman,” Siniša noted, “but I am afraid to give her medicine that a doctor didn’t prescribe.”

“No, sir, all of this is quite simple. I will put some cold *Lord’s sheet* on her forehead, and change it out frequently. I also have some other herbs that I will use as dressing over her head and chest, and she will get better. Here, you see, these are the roots I need to boil and cool for her to drink. If you’re uneasy about it, have a taste and you will see that it is good and useful. Now leave me alone with her for a short while so I can adjust her body to make her more comfortable. If she does not recover, you will still have a chance to call the doctor.”

Siniša and Filip went to the adjacent room where they sat silently, staring into space. They were somewhat relieved to have Barica in the castle with them. But Siniša did not have much faith in her remedies.

“Don’t worry, Siniša!” Filip finally said. “I know the baker. She treated all of our women at the Countess’ castle and is good at it. She once apprenticed with a doctor where she picked up a lot of knowledge about medicine.”

In the meantime, Barica had dressed her protégé’s head with cool leaves, which she changed out frequently. This cooled Nera’s forehead and absorbed the heat so that she was able to fall into deep slumber by morning.

The following day dawned overcast and gray; true autumn weather. Siniša sat in his room lost in thought. He was expecting news from the first floor to reach him any minute, but Nera still lay there unconscious. He had not slept a wink all night, but he was unable to rest now. The

horizon of his soul was darker and gloomier than the one outside on which fat, dark clouds hung giving the appearance of twilight.

The atmosphere in the castle resembled that of a church. Everyone tiptoed across the halls, and it was as if all the men understood what was happening and knew the predicament their Captain was in and the tragedy that set into his soul.

By that evening, Nera showed significant signs of improvement. Siniša stayed in his room, hiding from others the pain that so obviously broke his spirit. However, late that day he received a letter from Krajačić summoning him to town immediately. He ordered Filip to stay at the castle and to refuse visitors.

As night settled in, Siniša rode off to Grič.

## Chapter 46: Intrigues

Judge Krajačić's house has been silent for some days now. Little Sanda's daily songs were a thing of the past. The girl paced her home in silence and melancholy from dawn to dusk. The servants whispered:

“What has happened to our young mistress that silenced her song?”

Until now, the sun had not set without the charming girl having filled the house with her reverberant song. Now they'd had several days of silence. She still tidies and cleans her father's rooms, works in the kitchen and walks in the spacious garden, conducts daily business and oversees the household. But she no longer sings. Even the Judge himself noticed that his daughter had changed. He knew that she was mourning the imprisonment of her brother, but she could not understand why she was so pale and depressed. Krajačić had no idea that Sanda's young heart was sick over Francesco Malakoczy. Krajačić never suspected that he was the cause of her grief, though Sanda was the only person whom he truly loved and trusted. Ever since his son Tito attempted to kidnap Nera, that terrible witch, right before his very eyes, Krajačić erased him from his heart.

Father and daughter had just sat down for dinner when the arrival of Captain Siniša was announced. The Judge went to the office in which he usually received visitors and had the young Captain brought in. When Siniša laid eyes on Judge Krajačić, his soul filled with hatred for that miniscule, emaciated little man whose superstition was to blame for all of Nera's misfortunes. The Judge immediately asked him:

“What is happening, Hon. Captain? Your chase produced no results still? I thought you would bring a whole hoard of witches in by now, like you once promised to do, and yet I see no trace of them.”

“It’s not my fault, Hon. Judge, that the witches refuse to gather at the crossroads or at Medvednica. Perhaps this is not their season.”

“It’s been several days that our greatest witch had been kidnapped, and still no news of her whereabouts. You might have caught the kidnapper by now.”

“Hon. Judge, I am unable to follow the devil to hell.”

“I don’t believe the devil took her to hell. He must have settled her somewhere on Earth. You must have heard that the evening of the kidnapping the damned witch burned half of Mesnička Street.”

“But Sir, it was the men who set that street on fire. The wind carried the sparks and embers, and it’s only reasonable to expect that the straw roofs in Mesnička Street would burn too.”

The Judge stared at the Captain with surprise:

“You don’t believe that the witches did it to avenge their Lady Captain?”

‘Damned fool,’ Siniša thought to himself, ‘wouldn’t I love to smack him across his dense bald head!’

“No, Hon. Judge,” he said aloud, “I don’t believe that. For one, I know how it happened, and doesn’t that make sense? Sparks must set fire to the straw, no witches are required for that operation.”

“Don’t speak this way—I am getting the feeling that you have no desire to pursue a witch hunt. You know that the Vice-Governor ordered an end to the crimes that these damned Babe commit.”

“So, what do you want me to do?”

“I invited you here to tell you what had happened—again. I store a lot of wine in the cellar at my vineyard in Bukovac. These past few days my men found an opening under the cellar big enough for a man to crawl through. We established that a good measure of my best wine is missing.”

“Some crafty thieves must have broken into your cellar.”

“No, Hon. Captain, this is the work of the witches.”

Siniša could barely contain himself from saying something imprudent.

“Just ask Notary Sale. He is convinced of it as well, as is Dvojković.”

“And so what would you have me do?” Siniša asked the Judge.

“You need to guard the cellar. Your men must wear some amulets that protect them from the witches. I would like to catch those criminal hags red handed.”

“Alright, Hon. Judge. I am very interested in this matter. Give me eight days at the most and you will know who’s been toasting with your wine. But I would like to note that I believe Hon. Sale should be in charge of this type of an investigation.”

“I am convinced that you will do a better job of it. But please, don’t tell him I asked you to look into it.”

“Will there be anything else, Hon. Judge?”

“Not today. Join us, if you’d like.”



Siniša thanked him for the invitation and bid him adieu. He had barely left the house when he ran into City Notary Sale and Council Commissioner Dvojković.

“What are you doing here, Hon. Captain?” Dvojković asked him. “I was just on my way to the Magistrate’s office to send you a message from Countess Auersperg.”

“What does the Countess want?”

“She wants you to join her at Count Drašković’s where they are throwing a grand celebration in honor of his name day.”

Siniša decided to head straight there, as he felt that would be preferable to her sending someone to the hunting castle to fetch him. The three men walked to Ivan Drašković’s palace together. All the halls shone in a sea of light. The ladies sparkled in their silk gowns and jewels that adorned their powdered heads. The air smelled of scented eau de toilette, the ringing of music spread through the rooms and young couples swayed while slow dancing.

The Captain bowed in front of the hostess and other ladies who surrounded him, curiously questioning him about his absence at Countess Čikulini’s. He made up a sincere-sounding story that they took at face value; he said that his horse was hurt on the way there and how he was sorry to have missed the party, as he had to handle that ordeal. As evening wore on, Contessa Terka found a propitious moment to pull Siniša into a nearby salon. When the Captain sat down into an armchair, she grabbed his head and said, her voice trembling:

“Siniša, I am getting married.”

“Congratulations, Contessa.”

“You terrible man! Are you happy to hear this?”

“Your happiness is dear to me.”

“Siniša, don’t jest. You know what I told you last month?”

The Captain had all but forgotten it.

“You know why I am getting married, Siniša—for you, only for you.”

“I can’t believe that. You’re not as mean as all that.”

The Contessa help up her beautiful dark head, and jealous rage seeped from her eyes:

“You should be ashamed of yourself! How is my love for you ‘mean’?”

“It isn’t, but the fact that you’re planning on cheating your husband is.”

“Since when have you joined the priesthood, Siniša? Or can it be that you have changed your mind? You know there isn’t a man in this world I’d rather marry than you. Will you be my husband?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Terka grew pale. She squeezed his hand passionately.

“That’s not a very nice thing to say.”

“But it’s the truth.”

“So you truly don’t love me?”

“No, Contessa, I truly don’t.”

“So which one is it?”

“There isn’t one.”

“I don’t believe you. Your eyes speak of your love. If only I knew.”

“Then what?”

“I’d poison her.”

These words sounded like bloody revenge coming from her, and Siniša felt by her tone that she would be capable of making good on her promise. And when he thought of Nera, lying

forsaken and despised in a solitary castle, Terka's threat almost filled him with fear. 'What if she knew I loved Nera? What if she learned of Nera's whereabouts? She would run straight to Krajačić and lead him there to drag Nera back to the tower again. And it would be so easy for her to figure this out! Every day presents a new danger of someone finding out about Nera's hiding place. Any moment Skerlec could come to the castle as its rightful owner, prepare a hunt and...'

"What are you thinking about?" Contessa Terka asked. "I think you're drawn to Sljeme for an especially intriguing reason. Do you think I did not notice how you used to spend your days and nights in Zagreb, and how today is the sixth day that you have been out, at that castle? Everyone gossips about it already: they think it's not only the witches who keep you employed there."

"Those are Babe' stories. You're a smart girl, and I wonder at your falling prey to these speculations. I worry about no woman, and I am not in love with one, but I can't guarantee to remain unaffected forever..."

"Could I be the one you fall in love with?"

"I couldn't tell, Contessa. Perhaps—perhaps not."

Terka listened to these words desirously, moved closer to the Captain and whispered:

"Well I don't require you to love me all that much. I only need you to love me a small, negligible amount."

Siniša looked at her absentmindedly.

"Love me at least as much as would allow me to love you back. You see, Siniša, you're the reason I wish to marry another, only you! Look at me, Siniša. Am I not beautiful? Am I not desirable? They say I am enchanting. You wouldn't be a man not to notice."

"I made those observations a long time ago."

“And you are not burning with the desire to own this beauty?”

“Your beauty does not leave me cold, but I am not fit to be a husband. I am a vagabond who enjoys bumming around the world; I am a madman, my dear Contessa—a true Trenk brigand. What would you want with such a man?”

“But this is exactly why I love you so much. I love your strength, your adventures, I love your outlaw temperament!”

Fiery passion glimmered in her eyes, her face was inflamed. Consumed by emotion, Terka threw herself around Siniša’s neck.

“You’re mine, you must be mine!” she cried, ardently.

Even just a month ago, Siniša would have engaged in the embrace out of vengeance for Nera’s loathing of him, which boiled inside him at the time. But today he was so consumed by his secret love that he couldn’t muster common courtesy for Terka. Something came to mind, though: he grabbed Terka’s hands off of his neck, lowered them slowly away and said to her gently:

“Contessa, may I give you a clever piece of advice?”

“I give you my love, and you wish to give me advice?”

“A woman entices love when she’s not submissive. If only you were somewhat more cunning and flirtatious, you would be able to invoke a passion you yearn for.”

“You are right, but my love is like fire. I burn, I am tortured and I cannot keep it a secret. Siniša, if you can’t love me you must allow me to love you. In a month I will marry another, and you shall be mine.”

Countess Auersperg entered the salon at that moment. One look at Contessa Terka revealed to her the girl’s flushed face and fiery eyes.

“Are you courting the young Captain, Contessa?” the Countess said maliciously. “But of course, you can’t be serious. He’s already taken.”

Terka stared at the Countess furiously. The Countess noticed and understood that look, but she felt victorious. She smiled and invited Siniša to escort her to the dance floor.

“Forgive me, I can’t dance today,” Siniša replied. “I have some urgent business to discuss with Count Drašković.”

The Captain felt that these women had just become sworn enemies, but he welcomed the development, as it seemed to him that this would deflect danger from Nera: ‘Let them gnaw at each other. Let them suspect each other, and then at least neither of them will look for another woman at the castle.’

Dvojković approached Siniša and asked to accompany him. The Captain asked the ladies to excuse him.

“I would still like to finish our conversation,” Terka told Siniša.

“I aspire to act like a gentleman, but the Council Commissioner needs to see me on official business.”

Siniša left, and Countesses Terka and Auersperg were left behind. For a moment they stared at each other murderously.

“Please, Contessa, don’t bother trying to seduce Siniša,” the Countess said mockingly. “He is engaged.”

“No, he refuses to marry.”

“Is this what he told you? You see what a gentleman he is! He found a clever way to deflect your courtship.”

“As well as your burden,” Terka said angrily, leaving the Countess in the salon.

In the meantime, Dvojković and Siniša walked together:

“Hon. Captain, why do you claim that there are no witches in the Judge’s vineyard?”

“Who told you about this?”

“Krajačić had just arrived and told me all about your conversation.”

“I don’t believe some Babe did that. Good wine is a man’s craving.”

“But if the Judge insists that it was the witches, why question him?”

“You surprise me, Hon. Council! The Judge is superstitious enough—why do you encourage him?”

“It’s not superstition. I am convinced that the witches could be responsible for it.”

“Hon. Council Commissioner, you don’t believe in witches!”

“How could you say such a thing about me? Am I not the defender of the law that clearly claims that the witches exist?”

“Regardless. Your face tells me that you don’t believe in it. I think that you mock the poor saps that do. But why do you insist on spurring Judge Krajačić’s obsession with witch hunts?”

Dvojković was a bit perturbed and said, offended:

“Forgive me, Hon. Captain, your accusations are too brazen. Your word choice is very strange.”

“Take it as you will. But when you claim that it was the witches who stole Krajačić’s wine, I must deduce that you are either making a fool out of the Judge or that you have an alternate agenda that thrives on Krajačić’s belief in crazy superstitions.”

“Hon. Captain, I am offended by your words.”

“So seek restitution.”

“I have no intention of dueling you.”

“I would advise against that.”

“But I would like to assure you that it was truly the witches who came into Krajačić’s vineyard and stole the wine in revenge.”

“Maybe it was the ‘witches’: male drunkards.”

“But, Hon. Captain, you insult the City Captain, myself as well as the Judge; it is as if you’re saying that some criminals did it and that we either couldn’t or wouldn’t apprehend them.”

“It’s either one or the other!”

With those words Siniša left Dvojković, who then hurried to inform Countess Auersperg of something important. Siniša wandered the shiny halls in which people draped in silks and jewels swarmed and enjoyed themselves loudly and jubilantly, dancing without a care in the world, chatting and gossiping, kissing, diplomatizing and coining political and social intrigues. The ladies attempted to outshine each other with their dress and beauty, and the girls obsessed over securing a suitable husband.

When Siniša came out on the hallway, he noticed two figures walk across the thick rug among the richly decorated walls. He halted at the door for a moment to see who they were; Countess Čikulini and Baron Skerlec.

“Don’t, Hon. Baron, it’s not good for you to mourn. It can’t be changed,” Countess Čikulini was telling the young Baron.

“I’m not sorry for her, but I am finding it hard to live through such an embarrassment.”

“It will all be forgotten, Hon. Baron. After all, you see, it wasn’t all her fault. She had no proper guidance growing up. Countess Ratkay left her to her own devices, and the girl did as she pleased.”

“But she was a reasonable girl.”

“Let it go, Hon. Baron. Think of happier things! Who knows if there isn’t a soul on this world who would understand and love you? She was never right for you anyway.”

“Do you think I shall find such a soul?”

“I will help you look for her, out of gratitude that I feel toward your mother.”

“You, madam Baroness? You are young and you should think of your own happiness.”

“Yes, Hon. Baron, I am a young widow but happiness eschews my doorstep. I have completely surrendered to my goal of finding happiness for others. I live off of other people’s joy, and if I could just see you happy I would be very, very pleased.”

“You are a noble woman, Countess.”

“I don’t know if this is nobility, but it has always been my disposition. Forget about everything that tied you to Nera.”

“I will forget, I am forgetting. But still, I loved her—she was beautiful and refined.”

“But she was too hard-headed, not delicate enough and too confident to abide by the prescriptions that our circles of society must uphold.”

“Yes, she was too independent, and perhaps she wasn’t always behaving as befits a lady at court. But what happened to her? Countess, do you think it was a real devil that took her, the one who kidnaps witches?”



“Everything she had said pointed to her being a witch—so it could have been a real devil. Some say it was a ‘Lucifer.’”

“What ‘Lucifer’?”

“I’m not quite sure myself. I heard that there’s a society in our circles that formed in the interest of pursuing fun—but I don’t know anything about it.”

Siniša had had enough of this conversation so he walked down the hallway to the right, trying to leave the castle. Count Nadaždi met him and cordially greeted him.

“What happened to you, my dear Captain? Everyone wonders at your absence from society.”

Siniša excused himself with work, and then steered the conversation to the Remetins.

“I was just talking to Count Drašković about them. We will try to get the Judge to release our young people. I assume you’re talking about the young men who tried to save Nera. Judge Krajačić even imprisoned his own son. This is madness. The young men fell in love with a beautiful girl and fancied being her rescuers. Their desire to play knights messed with their heads, but our Krajačić sees them as conspirators and God knows what.”

“Will he really set them free?”

“I did my part. It would be crazy to have the children waste away in the dungeon for such a small adventure as this. I will find a way to force Krajačić to agree with me.”

“He truly believes that Nera is some sort of a terrible witch,” Siniša said, trying to gage what the Governor thought of her.

“I couldn’t tell you if she is a witch or not,” the Governor said. “Certainly, she was an odd girl. Something about her was quite unnatural! But regardless, it would be a greater shame to have the sons of our nobility suffer in the dungeon over her.”

Siniša did not bring Nera up again. He was not pleased by Nadaždi's opinion. The Governor led him into the hall and introduced him to a circle of noblemen who were just discussing Count Petar Oršić.

"What about Petar Oršić?" Nadaždi asked the gentlemen.

"He wanted to urge the Queen to intervene on Nera's behalf, but they say he was not received."

"How come? He was always welcome at court."

"This time someone stopped him from reaching the Queen," Dvojković said.

"Must be some intrigue?" Nadaždi asked.

Dvojković shrugged his shoulders and said:

"Certainly, it was in someone's best interest for Nera to not be freed."

"Who told you this?" Siniša asked, keeping quiet thus far,

"My informants, Hon. Captain."

Dvojković smiled, and an older nobleman twisted his mustache and said:

"No need to ask who it was. It was obviously a woman. I do believe there's no man on Earth who wouldn't regret having that beautiful child burned at the stake."

"Perhaps you know who this woman might be, Hon. Count?" nobleman Malakoczy asked Count Vojkffy.

"How should I know?" Vojkffy replied. "I am not familiar with our ladies' schemes."

"I think I might guess," the Governor intervened. "Perhaps a beautiful young widow?"

"But which one. I know several beautiful young widows," Vojkffy said.

"If we knew why Nera was in the way, we'd be able to guess who it was."

“She must have seduced a man that the other one had her eye on,” Dvojković said pointedly.

“Well now we’re back to square one. Half of our cavaliers were in love with Nera, and I can’t help but think that one of them kidnapped her,” Malakoczy noted.

“And perhaps it was the devil. What do you think, Hon. Captain?” Vojkffy asked Siniša.

“I don’t believe in devils.”

“Either your men didn’t try hard enough to catch him,” Dvojković said maliciously, “or he really rode off so hellishly that he was impossible to catch.”

“You seem to be terribly affected by this?” Siniša said to Count Vojkffy scornfully.

“Why didn’t you chase after them?” the Captain laughed in the Count’s face.

“Why me?”

“Well you were the one on your knees, professing your love for her.”

“And you dueled me for it—so we are all good?”

“If you’d like, we could give it another go.”

Nadaždi interrupted this conversation, took Count Vojkffy aside and said to him:

“For God’s sake, don’t start with him again! You know what he’s like. You suffered the consequences once before, and it seems to me as if he’s itching to challenge you to a duel again.”

“This is one wish that won’t come true for him. I know someone who will soon clip Siniša’s wings.”

“Countess Auersperg? Look, he’s talking to her now. It doesn’t look like the pretty lady is happy with the young Captain. Just look at her frown.”

Siniša was standing before the Countess who was eyeing him crossly and said, grudgingly:

“Siniša, you must stop this at once. I recently promised you an engagement ring in half a year, but I changed my mind. We will wed in a month.”

“You may wed today, but not to me. You have no right to demand marriage of me.”

“Could Terka have seduced you? Do you think I haven’t noticed how Nadaždi flatters you? Hon/ Governor will have to desist from his plans of marrying you to his daughter.”

“I agree.”

“Siniša, I am asking you for the last time: will you or will you not marry me?”

“No!”

“You don’t realize I have you cornered. Remember: we will be wed in a month. This is the final word on the subject.”

“And how do you plan to force me into this?”

“Think of your past, and you’ll know. Or are you hoping that no one knows about it?”

Siniša grew pale, and looked darkly at the Countess.

“What do you know?” he asked crudely.

She smiled and replied amiably:

“Be smart, dear Siniša!”

Count Vojkffy approached them and looked at Siniša with a wicked smile. Without looking at Vojkffy the Captain said:

“Good night, Countess!”

“Let him go,” Vojkffy whispered to the Countess. “He’ll be back.”

Siniša returned to the hunting castle late at night. The place was dark but for the light in his room. Filip waited for him.

“How is she?” Siniša asked.

“Very well. She is sound asleep, and the fever went down.”

“Thank God!” he said to himself, and started pacing the room.

“You’re in a foul mood,” Filip noted.

The Captain made no reply. He kept pacing. Then he suddenly stopped before Filip and asked him sternly and quietly:

“How could Auersperg know of...that?”

“She? I don’t know. I find that hard to believe!”

“That damned woman. She’s threatening me, she wants me to marry her.”

“You? To marry such a... But what if she does know?”

“I won’t marry her, no matter what.”

“This is terrible. She’s a dangerous woman. She can tell the Queen about you, and you would be lost—no one could save you then.”

“So what? I only stand to lose my head! I don’t care for it much anyway.”

Both were silent. Siniša paced the room again, and then stopped suddenly.

“Filip, let’s not worry about this; go to bed.”

Filip left the room. Siniša took his coat off and continued to pace until fatigue and sleep caught up with him.

## Chapter 47: Siniša and Nera

Filip woke Siniša early the following morning.

“What happened?”

“She regained consciousness and wishes to speak with you.”

“With me?”

Siniša jumped off the bed and quickly started to get dressed. When he was done, he went up to the first floor. Baker Cindek met him in the hallway and said mirthfully:

“You see, Hon. Captain, I knew my medicine would help her. I have never been so happy about curing someone as I am today.”

“The Contessa wishes to speak with me.”

“Please, come in.”

Siniša’s heart fluttered when he opened the door. Nera lay on the bed, her eyes closed. Her beautiful big eyes were lost in the dark circles. Thick ashen locks framed her pale face and spilled over white pillows. Siniša remained by the door. She opened her eyes and met his. Silence lasted several minutes, and Siniša felt like he had never experienced such sadness, such fear as he did at that moment, in trepidation over what she was about to say. But he was surprised by her calm gaze to the point of almost feeling happy that it rested on him. He wished that she might stay silent and look at him this way forever, void of anger and hatred.

The girl opened her mouth and he was forced to endure the sound of her harsh voice again:

“We have a bloody score to settle, Captain.”

He shuddered.

“I am listening.”

“You decided one day to have some fun and pull Judge Krajačić’s nose.”

“Even if I were to tell you that this wasn’t true, you wouldn’t believe me,” he said softly.

“Didn’t you tell me that night that the only thing that inspired you to ride through Grič dressed like the devil was your thirst for adventure?”

“I did say that.”

“And you said that you had no ill intentions in kidnapping me?”

“I stand by those words.”

“But you know, Hon. Captain, how your actions affected me!” Nera said, lifting her beautiful head. He had never seen such passionate hatred in her eyes before. Siniša was almost defeated by that look. So, this was the moment of reckoning!

“Was I supposed to leave you to Krajačić?”

“Yes! You should have left me alone and found another adventure beside me! You should have entertained yourself in a manner that wouldn’t make my grandmamma’s murderer of you... While you were having your fun, my grandmamma sobbed as she burned to death!...”

Words stuck in her throat and her voice broke in a tearful tremor, breaking Siniša’s heart along with it. He took a step forward.

“I swear to you... Contessa, do you truly think I am not a man, but a monster?”

Surprised, she looked at his pale, glum face and listened to his strange tone of voice that revealed heartbreak and pain. She felt differently about his eyes that stared at her so unusually and peculiarly: a far cry from that ironic, malicious, mocking stare he used to give her.

‘What if he repented his actions?’ Nera thought. “Perhaps my grandmamma’s terrible death shook his soul, and he regrets his evil intentions? Perhaps he is sorry for what he did; perhaps he has a grandmamma himself somewhere in the world, and the thought of her suffering causes him pain?’

“You might be repentant now, but it’s too late. You will never be able to take back the terrible thing that you did.”

Siniša made no reply. He looked at the window that let the dreary autumn day into the room. Nera, as if unwilling to berate him any longer, asked suddenly:

“How come none of the Oršićs are here? Do they despise me? I hope you will tell me the truth.”

“Count Krsto left for Vienna with his wife after the kidnapping, and Petar has been taken ill.”

“Has he been to see the Queen?”

“No. They say someone prevented him from being received.”

“So everything is against me now. At least I know I am on my own. Thank you for telling me.”

Siniša understood that as his cue to leave. He bowed without saying a word. When he got downstairs he ordered Filip not to allow visitors, and to have the men cut down anyone who’d attempt to enter by force. Then he rode out into the woods on his black stallion. He spent the day riding in the hills, without returning for meals. When he returned that evening, his horse was fatigued, hungry and sweaty, and Siniša himself was pale and glum.

“How are things upstairs?” he asked Filip.



“Good. Cindekovka is leaving tomorrow. Nera has made a complete recovery. Please, come dine with us. The men think they haven’t seen you because you’re ill.”

After dinner, Siniša spent some time fraternizing with the lads, and then retreated to his room. He locked the door, threw his coat off and sat at his desk. The light of the oil lamp crept toward him as if out of curiosity, lighting his face and peering into his eyes. Siniša angrily pushed it aside, covered his face in his hands and remained immobile. Minutes and hours passed as he sat there motionless, his head bent and his face covered. The night was well under way when Siniša lowered his hands off his face. He looked tortured, as if he had just lived through the worst moments of his life. His features were completely changed and drawn out, his eyes burned like in a fever. Suddenly he bent and started to write as if in a trance:

“You say you’re alone, Nera? You—alone? You? How, when all of my thoughts are with you. Nera, can you feel them circle you sweetly, softly so as not to wake you? Can’t you hear their whispered sighs, their sobs?... You hate me, Nera!

Why must I pine for you? Why must the Sun warm the hard Earth? Why must a nightingale seek his mate? But the Earth will wilt without the warmth of the Sun, and the nightingale will die if his mate ignores his song.”

He wrote and wrote, until the oil lamp started to burn out. Then he took the letter, held it to the oil lamp and watched as its final flicker turned it into ashes.

Warm sun shone the following morning. Nera had risen and felt well enough to express a desire to take a walk in the fresh air. They fulfilled her wish: they brought out a chair and placed it under the wide tree crowns in the hunting castle’s yard. Silence reigned around the castle.

Lieutenant Branko, who stood at the threshold, started a conversation with Nera. Siniša threw

himself onto the ground behind Nera's back and kept quiet. Cindekovka strolled through the yard in search of a lucky charm among the grasses: a four-leaf clover.

Nera was pale and shattered. Her voice, which used to be so reverberant, strong and determined, sounded broken. Siniša noticed that, and he also realized that her grandmother's tragic fate scarred Nera. She talked to the Lieutenant of everyday matters without saying a word to Siniša. He leaned his head on his left arm as he pulled and tore the grass he laid on, crushing it, grinding it and casting it away. He would stop for a moment and listen, as if expecting Nera to call to him or address him. But she paid him no mind.

Siniša arose. Branko looked at him and approached him. Siniša would have preferred to curse him out, but he controlled himself and replied gruffly:

“I didn't get much sleep last night.”

Nera still ignored him. She stared at the ground with melancholy, watching the ants as they gathered on a large anthill in preparation for winter. ‘How good they have it,’ she thought. ‘They have their home and a place to shelter them through the winter. And I have no family, no home and no property. I am all alone and penniless!’

Siniša snapped her out of those thoughts. He stood close to her and spread out his coat.

“What is it?” she asked the Captain, looking at him with surprise.

“Quiet, Contessa! I saw two Babe behind the fence.”

“Two Babe?” Nera said softly, and bent closer to Siniša who stood before her with his hands in his pockets so as to hide her with his open coat. And truly, two nasty old women's faces showed from behind the fence: one dry, long and pointed, and the other round, meaty with one lazy eye. They were Baba Jana and Baba Urša.

Lieutenant Branko ran toward them but by the time he reached the fence the Babe ran away and were lost in the brush. Cindekovka had squatted under the fence and peered around the yard in fear, and once the Babe were gone she ran up to Siniša and Nera.

“What if they saw you, Your Grace?”

“Then they must have seen you too, Barica” Nera replied.

“Even if they did see you, Contessa, they would not have recognized you in this dress and kerchief,” Siniša said. “What were they doing here?”

“I know they often come to Sljeme to pick medicinal herbs,” Cindekovka said. “These Babe are pesky. Everyone on Grič and in the villages is scared of them. They’re always plotting and scheming, and no one knows what it is they do and how they make their living. Each owns her own house, and none of us know how.”

Siniša listened to Barica’s story and thought about it for a moment, and then he called Lieutenant Branko:

“Listen, don’t you think it’d be a good idea to investigate these Babe a bit? What are they doing here? I would love to know if they really come here to pick herbs.”

“Alright,” Branko said. “I will take two men and go after them. Who knows, they could be spies. Someone could have instructed them to come here and check what we are doing. I doubt that the Babe would be here on any honest business.”

“Contessa, please go upstairs,” Siniša told Nera. “It would be best if you didn’t come out at all. You see that you are not completely safe here either, even though we are in the middle of the woods.”

When Siniša made to bid her goodbye, the Contessa stopped him:

“Come up with me for a bit, if you’ve no other obligations.”

Siniša's heart beat faster. He followed her up. When they reached her room, Nera asked him:

“I keep thinking about how you never managed to capture a witch. Did you really keep watch at the crossing regularly?”

“I was there almost daily for the first month.”

Having said that, he halted a bit as he remembered his first unfortunate encounter with Nera in the woods. But he quickly continued in a calm tone of voice:

“I was curious to see those witches.”

“And you never saw any?”

“Never. Not at the crossing and not on Medvedgrad. I think those meetings don't exist. I don't believe in witches, but I thought that maybe something was afoot among the women; perhaps they were meeting somewhere for some devious reason. But it was all in vain. I never found anything to substantiate that.”

“This all seems very suspicious.”

“I agree. The Judge just complained that the witches drank the wine from his cellar.”

“You don't say? You see, if someone would reveal that witches did not commit these crimes and burglaries, this would be a great accomplishment. Just think of how much this would relieve those unfortunate witches of responsibility for every criminal act.”

“I am surprised that this has not crossed my mind sooner.”

“What?”

“To conduct an investigation.”

“Would you truly do this, Captain?”

“I will do it, Contessa. I haven’t done anything yet, anyway, and I think it is my duty to show that I am not here in vain.”

Siniša saw her face brighten; Nera was truly so delighted to hear his words that she almost appeared completely cheered up. She cried with joy:

“Captain, that would a great feat.”

Siniša’s heart beat faster and his filled with a secret joy. This was the first cheerful word he ever heard her say. This was the first sound, the first look that was not filled with hatred of him. Cindekovka then entered to room, ready for her return trip to Zagreb. Nera was moved, and thanked her for all that she had done to help her.

“I worry, though, about what your Adam will say of your sudden absence from town?” Nera said.

“I am not worried about that. Contessa. He believes that I left on honest business, and no one will be able to convince him otherwise.”

Siniša left the room and waited for Cindekovka downstairs. He wanted to reward her for her time, but she refused.

“Barica, have you considered that even one word out of your mouth could cost the Contessa her life?” Siniša asked her once more.

“Don’t worry, Your Grace. No torture device in the world would get me to talk.”

The sun was high on the horizon when Barica, accompanied by Filip, left the castle and headed to Grič.

## Chapter 48: On the Medvednica

Dusk settled over the forest, shielding the small castle. The world had calmed down as the day wore on. Siniša's men had dispersed. Some went to the crossing, some to Krajačić's vineyard, and the rest were gathered in the yard smoking pipes or exchanging war stories.

Siniša sat in his room, leaned his head on his hands and thought of Nera. He felt overjoyed at her speaking to him so softly earlier that day—without hatred, the same as she did with any other man. This was making him happy; just eight days ago she had called him a conniving crook and a bastard. Had she changed her mind about him or was she perhaps testing him? Was she trying to see whether he would attempt something? Those thoughts pestered him throughout the evening.

The darkness thickened. The wind rustled with the dry leaves that had collected under the tree trunks, and the spruce tree whistled over the castle. Branko was still not back from the woods, where he had gone to look for the Babe that had sneaked so suspiciously around the castle. Filip also was still not back from Grič. Siniša's men burst into his room, disrupted his contemplations and invited him into the yard. The Captain went out to check on the situation.

“Look over there, Captain,” a soldier said, “up, toward the top of Sljemen! So, you see it? What could that be?”

Siniša noticed a flame flicker through the darkness from the top of the hill. It wasn't a fire, but some flames that mysteriously rose in the air and burned in the night.

“Perhaps it's some hunters preparing their dinner over an open fire?”

“I don’t think it’s the hunters. We would have heard a hunting horn or some shots fire, and we didn’t notice anyone hunting in the woods the whole day,” Siniša replied.

“There’s got to be something there.”

“Let’s watch and see if the flame spreads.”

They stood together, tensely watching the flame develop. The wind would blow it to and fro, but it did not spread; at times it would almost be distinguished and all they could see was some smoke and sparks, but the fiery tongues would leap out again shortly. However, this flame was only visible from a particular spot in the yard—even just a couple of steps to the side would hide it from view.

“Let’s go see what’s out there,” Siniša said. “It’s obviously man-made.”

The men immediately went into the house to fetch their rifles, and they returned quickly to follow their Captain into the woods.

“You can’t all come with me,” the Captain said. “Three of you should stay here and ensure that no one enters the castle.”

Siniša looked at Nera’s window and saw a light burning inside, meaning that she was still awake.

“Don’t say anything of this to the Contessa,” Siniša ordered. “It might trouble her.”

The soldiers blindly followed their Captain’s orders, so they went back in and locked the door. Four men accompanied him into the thick darkness of the forest, walking through the brush and the dense grove toward the light that alternately vanished and reappeared before their eyes. The wind shook the dry branches with increasing frequency. The few remaining leaves fell and fluttered in the dark like bats, while bushes and sticks rustled underfoot. Siniša led his men, constantly watching the flame that remained the same size. No one could think of what it could

be. ‘It couldn’t be that Branko had decided to camp there and warm himself by the fire,’ Siniša thought. ‘What would he be doing up there anyway? If he were unable to find the Babe, he surely would have returned to the castle. And yet he still wasn’t back; perhaps he had gotten lost in the forest. Either way, no matter what, I must get to the bottom of this.’

A short while later he thought: ‘Perhaps it’s the crooks that hid in the hills to divide their booty, or some other type of criminals.’

The farther he walked and the higher he climbed, the more curious he was about that even and steady flame. It was as if the shepherds had lit a small fire—but no one brought their herds to graze in the woods. They had been walking for over an hour without minding which way they were going, merely following the mysterious and evasive light. The wind whistled around them, tearing through bare branches, the darkness appeared more impenetrable, and the forest thicker and thicker as they continued on. At times they would stop to listen, but there was no human voice to be heard in the vicinity: only the whistling of the wind and the rustle of the leaves. Suddenly something black erupted from the bushes and charged straight at them.

“Don’t shoot, it’s a doe,” Siniša commanded. “We might scare off the people at the flame.”

“If one of them comes near me, I’ll slay it with a knife,” a lad said, and the others laughed, teasing him for not having done that the first chance he got.

They walked on until they noticed the dark ruins of a wall before them.

“It’s Medvedgrad,” Siniša said. “Come on, lads, let’s surround the fort.”

Siniša found a path and led the men over the rocky and thorny terrain. They weren’t bothered by it: the Captain climbed first disregarding the thorns, and the soldiers knew that once



he fixated on something they had to follow him. They climbed up to a steep cave under which gaped a black abyss. Siniša looked down into the darkness, but he couldn't see the ground.

“Never mind,” he said, “it’s dark here as well as down there. We’ll manage somehow.”

He held onto the hard cave’s rocks, bushes and trees, and climbed like a mountain goat onto the roof of the cave. A light blazed before his eyes through the darkness, and it came from behind a tall wall. He stopped, holding on to a bush.

“What’s that?”

All the way up on the top of the cave a few flames flickered in the wind.

“We made it,” Siniša said mirthfully, grabbing onto the old ruins and slithering higher and higher. He would stop frequently to listen, but he heard nothing but the wind through the leaves.

“Strange. If these were hunters, their dogs would have picked up our scent by now.”

They climbed to the wide wall that encircled a part of the hill. They were now able to stand and they continued carefully and stealthily, hugging the wall in expectation of reaching some kind of an opening.

“Shouldn’t we climb the wall?” a lad asked the Captain.

“Why? I expect we’ll find a hole or a window in the wall to pass into the ruin.”

He went ahead, holding a flintlock in his hand. A few minutes later they came upon an opening; darkness stretched before them. They entered a narrow hallway and went through another hole. Far down the wall they saw an opening through which the flames shone. Siniša turned and raised his hands in the air to signal his men to stop.

“Not a word!” he whispered.

Then he quietly, slowly started toward the hole, leaned against the wall and peeked in.

Underneath stretched a roofless yard encircled by tall walls, and a small fire burned on the ground by the ruins of a wall. Dry twigs were stacked next to it, and it burned slowly, and heated a cauldron covered in black soot in which something sizzled. Two women sat by the fire. Siniša saw them from behind, but he immediately recognized Baba Urša and Baba Jana.

“Let the heart of every young person who tastes this love potion sizzle and boil,” Urša spoke. Then she grabbed a small bottle and started to pour some kind of a liquid over the fire, after which the fire’s flames shot into the air.

“Let our enemies’ houses burn, let the roof burn over the heads of everyone who threatens us.”

“May everyone who anoints themselves with this miraculous ointment fly from Medvednica to Okić-grad, and from Okić-grad to Susedgrad.”

Babe stared at the pots, whispered various enchantments, lifted the heated rods off the fire and traced various shapes in the air, and then lowered them back into the pots and whispered strange words. Then they grabbed some water out of a nearby pitcher and started to turn left and right, saying:

“May the devils’ clouds gather and may Lucifer break them, may hail fall from them and destroy our enemies’ crops!”

Baba Urša incessantly squinted her eye and flicked her tongue, while Baba Jana was calm, with a proud expression on her face. She took the dried twigs again, placed them on the fire, and thick smoke gushed from them filled with fiery sparks.

“What do you think,” Baba Jana said, “will the Lucifers answer our pleas?”

“I think so,” Urša replied.

“And who are you preparing these for?”

“A Lucifer Lady.”

“Is she high born?”

“You fool, when did they ever wear kerchiefs on their heads?! Jewels sparkled under her black cloak, and her mouth smelled sweet.”

“And what did she say?”

“‘Urša, you have to help me,’ she whispered, begging me. ‘I want a brand-new potion, one that you will cook up at Medvednica at sunset.’ I asked her whom it was for. ‘I fell in love with a gorgeous young man!’ So I said to her: ‘Since this is how things stand, you will pay triple.’ I could tell that she was pining for him, so I increased the price. She would have given me half her estate just to embrace him.”

“And then what happened?” Baba Jana said impatiently.

“What happened? Coins jingled on my shelf. ‘Urša,’ she begged me as he voice and her hands trembled as if she were feverish, ‘concoct such a potion that will make him fall madly in love with me, I want him to rage with passion, do you understand? If you accomplish this, Urša, I will shower you with gold coins.’

And so I asked: ‘Is he that young?’

‘As young as a dewdrop, as tall as the hills, and as handsome as the sun. I’ve never seen a man like that before.’

‘All right then,’ I said to her, ‘but this will cost you. I need a bat from Medvednica for that.’

‘Don’t worry about the cost, just make it as quickly as possible.’

‘Your mother didn’t birth you on a Friday for nothing. Lucky you!’

‘Shut it, you toothless hag, jealousy seeps out of your every pore. But hold your tongue. As long as I am rich, there’ll be some money in it for you.’”

“The potion is almost ready. What should we do now?” Jana asked.

“We’ll let the bat cool, crush it with stones and boil the rest, and we’ll head home tomorrow at dawn.”

“But I’m starving,” Jana said.

“You glutton! Your stomach is bottomless; it’s deeper than a well. Go and fetch some cheese pie and some roast turkey. I could use some too. There’s some wine, as well.”

The Babe were preparing their rich meal, discussing all the ingredients they would put in the love potion. They had just bitten into a drumstick when Siniša’s head appeared through the hole. They startled and stared in fright at the unexpected apparition.

“There’s the devil!” Baba Jana shouted.

Urša shoved her in the ribs and yelled:

“Shut up, you old fool. It’s a man.”

The Captain was already at the site of the fire, and the rest of the lads hurried after him. One of them grabbed Baba Jana who had started to run and pulled her back, and the others surrounded the fireplace and Baba Urša. But she showed no fear. She placed both hands on her hips, and looked at the soldiers as if they were her customers on Grič. Only her smaller eye twitched continuously.

“What are you doing here?” Siniša asked sharply.

“What are we doing? We climbed up the hill to pick medicinal herbs,” Urša replied.

“Since when is this illegal?”

“And what is this?” Siniša’s asked, pointing at the cauldron on the fire.

“That’s our supper, sir. If you’re hungry, you’re welcome to some.”

“There’s no need,” Siniša replied. “I will be the one to feed it to you! Who has a rope?”  
he asked the lads. “Tie her hands, make her supper more enjoyable!”

“Don’t you have anything better to do than tying old women, poor innocents who are gathering medicinal herbs for the doctors?”

“And what would you have to say for yourself if I were to tell you that we heard everything that you two had talked about. You’re preparing a potion for a young man whom some girl is lusting after.”

“Did we say that, Your Grace? You must have been possessed by the devil; God willing that I go blind, that I lose my mind, and that I grow mute if what you say is true! We’re not witches, Hon. Captain!”

“You swear in vain, you old witch.”

“How could I be a witch? What are you thinking? You’re a stranger in these parts, and you don’t know what you’re saying. There are no more godly women than us on the whole Grič. How could we be witches when we go to church every day? Just ask Hon. Vicar about the many times a week we go to confession and communion. If we were witches, the Vicar wouldn’t give us the amulets.”

As Baba Urša spoke, Baba Jana cowered and peeked from under her kerchief with her beady eyes, in anticipation of what was to happen.

“Lads, tie both Babe.”

“I am not afraid of anyone,” Urša said. “Take me wherever you wish. I am just, and will be treated accordingly!”

“Take them straight to Grič,” Siniša said. “Give my regards to Hon. Sale and Krajačić, and hand over the witches. They’ll be happy to see them!”

Two men took the Babe away. Siniša followed them with the other two, and they descended from Medvedgrad.

## Chapter 49: Shadows of the Past

Nera sat pensively in a room of the hunting castle, thinking about her conversation with Siniša. Would he fulfill his promise? That crazy Judge needs to be convinced that there are no such things as witches. As she pondered this, she turned out her lamp. But she could not fall asleep. The wind whistled over the castle eerily, and she felt anxious. She sat by the window staring into the oblique night. She suddenly saw something black, darker than night, move under the window. She bent her head to the window to see what was moving like a hoard of black ghosts. A few moments later someone knocked on the front door, and familiar voices reached her.

“We’re back, open up,” Lieutenant Branko said.

The door opened, but it sounded as if there was a commotion in the hallway. Curses rang through the castle; she could hear muffled sounds and heavy breathing, as if someone were wrestling and fighting. She ran to the door and leaned her ear against the keyhole. Strange voices came from the hallway. She could hear someone climb the stairs and command:

“Go ahead, Hon. Lieutenant. If we don’t find your witches, you’ll get a bullet in the neck.”

‘If I lose my cool now,’ she said to herself, ‘I am lost.’ She quickly put on her burgher coat, tied a large kerchief around her head and pulled it over her eyes so that it covered half her face. Then she rushed to the kitchen on the first floor. She quickly turned the lamp on, bent over the fireplace in which the fire had died out a long time ago, covered her hands with ashes and

smeared it over her face, and then started to move the dishes about as if she was just about to clean up the kitchen.

When she heard footsteps down the hall she quickly opened the kitchen door, leaned on the threshold and stared at the incomers dumbly. Branko stood before her, his hands tied, and six men walked behind him. Nera was startled; she had seen these men once before when she had visited Baba Urša with the Remetens. One of them stood behind the Lieutenant, holding a pistol against his back. The Lieutenant didn't flinch at seeing Nera there. She stood calmly by the door and asked the Lieutenant:

“What kind of gentlemen are these, Your Grace?”

Nera spoke calmly, altering her voice completely. She appeared to be a real servant from the village.

“Look, a cook,” one of the black figures laughed. “What's your name?”

“My name is Eva,” Nera replied, dragging her words as if she were simpleminded and slow, and as if she did not understand what was happening around her.”

“And where's that other woman who was here earlier today, girl?” the black figure asked.

“I'm the only housemaid, there's just one more chef.”

“I'm not asking about the chef, but the beautiful widow who was here this afternoon.”

“Oh? She went back to town.”

“And how long was she here for?”

Nera shrugged her shoulders.

“I couldn't tell you. The gentlemen don't inform me of their affairs.”

The black figure turned to his companion and said:

“It looks like this girl was the other woman.”



“That’s clear as day. Cindekovka ran away.”

“Fetch some food and wine, girl. You must have some in the house?”

“There’s some downstairs.”

“Bring it up.”

Nera went downstairs to the kitchen where she found three men and the chef restrained. A black figure stood before them holding a pistol. She grabbed everything she could find in the kitchen and carried it upstairs. The black figures sat at the table as Nera served them. They paid no attention to her, and continued their conversation as if she were too dumb to understand or comprehend them.

“The beautiful Barica got away from you again, my dear Matiček. Captain Siniša snatched her from under your nose.”

“It’s tough to compete with the Lucifers.”

“O-ho, so the Captain is a member of the brotherhood?”

“Who did you think that tall, handsome Lucifer was who came to hell two moths ago? I’m not blind!”

“The last thing we need now is for him to catch us here.”

“What would he be doing here? You know Baba Urša said they all went to watch over Krajačić’s vineyard.”

“And what if he were to catch us here anyway?”

“If he’s a Lucifer, he’ll help us escape!”

“And what about the Lieutenant? We tied him up and forced him to get us into the castle. Don’t you think he’ll try to turn the Captain against us?”

“Let him.”

“Then we’ll be spending another month on the backburner!”

“Why do you insist on these witless pursuits, Matiček? Why do you pine after widows who’ve already been chosen by Lucifers?”

“To hell with them! Why must we always choke on their leftovers? I will find Barica, even if Captain Siniša were to send ten thousand Lucifers after me.”

“Let’s drink and get out of here fast. Why agitate the Lucifers? There are plenty of other girls available.”

“I want Barica,” Matiček banged on the table, clearly already drunk.

“You’re crazy. You also wanted Countess Nera.”

Everyone laughed loudly.

“You made that up. But she even flew away from the Lucifers.”

“Flew away? You fool!”

“Why are you calling me a fool? The devil took her to hell.”

“You must have seen that this was Lucifer—our Lucifer!”

“It couldn’t have been; they don’t know where she is, either!”

“That’s how these things go. One of them kidnapped the girl and is hiding her from others.”

“He’s right to do so. He went to the trouble, so he should reap the rewards.”

“And now everyone suspects that the other had kidnapped Nera, and none of them know for sure which did it. They’re already fighting over this—with sabers.”

“They’ve been searching the castles, too.”

“They upended each other’s homes.”

“And all they found was an empty nest!”

“The thief hid the girl well.”

“And why do you think the Trenk men were unable to catch him? Huh?”

“Do you mean that the Captain...”

“A-ha, that’s right!”

“And what about that girl whom Baba Urša had seen with the Captain?”

“That was this plain creature here,” one of them said, tilting his head toward Nera who was serving the peculiar guests in her strange costume and with her face dirtied.

“Fetch some more wine.”

She went straight downstairs, and by the time she returned they had changed the subject to Countess Auersperg.

“Her servants say that strange things have been happening in Mokrice. They say that Satan is in the basement, raging in it every night as if he is mad.”

“As long as it’s not Countess Ratkay’s daughter’s ghost.”

“What daughter?”

“This is an intricate story. One of Countess Auersperg’s lovers became infatuated with Contessa Nera’s mother, but the Countess learned of his indiscretion and in fear of her retribution the man had the beautiful young Countess killed.”

“That damned hag! But who was this lover?”

“A-ha! Wouldn’t you like to know! As long as I keep my mouth shut, I don’t have to worry about having enough to eat or drink tomorrow.”

“So he’s making it worth your while?”

“He better. If I said but one word, he’d be hanged.”

As they spoke Nera listened by the china cabinet. The whole room started to spin and she grabbed onto the cabinet, causing the dishes to clank and one of the black figures to look at her and shout:

“Hey, what are you doing, gal? Come on, come here. Let me wash that filthy face of yours.”

The girl remained standing but the cabinet until the man came to her and pulled her hand roughly:

“Hold on, hold on! What’s this?” and he whistled as if he saw something interesting.

“Listen, gal, how come your hands are so fine and small?”

The black figures shifted and turned to Nera.

“Come, let’s get a better look at you.”

Nera was scared, but she thought to herself that it would be futile to resist. She slowly went after the man who led her by the hand to the table, where the black men gathered to peer curiously at her face.

“Take the kerchief off!” someone commanded.

The Contessa shuddered. She felt hopeless; her ashen hair was famous on the whole of Grič, and it would give her away.

A gunshot was heard that shook the whole castle. The black figures were taken aback and started to fret:

“What was this?”

“Someone entered the castle.”

“I can’t see a thing from the window.”

The armed man who was left to stand guard downstairs started ran up and waved his arms:

“Be quiet. Someone is down there banging on the door and demanding to be let in.”

“If it’s the Captain, we don’t need to run. Go check.”

“Let’s get out of here!” a tall, slim man commanded.

“But how? The windows are barred.”

“Quickly. They’re breaking down the door.”

They rushed out of the room, shoving each other. The tall, slim man led them through the hall toward the wooden steps at the back of the castle. Nera was left completely stunned; she found herself unable to think clearly during the last few moments. She just kept staring at the slim man whose head was so carefully hidden by the hood, and who seemed so well acquainted with the tragedy involving her mother and the man who seduced her. And now he led the black figures down the stairs the existence of which was only known to those who were very familiar with the castle.

When she saw that they had run away, she darted through the rooms to find Lieutenant Branko. He was still restrained so she quickly untied the rope that bound his arms and legs:

“Run after them, they’ll escape! Chase those devils made of flesh and blood! Please, catch them. But don’t take the Captain along.”

The Lieutenant looked at Nera with surprise, but he didn’t reply because people were still banging on the front door. Branko rushed downstairs and opened it; Siniša burst into the hall:

“What happened? Where’s the Contessa?”

Branko quickly told him what had happened, including how the black caped men took him and his two men captive in the woods that afternoon. Eight men had ambushed them from

behind and brought Branko along to the castle so he would call on the men inside to open the door. Thinking that Siniša was inside and would easily capture the black bandits, Branko complied.

“Let’s hunt them down,” Branko said, finishing the account he gave as he untied the men who lay in the hallway.

“There are eight of them and five of us,” the Captain said. “Someone must stay behind to guard the Contessa.”

“You stay!” Branko said.

“You’re being ridiculous. Come on, men, on your feet and follow me. Though I am afraid our search will be in vain.”

Siniša ventured into the dark night followed by five of his men. Branko didn’t dare go to Nera, since she had asked for him to be the one to pursue the bandits and she was unable to honor her wish since it went against Siniša’s commands. He was perplexed as to what to do when Filip showed up. He had just returned from escorting Cindekovka into town. Branko told him what had happened and asked him to tell the Contessa that everyone had gone out in pursuit of the bandits, including himself. Filip did as he was asked, and went up to see Nera who had just cleaned the ash off her face.

“If only they would catch them! If only they wouldn’t get away!” she kept saying as she stood by the window, staring eagerly into the darkness. A few moments later a few shots were fired, and she trembled with fear that the men would be killed. She was already imagining them captured and brought back to the castle; she would then be able to see their faces and find out the rest of the story about Countess Auersperg’s castle. Her whole body shook with the desire to know the name of the vile man who had broken her home and destroyed her mother and father.

Now, finally, she had picked up his trace—so suddenly and unexpectedly. Until today she was almost convinced that she would never be able to find him.

She couldn't keep away from the window. Holding her breath and trying to slow her pulse she stared into the night, hoping that the Trenk men would return with the unknown burglars. However, an hour went by and she was still standing by the window and waiting in vain. The wind blew the dry leaves across the ground, and whenever it would pick up, rustling the leaves, she thought that it was them coming back.

Filip stood behind Nera. He didn't know why she stood frozen by the window, awaiting the return of the black burglars, and he did not dare ask her. Suddenly she jolted as if she saw something.

"They're coming, they're coming" she cried, joy flushing her face. "I can't see a thing, it's so dark outside, but I can hear footsteps. They're bringing them back. I'll finally be able to see him face to face."

"See who?"

"The man who knows of the criminal I am after! If only I could find him! My life's purpose is to see him pay for his crimes."

"For God's sake, Contessa, you have plenty to live for. The world is your oyster."

"Krajačić's tower! That's the only place that would welcome me at any time."

"Don't you think there's a heart in this world that would welcome you at any point?"

That question caught her off guard.

"You're referring to the man who writes me those letters?"

"Yes, him."

“If he had to face peril and poverty with me, he’d soon be cured of the love he writes about.”

‘So, it is love he writes of,’ Filip thought to himself. ‘At least now I know for certain.’

Then he said aloud:

“Great and selfless loves exist in the world; one just needs to seek them out.”

“The only person I am seeking is the one who needs to be punished.”

Suddenly, she started, thinking: ‘why am I discussing such serious matters with a servant! Strange! And his responses sound like those of a learned man.’

They heard footsteps on the stairs, which Filip recognized and therefore left the room in haste. Siniša walked in moments later.

“Did you catch them? You did, didn’t you?” Nera asked him excitedly straight away.

“It was impossible to catch them!”

“What? Impossible...?”

“Yes! They disappeared into the woods. They must have a good shelter; it would be futile to look for them now. We shot a few rounds in the direction that they ran, but none hit a target. It was as if the earth devoured them, so we came back.”

“Were you a part of the chase, Captain?”

“Yes, I went with five of my men.”

Nera’s eyes flamed with anger.

“Then it’s clear why you didn’t catch them.”

“What was that, Contessa?”

“You never chased them to begin with.”



“What you’re saying makes no sense; it’s as if you’re hallucinating. What’s going on with you, for God’s sake?”

“I am perfectly well. You let them get away!”

“This is a deathly insult, Contessa,” Siniša raised his voice. “You are free to call me a bastard, but not a coward.”

“That’s not the reason.”

“Then what is? Tell me.”

“You know better than I do.”

“Stop toying with words that sting worse than any insult. How dare you accuse me of letting the bandits escape? Why would I do that?”

“Because you’re in the Lucifer brotherhood!”

“The Lucifers? Me? Since you claim this with such conviction, it’s impossible for me to defend myself.”

“They claimed it, not me.”

“The men who were here? If this were true, why would I send them running?”

“It’s needless to pretend. I know that these men and the Lucifers have a good rapport.”

“This is the first I hear of it.”

“Then why did they say that they needn’t fear you because you’d even help them escape?”

“But why did they run, then?”

“They didn’t know it was you who fired the pistol and banged at the door.”

“Contessa, I ask of you to prove this to me: is it true that you heard all of this from the men who were here?”

“Yes, I heard it from them.”

“And they specifically said my name?”

“Yes, your name.”

“And you believe that?”

“Do I have a reason not to?”

“You have no reason not to? Then it’s pointless for me to try to convince you otherwise.”

“Why would you want to convince me otherwise?”

“Why?”

His firm features appeared to soften. He looked at her, his head bent slightly to the side and his eyes betraying a tremor as if he were about to lose his composure. For a moment he felt weak; he felt like saying: ‘I want to convince you otherwise because I want nothing more in this world than to have you think well of me.’

That’s all he wanted to say—nothing more.

He was unable to resist this wave of emotion, and he parted his lips to tell her how he felt, he looked at her with misty eyes and stepped closer. Nera started and lifted her arm as if to defend herself.

Siniša halted, his lips pressed together and his gaze frozen. Pain, as cold and hard as steel reflected in his eyes. He held his head high and remain as immobile and mute as a statue for a few moments. He was again cold and distant, calm and composed. The words he had intended to say had died in his breast, and, as Nera looked at him with fear, he calmly bowed and said curtly:

“I will trouble you no longer. Good night, Contessa!”

He left the room and came down the stairs. Filip and Branko were standing in the hallway, talking. Siniša went straight for the door.

“Where are you going at this hour, Siniša?” Filip asked, looking at his face with foreboding. “What’s the matter with you?”

“What do you mean? Stop asking stupid questions,” he replied and turned to the Lieutenant. “Have them ready my horse.”

“Where are you going now, Siniša? Is everything all right? Stay here, the bandits may still be at large.”

Filip and Branko looked at each other perplexed, but none of them dared make insinuations: both of them stood there paralyzed. A few moments later they heard Siniša take his horse out of the stable. The sound of the whip lashed the air, and the horse started wildly through the thick, dark forest.

## Chapter 50: Ladislav Sale

The sun had already set when Cindekovka parted with Filip in front of Grič, so the widow quickened her pace to reach the town as soon as possible. The Vespers had just rung when she passed under the Stone Gate. She knelt and prayed before the icon of the Mother of God, and when she arose she noticed three people staring at her from Palčić's shop. In the semi-darkness she could make out Mikica's pointy face, Andrija Palčić's bald head and the hideous, hateful face of his wife. They were saying something, and Palčićka laughed maliciously.

Barica went straight to her shop. To her surprise she saw that it was open; through the glass door she saw Adam fill a basket with bread.

"Good evening," she greeted her fiancé.

Adam turned around, his face brightening.

"Thank Goodness you are here! I'm not as good at this as you are."

"Did you keep the shop open?!"

"How could I not? I sold as much as I knew how."

Barica was surprised that he didn't ask her where she had been.

"You are kind, Adam, thank you!" she said. "And you didn't mind me leaving so suddenly?"

"Why should I mind?"

"Didn't people ask about me?"

"Ah, people pry! Who cares about them."

"Adam, I won't lie to you. I didn't go to Bukovac."

“You didn’t?”

“No. And I can’t tell you where I went. I swear to you that it was on honest business; I was helping a kind soul—but I can’t tell you who it was.”

“Well, since you can’t tell me, then don’t.”

“Do you believe me?”

He looked at her warmly and said:

“Whom should I believe if not you?”

Adam touched her shoulders with both hands.

“I was just sorry not to find you at the shop these days. It was terribly boring. Now that you’re back again, would you like to come visit my mother today? We could speak at length there.”

“Yes, I will come. I missed you, too.”

These words made him so glad that he blushed and looked at her with sincere warmth. Happily he helped her tidy up the shop, and then they ventured together to his mother’s. The old lady’s face was pleasant and kindly. She welcomed her future daughter-in-law and went straight to the kitchen to prepare some supper. The two of them stayed behind, sitting at a table and chatting. Adam told her about the goings-on in the shop, and named the customers who had ordered bread, and then the conversation turned to plans for their future. Neither of them mentioned Barica’s absence or the reasons behind it; Adam seemed completely uninterested. He was calm and composed, and he walked her home around ten o’clock that evening.

“I will come in the morning to help you carry the bread.”

“Come,” she said warmly, pulled her hand out of his and rushed into the house.

The next morning Adam rose early and went to see Barica. Even as he turned onto her street he noticed a crowd had gathered in front of her house. He was unpleasantly surprised, and almost fearful. When he reached it, the people started to glance at him curiously.

“Why do you loiter here?”

“No reason! They took baker Barica away.”

“Where did they take her?” Adam asked, shocked.

“To see Hon. Sale at the Magistrate.”

“Why?”

“We don’t know! They say a witch gave her away.”

Adam remembered the invitation that Sale had sent Barica two days ago and his heart beat faster. He was consumed with fear and anger. He didn’t even go to his fiancée’s house, but left straight for the Magistrate.

Hon. Sale was more eminent than the City Captain; he commanded the whole town’s security department, but of particular import was his position as lead investigator of witchcraft. He was the one to summon the accused women and the first to question them, imprison them, call the witnesses and conduct hearings.

It was early in the day when he sat at his desk. A white wig pleasantly framed his symmetrical, skinny face with dark eyes. He was not handsome, but he was tall and slim, of elegant demeanor and passionate at courting the ladies, who were particularly fond of the mysterious smirk on his pouty lips. His face was always calm and composed, and so it also appeared pleased now as he sat at his desk.

Andrija Palčić stood before him with his wife. The baker seemed to be terrible uncomfortable as he stood there crushing his ushanka hat with his hands, but his tall and scrawny

wife stood determinedly before him, as if she were his judge. The poor fat little artisan was more scared of his wife than he was the Notary whom he would need to answer to.

Timidly, and glancing at his energetic wife, the man muttered:

“Yes, Your Grace, she must be a witch. Yes, yes, I could swear to it!”

“And what makes you say that?” Sale asked.

Palčić questioningly looked at his wife, who then shoved him, gave him a stern look and whispered:

“Speak now, you fool!”

“Yes, this is how it is, Hon. Notary. Barica had a small shop under the wall. None of the burghers bought bread from her, only some bric-a-brac. Then she suddenly started to visit the old Countess Ratkay and the young Nera. They were always in cahoots, and then suddenly Barica moved her shop to Grič. She took the space by the Stone Gate, right in my neighborhood, and by golly that isn't cheap. How come she suddenly had all this money for rent?”

“I suppose her business picked up,” Sale said.

Palčić made a hand motion as if to say: ‘I guess so,’ but his wife’s angry look quickly remedied it. He started to cough and prepare his answer:

“Yes, Your Grace, she’s doing well—and this is the straneg part. Her goods are inferior in quality to ours, but she still sells more than us. Whenever we go to the market she stands by her table, her hands on her hips and smiling every which way, and people flock to her as if she were selling honey. She never has to take any leftover bread home from the fair—and by god we bring half of ours back.”

Palčić paused as if he was unsure how to continue. His wife's stare dug into him, pricking him like thorns. His shoulders started to twitch, and he kept shifting his weight from one leg to the other, turning his ushanka. Then he cleared his throat again and continued:

“The same thing happens at the square. Everyone crowds her display as if her bread were made of sugar. And believe me, Your Grace, my bread is much superior—just ask clerk Mikica. He only eats my bread. Other gentlemen from the Magistrate praise my bread, too.”

“So why does everyone buy hers?”

“Because she's got the devil in her pocket!”

“Perhaps her bread is a smidge better,” Sale said.

Palčić made no reply, he just shook his head. He didn't dare contradict Sale, but he also couldn't bring himself to look at his wife. He stared at the floor, feeling her gaze with trepidation. She now started to cough and nudge him in the back. Sweat poured out of him; in his great distress he kept shifting his legs and crushing his ushenka.

“No, no, Your Grace—it's not better at all. How could it be better when she gets the same flour as we do? It's just that she bakes her bread in the night. In fact, she does it after midnight. The whole neighborhood knows this. Why doesn't she bake it in the daytime so that everyone could see?”

“Whoever has nothing to hide works in the daytime, just like the rest of us honest folk,” Palčićka intervened, eager to prove their point.

“All right,” Sale said, “I will investigate the matter.”

“Your Grace should also question my wife as a witness,” Palčić suggested. “She knows much more than I do. But I beg you, Hon. Notary, don't tell Barica that I was the one who testified against her, she might hold it against me.”



“He didn’t tell you the whole story yet, Hon. Notary,” Palčička noted.

“So, there’s more?” Sale asked.

“Well, Your Grace,” Palčič started, as if he had been wound-up, “Barica had not been home for two days and two nights. Two days ago, in the evening, she received a summons from the Magistrate, and that same night she disappeared somewhere. No one knows where she went, and when people asked her she just shrugged her shoulders, laughed and said: ‘What’s it to you?’ She must have run away from your summons, for how else could a baker with a shop just disappear from town for two days? I have a wife, and I am not able to leave my shop.”

“And where did she go?” Sale asked.

“My wife knows.”

“You know as well! Why the hell are you stuttering as if you were mute?” Palčička growled at him.

“Yes, yes, I remember now. She must have spent the two days in the witch coven. Trust me, Your Grace, Barica is a true witch. I can swear to it,” but the last words got stuck in his throat. The fat little artisan found himself on his knees, his eyes bulging out of his head and his face a grimace of dread.

Sale jumped off his chair, and Palčička started to scream, holding her hands on her head. As Palčič spoke those last words, button vendor Adam had entered the room, and he got so incensed at hearing the accusations that he forgot he was in the Notary’s office and he grabbed Palčič by the neck.

“You damned pushover, you let your hag walk all over you!” Adam shouted. “I will strangle you, you good for nothing patsy! Your hag wanted you to incriminate Barica, and you obey like an ass.”

“Let him go!” Sale yelled at the button vendor.

“Let him die for his lies,” Adam raged.

“I won’t, I won’t do it...” Palčić choked in angry Adam’s strong grip, pleading with his hands.

“Everything you said was a lie. Admit that it was a lie!” Adam shouted.

“Yes, yes. Let me go, I won’t ever do it again. Don’t kill me, my dear Adam. It’s not my fault,” Palčić begged, shaking like a twig as he stared scared to death at the enraged button vendor.

Adam lifted his hands off of Palčić’s neck, leaving fingerprints behind. Palčić jumped to his feet and disappeared from the office at the speed of light. Palčićka followed him out, cursing under her breath.

Notary Sale stood before Adam and said sternly:

“What have you done, Adam?”

“He lied, and if he does it again I will crush him.”

Sale looked at the young button vendor with interest and said to him kindly:

“But, my dear Adam, you are a burgher and an oath-taker<sup>113</sup>, and it’s not nice of you to behave this way in this office. I should be punishing you right now.”

“For defending an innocent woman?”

“How do you know that Barica is innocent?”

“I’d put both my hands in the fire for her.”

“Would you look at that? You’re under quite a strong spell by the young widow. Perhaps a love potion?”

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<sup>113</sup> Oath-takers, “prisežnici,” were 22-24 men who were lifelong members of the municipality (“*communitas*”) and were chosen to represent the community before the city’s administrative authority. The system started in 1242 with King Bela IV’s *Golden Edict* and ended in 1850.

“No, Hon. Notary; she won me over with her honesty.”

“So, you’re in love with her?”

“I am engaged to her.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize. Of course, now I understand.”

“So I came straight here to get her.”

“I am terribly sorry, Adam, but she is already in the tower.”

This bad news made the young man’s heart skip a beat.

“Your Grace, how can you imprison an honest burgher woman whom no one holds anything against?”

“Serious accusations have been brought forth against her.”

“You heard it yourself: Palčić was lying.”

“Yes, but it wasn’t just him.”

“Who else has anything to say against her?”

“I am terribly sorry, but Katica Dolenc confessed during torture that Barica was in the coven with her.”

“Hon. Notary, let’s not do this! I know perfectly well what’s going on here. That crook Mikica cooked this up because Barica refused him.”

“Mikica propositioned her?” Sale asked curiously.

“Yes, but I threw him out into the street. Barica was never in any coven.”

“Tell me then: why did she leave town for two days and two nights without telling anyone where she went? And right after she was summoned, too. It looks as if she ran away.”

“If she had run, she would have stayed away and hid. Any reasonable man can see this.”

“But where did she go?”

“That’s her business.”

“And what was she doing at the hunting castle under the Medvednica? I suppose you know that the Trenk men are stationed there. This is where two witnesses saw her.”

“This isn’t true. Have the witnesses tell this to my face.”

“I can’t reveal the names of the witnesses because I would expose them to retribution. Look what you have done to Palčić!”

“Then call the Trenk men, let them tell you if Barica was there or not.”

“All right, we will ask them.”

“But please, Sir, do it now. I wish to have this cleared out.”

“Have a little patience.”

“Hon. Notary, I am a burgher and an oath-taker and I won’t rest until it’s been proven that Barica wasn’t under the Medvednica and that she is innocent.”

He was mid-sentence when the door opened and Captain Siniša entered the room. Sale looked at the incomer with surprise. He was disheveled, he was pale and cross, his uniform was ragged and damp, and his boots muddied up to the knees.

“Here, Your Grace,” Adam whispered, “Perhaps Hon. Captain will be able to give us some answers.”

“Step outside for a bit!” Sale said. “I will speak with him.”

The button vendor left the room to wait in the hall.

“Where in God’s name have you been?” Sale asked once they were alone.

“I was looking for your witches up in the hills. I believe you’re happy with yesterday’s catch.”

“Oh, yes, you mean the two old ladies.”

“Are they locked up?”

“Unfortunately, Hon. Captain, this time you were mistaken.”

“What do you mean?”

“Those two women are not witches.”

“Why not?”

“The two Duganke are well known burghers with a clean record. The doctors say that they go in the hills to gather medicinal herbs. You must have found them there and concluded that they were witches.”

“If there are such things as witches, my dear Sir, it’s these two hags.”

“Just because they dress a bit odd?” Sale laughed. “I think they look like witches, too, but you can see how easy it is for one to be mistaken about these matters. The Prefect himself came here and vouched for them, and he told me they were the most God-fearing women in town. And some other eminent figures spoke on their behalf as well.”

“Who were they?”

“Countess Čikulini, and Krajać himself claimed that they were not witches. Rafael was here too. Do you know him? He’s a godfearing man who some believe to be a saint, so they listen to what he says as if it were the word of God.”

“And you already questioned all of these people?”

“This is how these things go. I was barely awake when the whole town learned that the Duganke had been brought to the Magistrate.”

“And did you question my men too, Sir?”

“Of course.”

“Didn’t they tell you that we found them preparing a love potion for a high society lady?”

“Yes, but they must have been mistaken. The old ladies were preparing their dinner, and since they were at Medvednica your men thought they were concocting a potion.”

Siniša was shocked by this turn of events, but he concealed his reaction. Judge Krajačić stepped into the room to speak with Sale.

“What auspicious timing, Hon. Judge,” Sale greeted Krajačić. “The Captain claims that they saw the Duganke at Medvednica cooking up love potions.”

“That is impossible,” he replied.

“But I saw them myself,” Siniša said.

“I don’t believe them to be witches. Rafael and the Prefect agree with me. Are you still busy, Hon. Notary?”

“Please wait for me in the adjacent room, I will only be a moment.”

When Krajačić left, Siniša asked Sale:

“So, you let the hags go home?”

“What else could I do? You saw for yourself how powerful their protections are. But please tell me, dear Siniša, is it true that a baker from Stone Gate was at your castle yesterday?”

The Captain realized immediately what this was about. Baba Urša and Baba Jana had seen and recognized Cindekovka, so they reported her.

“How would I know your bakers?”

“Heh,” Sale laughed, “she’s a very young and beautiful baker, though.”

“Then I am sorry I didn’t make her acquaintance.”

“Is it possible that one of your men had brought her there?”

“If they had, they wouldn’t tell me about it. And who told you this?”

“Two witnesses,” Sale replied. “But these are official matters that I am not at liberty to say. At first I was afraid that perhaps you had a bit of a tryst with the young widow, in which case I would now be in an awkward position. And, of course, you wouldn’t be pleased at your fiancée learning about it.”

“My fiancée? And who might that be?”

“Well, well, don’t play shy. These things are public knowledge, as most are. Countess Auersperg stole your heart. It’s only natural.”

‘So, she’s planning to force me into this?’ Siniša thought. The Captain was done talking with Sale. He now knew that Baba Urša and Baba Jana were at large, but even more than this the news that he heard about Countess Auersperg caused him discomfort.

“So, the baker was not with you?” Sale asked. “It’s important for us to know, because she has been accused of being a witch.”

Siniša was surprised and responded:

“No, we had no women at the castle. All of my men will vouch for that.”

Sale eyed Siniša as if he did not believe him. As if he had just remembered something, the Captain suddenly bid him adieu and left the Notary’s office. Sale invited Adam back in.

“What did the Hon. Captain say?” Adam asked.

“He did not see her.”

“So, you see, Hon. Notary, your witnesses lied.”

“But the Captain’s statement has no value. Even if he had not seen her, there’s still a possibility that she was there with his men.”

“Don’t talk like that, Your Grace. I told you she was my fiancée, and I promise you that I won’t be silenced. You won’t find me easy to deal with: I want you to prove that none of the accusations against Barica are true.”

“Do you know what, dear Adam? I would love to help you, because I don’t think Barica is a witch either. But I am afraid that it would be very hard to free her once Krajačić gets involved.”

“You see, Hon. Notary, you find it hard to believe these allegations as well. Let her go, and I will ensure that she doesn’t run away. Then you can conduct your investigation in peace.”

“This is very difficult. You know that once a woman is locked in the tower, she is all but lost.”

Adam’s face turned pale and he bent his head in consternation.

“Yes, I know very well what that means. But Hon. Notary, since you yourself don’t believe that Barica is evil, you won’t allow more evil to come of this. Do something, or tell me what I can do. How can I get her out?”

Sale folded his hands behind his back, paced his office a few times and pondered the question. Then he stopped before the button vendor, took hold of his coat and said in a low voice and conspiratorially:

“I know how you feel. You are a son of a respectable family, and it’s a great disgrace to have your fiancée be in the tower.”

“I don’t care about my reputation, I am worried about her. You have to save her, Hon. Notary!”

“There is only one way to get her out of the tower, at least until the investigation is completed.”



“Please, tell me how.”

“Would you do anything for her?”

“Of course I would! I would rather you imprison me than have her waste away in the tower.”

Sale’s eyes gleamed as if something Adam had said caused him great pleasure.

“But what I am about to tell you must stay between us. Give me your hand, promise to keep this a secret.”

“I swear on my life, Hon. Notary.”

“We’re men, so we can speak openly. You know, my dear Adam, that once Krajačić takes over the matter, Barica will be lost. But I could try to free her.”

“Please, Notary, do it.”

“If you were to remit four hundred forints, then I would be able to release Barica from the tower. This is just as security that Barica won’t run away. Of course, you would need to keep this a secret.”

“I will keep it a secret, and I will bring the money straight away.”

The young man offered the Notary his hand, and left. As he walked onto the street he found a group of people standing in front of the Magistrate, looking at him spitefully. Some women started to laugh, and one even dared to yell out:

“Where is your Barica?”

Adam turned around, threatened them with his fist and asked loudly:

“Which one of you said that?”

The women grew quiet, and Adam yelled:

“If either one of you dares to badmouth Barica I will strike you so hard you’ll be picking your teeth off the street.”

The women got scared and ran away, and the young button vendor went home to get the money he intended to use to save Barica.

## Chapter 51: Siniša

The first snow of the season seeped out of cloudy skies over Sljemen valley when Siniša returned to the hunting castle from his visit to Ladislav Sale. No one in the castle had seen him since the night before when he parted with Nera so abruptly. When he came off his horse the yard was deserted so he called to a lad to take the horse to the stables. The animal was wet, exhausted and covered in mud. When the lad left, Siniša looked at Nera's window; it was open.

'Why is her window open when it's so cold outside?' he thought. 'Did she change rooms? Is she sitting by the open window?' He walked across the yard a few times, stealthily looking at the window. He was hoping to see her so he kept pacing up and down. 'She's bound to close the window sometime,' he thought, 'she'll be too cold.'

He stayed outside, waiting for Nera to appear at the window. No one, not even Filip or Branko, came out to meet him. 'Why isn't Filip coming to check in with me?' Siniša thought angrily. 'Everything is as quiet and calm as if they were all dead.' His patience finally ran out and he went into the house and straight to his room. This is where he found Filip sitting by the window.

'So this is how it is! He sits by the window instead of coming out to greet me. He used to come to me and share news of her,' Siniša thought. He turned to Filip and said in a low voice:

"Didn't you see me ride in?"

"Yes," he replied quietly. "You were gone a long time."

"Have them bring me some food."

Filip left and returned shortly with a lad who carried in some bread and ham. Siniša had not eaten since the day before, so he devoured this meal. In the meantime, Filip sat by the window, watching the snowfall. Both men were quiet, and then Siniša grew tired of the silence. He was upset that Filip was not giving him news of Nera. Finally he started to ask questions:

“What did the Contessa say about us catching Baba Urša and Baba Jana? Was she happy to hear that?”

“No, because I was unable to tell her about it.”

“I assume the men told you what had happened.”

“Of course they did.”

“So what the hell is wrong with you? Why are you sitting here like a mournful hag?”

Siniša pushed his meal away and lit his cigar. For a while he smoked in silence, then he turned to Filip.

“Go and tell the Contessa to close her window. She could catch a cold.”

Filip remained seated.

“Why are you still here?” Siniša demanded.

“I can’t give her your message.”

“Why not?”

“Because she isn’t upstairs.”

“She can’t be taking a walk in this weather?”

“I don’t know where she is.”

Siniša looked at Filip with fear.

“You don’t know where Nera is?”

“No.”

“Have you lost your mind? I hope you didn’t let her leave this castle alone?”

“I was unable to follow her, and I don’t know when she left.”

“You don’t know when she left. The devil with you! Speak clearly. What is the meaning of this?”

“How can I be any clearer? She left.”

“But how could she have left? Weren’t you able to watch over her?”

Filip arose and approached Siniša, saying in a melancholy tone:

“Do with me as you wish, it wasn’t my fault. I have suffered enough over it; I didn’t even dare to greet you.”

“What happened?” Siniša asked anxiously.

“This is how it was; I knocked on her door in the morning as usual to ask her if she’d like some breakfast. I knocked for a long time, but no one replied. I thought she was asleep so I went back downstairs. But something didn’t feel quite right. I returned upstairs and started to knock. Everything was quiet. I tried the door... it wasn’t locked. The room was empty. I looked over the entire first floor, I searched through the whole house, but there was no trace of her.”

“You didn’t find her?”

“No. God only knows where she went. It looks like she left during the night.”

“You must have heard something?”

“I heard nothing. I was up late waiting for you, and before I went to sleep I listened from the stairway and I could hear her footsteps pacing the room. Then I went back to your room and fell asleep waiting for you.”

Siniša stared before him for a few moments, then he left Filip and went upstairs. No one was in the hallway. The Captain halted and stared at the door where Nera had slept. Then he

approached it slowly and pushed it open. The room was empty, the bed made, the divan vacant, all the corners of the room were bare. Siniša stood in the middle and looked around. It seemed to him that the room was so terribly large and barren of furniture. He felt as if he had never seen a room as empty as this. The entire world seemed deserted, and he the epicenter of an endless void.

Everything pointed to Nera leaving voluntarily. She took all the knickknacks that she had owned with her, even the handkerchief that Barica Cindekovka had left. This is where Nera had kept the gold coins that Filip had given her from Siniša, but under the pretense of fetching them from her room on Grič. The room looked as if Nera had tidied it up before she left. He looked over all the corners, the table, the nightstand and the other furniture in hopes of finding a letter or some other sign of her departure. But he found nothing. Distraught, he threw himself onto the divan and covered his face with his hands. ‘So, she left. Where to? Why?’ He couldn’t find an answer to either of these questions. He sat there for some time when Filip entered the room. He didn’t dare ask questions, but he sat on a chair in hopes that Siniša would start a conversation. After a long while Siniša lifted his head, looked at Filip and said:

“Bring my things up here.”

Filip returned shortly with all the things he knew Siniša had need of, including a few books he enjoyed reading.

“I will speak with no one,” Siniša said. “Leave me until I call for you.”

Filip nodded and left. The day was mournful and sad; Branko left for Grič, and Filip sat in Siniša’s room staring at the wall. The men talked in a low voice in the family room. No one had given them orders as to what to do or where to go, but no one had started a song, as they usually would. No one even raised his voice; they all felt the atmosphere of gloom that would have been disturbed by raucous and loud conversation.

Snow covered the mount, and the wind blew snowflakes at the small windows. The night sailed in like a great, silent beast and covered the earth with its black wings. Siniša lay on the divan for hours. He knew that he should go to Grič and report last night's invasion to the City Captain, that he should give orders to his men and send them out to look for the bandits or guard Krajačić's vineyard, but he couldn't bring himself to get up, go downstairs or talk to anyone. He was bothered by every sound that reached him from downstairs. He wanted to be left alone—to see no one, to hear no one.

He could hear the stove being fired, the cracking of flames. Even that gave him a headache; he could barely wait for everyone to go to sleep and for silence to take over the castle. Winter rushed in from the north and the snow covered the mount. The night claimed its black throne and lulled everything living into sleep. Only Siniša was awake, lying stiffly in the dark and daydreaming...

... 'Why do you recoil from me? Because I want to defend you? Look into my heart! Can't you see that its every beat whispers your name. Its every pulse is filled with you, Nera... I see you, I hear your footsteps and your voice, I remember your fear of me...

... This whole room is filled with you—I can feel and sense you.

... I can hear your footsteps: quiet, soft, determined.

... I can hear the rustle of a woman's dress across the floor.

God, I lie here on her bed! I am sorry; it is so rude of me, Contessa, to lie on the divan. I waited for you for a long time, and I got tired.

Why is there fear in your eyes? I don't wish for anything, I don't long for anything but that you would stop thinking of me as a villain! —Don't go. Stay. —Despise me and hate me, but stay so I can see you every day—so I can hear your voice, even if you were to speak to me

sourly, even if you were to cast accusations on me! I welcome those if it means that I will see you again, that you are alive, that you are well, that you are warm and protected from the north wind. Do you want me to leave? I'll leave. I won't show myself to you; it's enough for me to know that you are here. Forgive me, Contessa, for speaking to you this way and for daring to come here. I was afraid for you because of your long absence.'

The floorboards creaked under footsteps. A candle was lit, and in its light Siniša's pale, frozen face looked like that of a ghost. His melancholy, injured stare was directed at the door, and then he jumped toward it as if to open it. But the door was locked. He looked around the room in confusion: everything flickered before his eyes. Long sparks fluttered in the air around him, turned into blue lines and faded into darkness. The bright circles spun before his eyes, and the candle that he had lit a moment before seemed to pale. He pressed his hands to his temples, rubbed his eyes and sat down. He felt pain in his legs, and lethargy and exhaustion in his body. It was as if he had convalesced from a chronic illness.

He looked around the room wearily and said to himself:

'I had locked the door from the inside. If it wasn't for that, I could have sworn that she was in here. It was as if I could reach out and touch her!'

The wind picked up and strewed snow over the windows. Siniša shivered from the cold.

'I wonder where she is now, and how she is doing. Could she be out in the wind and the cold?' he uttered in a low voice. Then he delved back into his thoughts that continued to torture him throughout the night with vivid visions and apparitions.

The sun was high in the sky, and Branko and Filip still had not ventured into Siniša's room. They didn't dare go upstairs; they paced the snow-covered yard and discussed their



options. He thought it odd that Siniša hadn't called for anyone, hadn't asked for food and had refused to speak to them.

"I've known for a while that Siniša is in love with the Contessa," Branko said. "But it seems that he has now gone completely insane."

"Quiet!" Filip whispered. "You mustn't say that. He almost beat me when I mentioned it to him once. I never dreamed that Siniša could love someone like this. His love made the rough and uncouth man suddenly mellow like a little girl."

"He might be rough and uncouth, but deep down he is very sensitive. I am worried about him."

They walked back into the house, and Filip decided to go upstairs even if it meant that Siniša would berate him. He found him pacing up and down the room, and he was surprised to see that he was not unwelcome. Siniša started to talk as if he could barely wait to share his thoughts with him.

"Filip, do you know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think someone helped Nera leave. This must have been a pre-arranged escape."

"I wanted to say this to you yesterday. Do you think Barica Cindkek was her confidante?"

"But the baker is in the tower."

"Jesus Christ!"

"Yes, you should all testify that she wasn't here. But still, have them ready my horse."

Shortly after Siniša was racing toward Grič.

The clock struck noon as Siniša passed under the Stone Gate. Barica Cindek and button vendor Adam were just coming down from Marko's Square. Siniša noticed the crown staring at them so he halted his horse to see if the baker would go to her shop. But she went straight home. Siniša followed them from afar. Barica parted with Adam in front of her house and he went home. Siniša went straight to Barica.

She was very surprised to see the Captain. She thought that he had perhaps come back for her again. Siniša told her briefly what had happened and then he asked:

“Tell me if you can: do you know where the Contessa went?”

“I swear to you—I do not.”

“And did she tell you at least that she was planning on leaving the hunting castle?”

“No! And if she had, I would have tried to dissuade her, because I think it's very reckless of her to leave all alone and without protection. She was so safe with you—no one could have defended her the way you could.”

“Did she come across as unhappy and wishing to leave the castle when you spoke to her?”

“We didn't talk much. The only time she said anything was when she told me that she hoped Captain Siniša would prove to Krajačić that there are no such things as witches. She said that this would make her very happy.”

Siniša arose and prepared to leave. As he did so he said to the baker:

“If anyone asks whether you stayed at the castle, you mustn't admit to it. I ordered my men to keep it a secret, too.”

Barica thanked him and Siniša left. He went to see Sanda and Father Smole next. But as they were unable to give him any news of Nera, he rushed back under the Sljeme. He could

hardly wait to come back. The empty room that Nera had lived in waited for him there, and this was enough to make him want to return. When he got back, Filip noticed that Siniša's face wasn't as gloomy as it had been when he left. Siniša sat on the arm of the divan and asked Filip to come closer.

“We spent so much time here, laughing at Krajačić and dilly-dallying.”

“Are we leaving this place?”

“On the contrary. We will stay here until I have accomplished my goal.”

“What goal?”

“I will prove to Krajačić and all the saints that there are no such things as witches and that Nera couldn't have been a witch to begin with.”

“That is a difficult task and I am afraid you will not succeed.”

“It has to, even if it ends up making a witch out of me. Is that sleigh bells I'm hearing?”

Both men looked out the window and saw a sleigh come to a halt in front the castle.

Countess Auersperg, Countess Čikulini and Baron Skerlec sat inside.

“How tiresome!” Siniša mumbled. “Go down and tell them I'm not at home.”

He had barely uttered those words when the ladies started up the stairs, having asked about him at the door. Filip went out to meet them while Siniša stayed in the room. Countess Auersperg came in shortly, wrapped in a black fur coat that accentuated her beautiful tall body and made her look regal. Siniša bowed and kissed her hand. Trying to control his temper, he asked:

“And the others?”

“I hope you don't mind us being here alone?”

“Not at all. I just wanted to greet the Countess and the Baron.”

“And I would like for us to stay here.”

“If you’ll forgive me, I’d prefer not to stay and chat in this room.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a sanctuary, and I know that you plan on delving into godless topics.”

The Countess laughed. She looked around the room meticulously and when she failed to find anything suspicious she agreed to Siniša’s peculiar request and followed him into another room. Siniša offered her a seat, and she looked at him smiling ironically:

“You must have forgotten my address...”

“Aren’t you still a guest at Countess Čikulini’s?”

“But you have forgotten the way to her palace.”

The Captain laughed.

“The witches obstructed my path. You must have heard of the hunting I did at Medvednica.”

“This is hardly the job for you, my dear Siniša. I want to save you from such a waste of your time. Here, read this!”

The Countess handed him a letter. He opened it and realized that she had communicated with his commander about his situation. The letter said: “If you wish, I will summon the Captain immediately to Vienna!”

He was aggrieved by this news, but his face remained calm as if it was none of his business. He folded the letter and said:

“And what was your response?”

“I told him how you always complain about the indecency of being asked to chase Krajačić’s witches.”

“But the matter has become more serious.”

“Since Countess Terka is on Grič?”

Siniša laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

“My dear Captain, are you hoping that Count Nadaždi is more powerful than I in Vienna? I came to ask what you would prefer: for us to spend Christmas in Vienna or Mokrice?”

Her question and the tone that she used embittered Siniša. He was on the brink of responding angrily and boorishly, but he composed himself and replied courteously:

“I believe we will be more comfortable in Mokrice.”

“Very well. I expect to see you the day before Christmas Eve. But don’t forget: you’re invited to supper.”

“I will be on time.”

“I won’t write to your commander for now. I can see that you would prefer to stay here, and I do to. In fact, I prolonged my leave from the Queen by two months.”

“That long? Won’t you be bored here?”

“No, my darling. I will be enjoying my honeymoon! So, au revoir at Mokrice.”

The Countess left the room, followed by Siniša. They found Countess Čikulini in the dining room gazing wistfully at Skerlec as he hung on her every word. Siniša gave Baron Skerlec a scathing look and greeted Countess Čikulini kindly, expressing his pleasure at seeing her again. But he was far more pleased when they announced that they would be returning promptly. He escorted them to the sleigh, and listened contentedly as the sound of its bells trailed off in the woods.

“What did she want?” Filip asked.

“She’s jealous of Terka so she wanted to ship me off to Vienna.”

“And to think that you were just about to start working on such an important mission.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not so easily manipulated. She offered Mokrice or Vienna. And do you know what that means? If I don’t show up at her estate, she will write for my commander to transfer me to Vienna. So I graciously accepted her invitation for Mokrice.”

“I hope she’s not serious about forcing you to marry her. She might make good on her threats.”

“I can’t imagine how she would know... no one could have seen or learned anything. You were the only person there when I strangled that damned woman...”

“We don’t know that for sure. Who knows if the body was completely consumed by the fire?”

“That’s a good point. If the unfortunate woman was not burned to ashes, does Auerspergova know about it and who could she have heard it from?”

“If she does know, you’re lost. She is sure to betray you if you refuse to marry her. What else could you do?”

“This!” Siniša said and pulled a pistol out of his pocket.

“That would be terrible!” Filip said.

“Why? Do I have anyone in this world to mourn for me? Do I have a father, a mother, a sister, or a woman to love me? I’d much rather blow my brains out than wait for them to cast their judgment.”

Siniša stood by the window and stared into the forest. Filip wanted to bring up Nera, so he thought of a way to do it.

“Will you stay in this room now?”

“Why do you ask?”

“She might come back yet.”

“She won’t be coming back...”

“What could have caused her to leave us in this manner?”

“She is convinced that I am a villain. And after all, she is right. Am I not a criminal? A death warrant hangs over my head.”

“But she knows nothing about that.”

“Regardless. She thinks me cruel.”

“Didn’t you try to prove her wrong?”

“I did, but she wouldn’t let me speak. She imagined that I would take advantage of her situation...”

“But didn’t she see everything that you had done for her? You were respectful toward her here in this castle, where you could have done whatever you wished.”

“Perhaps she would have come to see that if those black men didn’t come who spoke of me in a way that made her believe the worst.”

“What do these men have to do with you?”

“I don’t know. Leave me be.”

Filip wanted to discuss the burglary, but he had to obey: Siniša wished to be left alone.

## Chapter 52: The Witches

Night fell; Grič was deserted. Siniša rode through empty streets covered in thick snow. Small windows of the burghers' houses shone a serene light while the windows of the palaces belonging to the aristocracy showed opulence and merriment. The Captain dismounted in front of Count Drašković's palace, where he came to look for Governor Count Nadaždi.

The servant led Siniša to the salon where the Governor sat.

"Hon. Captain, do you know why I asked you to come?"

"I don't, Your Excellency."

"Perhaps you're aware that Countess Drašković owns an estate in Bukovac. The castle vacant apart from some servants; the estate manager and others live in adjacent buildings on the property. When the estate manager came to check on the servants who had not shown up to work in the fields one day, he was in for a shock. He came here to tell us himself about the stupefying events, and he brought along two servants who witnessed what had happened. I will invite them in so that you can hear it straight from the horse's mouth and be able to judge the story accordingly."

Nadaždi ordered the lackey to bring in the servants who had arrived from Bukovac: two tall young men came in who appeared brave enough. The Governor ordered them to tell the Captain everything they had witnessed the night before.

"I was celebrating my birthday so we were drinking and partying in our room that is situated by the front door of the castle. Around midnight our friends went to their rooms on the estate and Štefan and I locked the front door and went to bed. The door to our room was slightly



ajar. We hadn't been asleep for long when I woke up, thinking someone was walking outside. I listened for a while assuming it was one of our friends who had stayed behind, which would have been plausible since we were all drunk. But I didn't feel like getting up to check on it—my head felt heavy and I wanted to sleep. However, I heard the footsteps again, and I realized that someone was whispering and rustling in front of our room.

I looked at the door—everything was dark. I didn't see anything, I could just hear things. I quickly woke Štefan and we both jumped off the bed and listened: we were sure someone was in front of the door.

'Who is it?' I yelled.

In place of a reply the door opened, and we saw a procession of Babe. Two of them carried lanterns, and they were followed by more Babe who carried brooms. Now we were certain that we had fallen into the hands of the witches. We started to cross ourselves and pray to God. I was so scared I couldn't stand on my feet, so I knelt and continued to cross myself."

"And what did those babe look like?" Siniša asked.

"I couldn't say. Some sort of long skirts and kerchiefs hung over them. They wore veils that covered their faces so we couldn't see who they were. Perhaps some of them were barefaced, but I was so scared I couldn't see clearly. Štefan was also scared—the Prefect himself would have been scared if he had seen them. They got me on the floor and tied my hands behind my back in no time; as if I were a helpless babe. I was so terrified it didn't occur to me to defend myself. If these were bandits I would have shown them what I was made of, but no one can defend himself against witches. They butcher a man on the spot. In the meantime the others had tied Štefan, and then they threw us on the ground and started to threaten us with their brooms and scream, God help me, like beasts. It looked as if they had dispersed flying across the castle. I will

never forget what we had heard and lived through that night—not as long as I live. The whole house shook, everything boomed. I didn't dare breathe or call to my friend. The witches danced, jumped, screamed and laughed hellishly in the upstairs rooms, and my hair was standing on end. I was afraid that they would return, butcher us and cut out our hearts. That terrible hellish dance and the thunder lasted for about two hours, and then suddenly everything was quiet as if they had flown away. When the others found us tied up like that the next day we went upstairs with the servants to look at the damage. They had taken all the gold and the silver and had broken everything they didn't wish to carry away. Tiles, laundry, broken chairs and other debris littered the floors. The windows were open, which must be how they flew away. They also left behind a few brooms.”

“And how did they enter the castle?”

“We found the door open. God only knows how they got in.”

Once the servant had finished his story and the other had corroborated it on Siniša's request, Nadaždi had them leave the room. Then he told Siniša:

“The same kind of thing happened a few months ago, if you remember. And yet, Notary Sale has still not produced any leads that would help us capture these criminals. If there is such a thing as a witches' coven, maybe they don't fly on brooms?”

“I am convinced that they walk on Earth like the rest of us.”

“I summoned you here to ask you to take over this case. Don't rely on the guidance from the town's gentry. And I would be very grateful if you could discover what's at play here.”

“I've been successful with my investigations in the past, and I am truly tickled by this case. So I agree to take on the City Captain's role.”

“But please don’t tell him about this; he would be offended,” the Governor requested, and invited Siniša to stay for supper.

The company who had gathered for supper was small: there were the host and the hostess, Governor Nadaždi, Ženka Drašković and Terka, the Governor’s daughter, with her fiancé Karlo Erdody and his brother, and Siniša. The topic of conversation throughout the evening was the break-in in Bukovac. Everyone was convinced that the witches had done it. Terka spent a lot of time chatting with her fiancé to mask the fervent glances she kept sending Siniša’s way. After supper, the guests dispersed to the various rooms.

Siniša grew bored, so he unobtrusively bid the hostess goodbye. She thought he was going to see Countess Auersperg, so she did not hold this against him. The Captain went down the long hallway that led to the main stairway, when suddenly someone snuffed out the light behind him, leaving him in the dark. He stopped, surprised. Then he felt hand arm on his elbow.

“Who is this?”

“Be quiet, for God’s sake. It’s me.”

“You? What are you doing here?”

“Haven’t you noticed me excusing myself to the guests? I wanted to meet you.”

“Why? What is it?”

“Siniša, you owe me an explanation, that is all. I need to know.”

“All right. Ask away.”

“Someone might hear us here. Join me in one of the drawing rooms for a bit.”

A door opened before Siniša and he saw a soft pink glow shine inside. The Captain realized immediately that this was not a drawing room, but Terka’s opulent bedroom. Dark red wallpaper and silk furniture drowned in the mysterious light that spread over the room like a pink

fog. The view was magical and enticing: Terka had put on a robe that revealed all the charms of her body. Her breasts were half exposed, and the sleeves were cut to the shoulders. She had brushed the white powder off her black hair and had braided it loosely to fall over her shoulders. Siniša had to admit that she was more beautiful now than when in her fancy ballroom gowns.

“You are exposing yourself to unnecessary danger of people finding me here,” Siniša said. “I can come back to see you tomorrow morning.”

“No. I want to speak with you now. No one will find us, the company is merry and loud and they don’t suspect us being here. Sit for a moment, Hon. Captain, and let me offer you a glass of champagne.”

The wine bubbled in gold-rimmed flutes, but Siniša didn’t touch it. ‘Perhaps this was the potion that Baba Urša was concocting at Medvedgrad,’ he wondered.

“You’re not in the mood for a glass of champagne?”

“No thank you. I would like you to tell me straight away why you invited me to come here.”

“All right then. You had told me once, when I offered to be your wife, that you had no intention of getting married because you had no interest in marriage.”

“And I stand by my words.”

“But yet you are engaged to marry Countess Auersperg? She wouldn’t dare spread the news if it weren’t true.”

Terka moved closer and asked passionately:

“Siniša, could it be that you are in love with a woman who has withered under the kisses of a hundred different lovers?”

“Who says I loved her?”

“You don’t love her, and yet you will marry her? If you plan on marrying someone you don’t love, then you mustn’t marry anyone but me?”

“You treat me as if you owned me!”

“What about her? If she secured the Queen’s good graces for you, I can do so much more.”

“Contessa, if you continue to speak with me this way I will stop being civil. Surely you see how insulting your accusations are.”

“But for God’s sake, what have I said?”

“I am in our Queen’s good graces because I proved myself with my sabre in the heat of battle, and not because some Baba pulled her strings on my account.”

“Then what ties you to this woman who has done nothing for you? Why are you with her?”

“One doesn’t need to love his lover.”

“Then you mustn’t marry her. And you won’t.”

Terka looked at him passionately and whispered:

“Siniša, don’t you feel how much I love you?”

“No, I don’t. Love is a grand and beautiful sentiment, and I doubt you are capable of it.”

“You’ve gone insane. You are blind. I am burning with desire for you, and your gaze is so clear and bright. This is an insult, it is maddening. You are pretending, you are lying just to make me grow wild with rage.”

She flung her white arms around his neck and pressed her hot face against his lips, but Siniša started, pushed her away and arose. Terka watched him in shock. Her eyes glazed over and wrathful ire burst forth from her hot, desiring lips:

“Siniša, you have lost your mind...”

“Since you’re not being reasonable, allow me to compensate for that.”

Siniša bowed, went to the door and made to leave, but the door was locked and the key missing. This surprised him. He pressed his lips together and stared at the door in silence for a few moments. Then he shrugged his shoulders, turned to Terka who stood there like a white statue enveloped in pink fog. Slowly the Captain returned and sat in the armchair. For a few moments they were both quiet, and then he said nonchalantly and coldly:

“What is the meaning of this? What are your plans?”

Terka rushed to him, placed her hands on his shoulders and whispered feverishly:

“I am getting married in a few days. You have lost your mind, Siniša. You are a madman! A criminal!”

The young Captain stared in silence at the beauty who was so shaken by her desire for his caress. All she could see was his dark face and black eyes in which a mysterious and deep emotion burned. She stood near him like a feline awaiting its prey and stared directly into his eyes. His calm and cool only ignited her passion more. Taking leave of her senses completely she threw herself to his feet and hugged them whispering:

“I love you, Siniša. I love you!”

“Stop it. Don’t talk to me about love.”

“Why not?” she asked, frightened by his harsh tone of voice.

“This holy word should not pass your lips.”

“A holy word? You’re talking about—a holy word? You.. in that tone? You’re in love, Siniša? You’re in love with someone...”

Terka's voice shivered with despair. Siniša leaned his head on his hand and did not respond.

"In this room, so close to me and my beauty, you're thinking of another woman?"

"I would dishonor her by thinking of her in here," he whispered.

"Dishonor her?" she laughed out loud. "You would dishonor Auerspergova?!"

"Ah, you can say what you wish about her! She's the same as you."

These words whipped Terka like lightning. She lifted her head and craned her neck like a serpent ready to attack.

"It's not her? So it's another woman? More beautiful, younger and attractive than me?" she asked feverishly.

"Stop talking about her!" Siniša threatened loudly.

"She can't be prettier than me! The damned woman's got you under a spell."

A rage erupted in Siniša as she reminded him of Nera.

"I am telling you to be quiet."

"You're under a spell, you have been entranced! Only a witch could cloud your judgment in this way—only..."

The Captain pressed his hand over her lips, choking her words. She grew pale, and this brought him back to his senses. He quickly lowered his hand from her mouth.

"Forgive my coarseness, but I can't allow you to smear something that's sacred to me with your words."

"Sacred?" Terka repeated, tired and terrified. "Is there anything more sacred than a youthful beauty, warm lips and steaming kisses? Is she a goddess?"

"If you insist on reminding me of her, I will be forced to handle you accordingly again."

Terka grew silent. Her breathing was labored. For a few moments she stood before him this way, looking at his handsome, manly face, his dark curls and his broad shoulders. She shivered. Then she collapsed on her knees next to him and whispered:

“Why mustn’t I speak of her?”

“Because when I think of her I find even the most delicious lips revolting.”

“I don’t understand,” she whispered. But she was forced to stop, as Siniša forcibly placed his hand over her mouth again.



### **Chapter 53: Shadows under the Mesnička Tower**

Grič streets were covered by the black wings of night. The night watchman passed in the deathly silence like a ghost. His small, pale lamp flickered eerily in the darkness. Siniša stepped out of Terka's castle onto a deserted street. The ravaged skeleton of Countess Ratkay's burned castle rose before him. Just a few weeks ago, the adored and proud Contessa Nera had lived there. The flames have extinguished the splendor, have devoured the castle, and bare walls were the only remnants of Nera's former home, left over like tombstones. Siniša tore himself away from that dreadful sight and went down Mesnička Street. He had no idea where he was headed; he wanted to walk the town in the dark, to be alone, all alone and unseen. A small lamp burned over Mesnička Gate: it was the town's lighthouse. But the doorman was asleep; his windows were dark.

Siniša walked down the street lined with butcher shops—they were all closed shut, not a living creature was in sight. The cold air blew in his face and cooled his forehead. He turned left and started to climb a small alleyway to the hill over Mesnička Street. He stopped before a small ruin that was covered in snow. This is where he found Nera many months ago. This is where she first suspected him of being villain who had her kidnapped from the Capuchin's church. He started to relive the events of that evening, and was lost in thought. Suddenly he started as he heard the crunching of snow from above the ruin.

Someone was walking on the snow. Yes, he could clearly make out footsteps. The snow crunched under what seemed like a multitude of people. He could hear their feet falling through the snow and being dragged out again. Who were those people? He could not resist looking into

it. He exited the ruin and slowly followed the direction from which he heard the snow crunch. But he quickly halted and stared at the distance, trying to make something out in the night. Up on the hill he could see something black on the snow. 'I'll wait and see where they're going.'

But he waited in vain. The black shadows kept moving, he could hear their every footstep as they walked, but they never approached Grič or Mesnička Tower. They kept walking around in circles. 'I don't believe in ghosts, but no one in their right mind would spin around like that as if they were making fairy circles. I'll go see what this is,' Siniša decided. He rushed over the deepest snow toward the shadows that appeared like ghosts among the brush. It seemed to him that this was a procession of madmen. One stepped behind the other, circling the bushes. One moment they would go back, and then return to circle the same bush again. What the devil was that! They all walked in silence.

He was consumed by a desperate wish to see them from up close, and he was afraid of not reaching them before they disappeared. So he rushed forward, but this disrupted the procession. They were all running away—and shortly they disappeared on the other side of Mesnička hill. Siniša ran after them as fast as he could, but four hands grabbed him as if out of nowhere. He shoved someone's ribs with his elbows and felt as they covered his eyes and tied a cloth around his neck. This enraged him and he started to thrash around, managing to free his right hand, grab ahold of his saber and fling it about.

He couldn't see anything but he realized that the attackers had run away. He took the tie off his head with his left hand, and saw that it was a woman's kerchief. There was no trace of the attackers or the mysterious procession. This all had happened so fast that Siniša only now got a chance to think about it. 'I won't budge from here,' he decided. 'I'll look for the footprints in the snow at dawn.' Leaning against a tree with pistol in hand, he decided to wait.

Everything was again calm and cold in the dead of night. The hours passed in tomblike silence. Siniša's hands were turning to ice, so he could barely hold the pistol he had pointed at the ready. But it did not look like he would need it; quietly and seamlessly the night left the Earth. Dawn rose in the East. He could now make out the footprints in the snow, and what he found truly stunned him.

He noticed that the footprints made an irregular circle. He could clearly make out the path that the nightly procession took as they kept pacing the same route over and over again, circling the bushes and the trees. But he was even more surprised when he realized that women's feet had made those footprints. Only a few of the prints were men's.

'This is almost beyond belief!,' Siniša thought to himself. 'If these were men's footprints I would have thought that some guys had gotten dead drunk and engaged in some idiotic partying. But those men would have been shouting and laughing, and this procession was silent! What to think of this? What kind of women were these, and what were they doing here? If I were to tell a sane man about what I had witnessed here, they would accuse me of having drunk too much. But I will go on and see where they had run off to.'

Siniša ascertained that the footsteps led downhill, toward the woods, and he started to follow them under Zvezdišće and then again toward Mesnička Gate. But he lost the trail on the road that had frozen over and was used for cart traffic. Where had they gone? To Grič or to Ilica? He couldn't be sure. Siniša returned to the scene of his attack and found his attackers' footprints easily. Their boots had left deep holes in the snow. They ran to Mesnička Gate, but their trail was lost on the snowless road as well.

'What was this?' he kept wondering as he walked to the hunting castle under Sljeme.

The produce vendors rushed in the streets, carrying their wares to Marko's square.

## Chapter 54: At Mokrice

Two riders were on the road to Samobor. They were in no hurry and they rode in silence, taking the time to appreciate the beautiful views. The valley covered in deep snow spread around them, and before them rose the proud white caps of Samobor hills, including the Okić hill wrapped royally in a vision of a snowy ferret's coat.

The valley itself is an icy sea, the white hills rising from it like icebergs. Above it rose the sky's blue horizon spun with golden rays of the sun. The white snow shimmered as if sprinkled in golden dust, and the frozen creeks glistened like pathways made of glass.

The city of Samobor stood atop Tepce-hill. Its pointy towers stared at the blue sky, and its cold walls soaked up the warm sun. The riders rode into the city and passed the small houses of the Samobor burghers, then turned to take the road to Mokrice.

“What a glorious day, isn't it, Siniša? Doesn't this soothe and comfort your soul?”

“No. I enjoy the gray skies, the thick fog and the dark night.”

“You're gloomy. This is what happens when you spend your nights at the Mesnička hill waiting for the mysterious procession.”

“You came with me, and it had no effect on you. If only we had caught someone, but it was all in vain. When I return to Zagreb we'll go back to catching the strange night birds who dance circles on the frozen snow.”

“Just try to make sure Auerspergova doesn't catch you in Mokrice.”

“Don't worry. I can see now that it's pointless to reason with women. The more you try the sooner reason escapes them. If I hadn't decided to come to Mokrice, the Countess would

have been furious; if I had come at the exact time she bid me to, she would have received me with kindness. But since I am arriving early, she won't be pleased to see me."

The noon bells rang from one end of the hill to the next as the round black towers of Mokrice town emerged from the white forest on a snowy mound. Siniša and Filip turned into the yard; a castle appeared before them with a high facade flanked by two wings. No one came out to greet them. Two women wearing black, Slovenian-style dresses stood by the well, cleaning something. Their heads were covered in white kerchiefs that were tied under their chins and that concealed half of their faces.

Siniša halted his horse, and said to Filip half jokingly:

"It's a bad omen for the first thing we see to be women."

"We should be fine as long as they're young and beautiful."

"The hell they are! One is as old as Methuselah, and the other is jaundiced; her face is terribly yellow. It's a shame, really; just look at that beautiful body."

Finally a servant appeared and took hold of the horses. The visitors went upstairs. Siniša was right—Countess Auersperg found herself inconvenienced. She apologized for not being able to spend the day with him due to the obligations she had in preparing for the holidays. She had a room prepared for him in the left tower, adjacent to the weapon room. The walls of the tower were covered in old weaponry—bows, spears, sabers, swords and rifles—so that barely an inch of bare wall remained. However, the room was furnished with chairs and divans that made for a cozy ambiance suited for receiving visitors.

That evening Siniša perused some of the weapons that he found of special interest.

“You should see the beauty that is our chambermaid!” he told Filip. It’s the one we saw at the well. I got a better look at her; the poor girl’s face is so decayed and yellow that she looks like she had risen from the grave. This must be why she hides it and avoids eye contact.”

“The Countess surely picked her so you wouldn’t spend too much time in this tower,” Filip replied.

They both laughed and continued looking at the weapons. The castle came alive at nightfall as new guests arrived: Countess Čikulini, Baron Skerlec, Count Vojkffy and Council Commissioner Dvojković.

Siniša retreated to his tower around midnight, pleased to be rid of the guests who had bored him throughout the evening. He sat down without lighting the lamp. Moonlight shone through the window, casting its light on the room, and he enjoyed sitting there alone, so that he could surrender to his thoughts without interruption. He thought of Nera; whenever he was alone at night, he couldn’t help but think of her. It was rather late when he thought he heard footsteps in the hall. He listened for some time: could it be that the Countess was spying on him? He clearly made out light, woman’s footsteps pass in front of his room. This angered him, so he turned on his lamp and opened the door. He lifted the light higher but he saw no one. He returned to his room, convinced that the sleepless nights had caused him to hallucinate, so he went to bed and tried to fall asleep.

But sleep wouldn’t come, so he lay on the pillows, staring at the moonlight that lit the room in its ethereal light. A quiet rattle pierced the silence, as if something was crawling along the wall by his bed. He started, stared at the wall and listened. ‘This is madness! Everything is quiet, I can’t hear a thing. But still something moves, advances, slithers. It stopped now. It’s nearby, as if it were inside the wall? Yes, I can hear it better if I lean my head against the wall.

It's in there! What could it be? It's as if the wall had come alive.' He arose quickly, turned on his lamp and started examining the wall. He found nothing, so he went into the hall. There was nothing there.

Siniša angrily returned to his room and lay down. He now thought he heard the rattle from afar; it was mind-boggling. Finally all was quiet again. The moonlight crept away from the window. Siniša surrendered to sleep.

The first thing Siniša did the following morning was re-check the walls in his room and the hallway. He found nothing in his room, but in the hallway he found a hidden button quite low in the wall on which the whitewash had chipped so that its edge blackened against the white of the wall. He found that the button was but an edge of a bolt that was fastened onto a door that was whitewashed to blend into the surrounding wall. He turned the bolt and opened a low door. He had to bend down considerably to look into the dark space that spread before him: it was square and it stretched upwards, with a small ladder leaned against the wall to facilitate access for the chimney sweeps. Siniša pulled back and laughed. 'I worked myself up over nothing. This is just an unused chimney. The wind must have caused the racket last night,' he scolded himself. He slammed the door shut, left his tower and joined the other guests, completely forgetting about last night's shenanigans.

The entire day was hectic, but Siniša was bored and uninterested so he felt more comfortable once he returned to the weapons room. He squeezed into a small opening by the window that resembled a tiny chamber just barely big enough for a man to turn around in, and he looked out as moonlight shed its silver glow over the landscape. He was engrossed in his thoughts when he suddenly turned around: 'What racket is this? Someone opened the weapons room door.' He quickly pulled into the far end of the chamber to hide from the moonlight. He

could hear footsteps and the rustle of a woman's dress in the far end of the room, which was covered in darkness. 'What's that? The clank of a weapon? It's as if she took down a rifle? What could it be?' For a moment all was quiet, and then the door slowly closed and something rustled in the hallway. Siniša quickly slipped out of his corner and rushed after the rustle of a woman's dress. He opened the door to the weapons room; the hallway was dark but he heard something crawl, move, slither along the inside of the wall. He advanced a few steps and leaned his head against the wall. 'Yes, here she is!' Siniša felt for the iron door that stood ajar and opened the in one fell swoop. A woman was climbing up the ladder.

Siniša grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled—a muffled cry reverberated through the chimney. Siniša held her by her shoulder and she tried to fight back but he was able to tighten his grip and pull her into the weapons room. She was strong, but she was no match for him, so he dragged her to the window to look at her face in the light of the moon. She didn't hide, however, which made him even more eager to find out who this woman was and why she was sneaking into the tower at night, grabbing the weapons and climbing through the chimney.

He grabbed both her hands with one hand and used the other to lift her head. At first he was surprised. In the dry, decrepit face he recognized the girl he met when he came to the castle. But he held on to her face as something compelled him to keep staring at it, yellowed and withered. It was her eyes, which he had just now seen for the first time, which bewildered him.

Was this a sick apparition? Had he gone insane or did the champagne distort his vision? Those eyes, so beautiful and dark, so wise and daring could have belonged to no one but her. And that high, brave forehead was hers alone; but her face wasn't that deteriorated, that yellow!

No, this couldn't be her. 'I have truly lost my mind,' Siniša thought. But he kept holding her face to the moonlight, fearfully staring into her eyes.



“In the name of God, who are you? I recognize your eyes, but not your face!”

“Let me go, Sir,” the stranger said in a timid, quiet tone.

“I can’t. There’s something so familiar about you. And yet...”

“You’re mistaken, Sir, we have never met before!” she uttered a barely audible whisper.

Siniša thought of something, seeing as how he was barring the stranger’s way out from the window nook. He turned around to light the lamp and he shone its light on the girl.

‘The figure, this tall, curvy and vibrant figure was—hers! The eyes, these eyes! Could it be that another woman in this world has her eyes?’ The longer he stared at them, the more he succumbed to a terrible fear that this was in fact her face. He was overcome with vertigo. He approached her, placed both his hands on her shoulders and said fearfully:

“Your eyes can’t fool me. Could this really be you?”

“It does rather seem that fate continues to harass me,” she said in her natural voice.

When he heard it, Siniša started as if it cut him like a knife. Yes, that voice, that was her voice. Those were her eyes, and hers alone. He had recognized them. But instead of shouting with joy at finding her, he stared in shock at her terribly transformed face and cried desperately:

“Nera, Nera, what happened to you? What terrible thing have you endured?”

“The fact that you recognized me!”

“Is this the only thing that distresses you? Your face fills me with dread!”

She smiled ironically.

“I’m not beautiful anymore, am I? No one will be kidnapping me anymore.”

“You are terribly ill Nera, and I feel responsible for your misfortune. It’s my fault for leaving you unattended so that you were able to leave the hunting castle. Do you understand what I have done? Every living thing would regret undergoing such a trial.”

“You think that an illness affected this change in my appearance?”

“What else could it be, for God’s sake?”

“Since you are so flustered about it, I will tell you the truth and absolve you from your guilt. I had a good idea the night that the burglars came into the castle. When I heard them enter, I ran to the kitchen and smeared ash over my face to give me the appearance of a dirty kitchen maid. Even though those men knew Contessa Nera, they did not recognize me like that. When I escaped the castle, I was passing through the villages on the way to Samoboro where no one knew me. I spoke with the village women who were very open to chatting about anything and everything, and so a woman told me about some roots that a village man made to wash his face with. These roots cause the skin of his face to grow sallow and as yellow as a lemon. In this way he goes to churches and begs in the villages, and since people think he’s really sick they give him sustenance. I saw the looks of that man, so I was sure that the woman had told me the truth, but I went a step further: I didn’t only apply this boiled root solution to my face but to my hair as well, and it made it grow darker. You must know that my ashen hair could have cost me my life. So now you know that I have not fallen ill. And you can rest assured that I am telling you the truth since my body is as healthy as it ever was.”

“But why did you do this, Nera? Why didn’t you choose go to Krajačić’s Sanda? She would have helped you leave somewhere far away where Krajačić wouldn’t be able to reach you. You could have asked Father Smole for help. There were a hundred different ways to approach this, but not this! You have a plethora of friends who would look after you.”

“I am not asking for help. I don’t care about escaping Krajačić’s rage or my death sentence. I have another goal in mind.”

“You’re after something else?”

“Yes! So I beg you, since you are already familiar with my situation, not to prevent me from executing my plan. No one must know about me or the existence of this chimney. It was an unfortunate development for you to recognize me, but from now on I am a stranger to you.”

“If this is what you truly want, I will obey.”

“I need you to give me your word, and I expect you to follow through.”

“I don’t know if it will mean anything to you,” Siniša said bitterly, “but you have my word.”

“Hon. Captain, this never happened. Good night!”

“Just a moment, please. I know I have no right to ask about your plans or the reason behind your coming to this castle. Still, in many ways I feel like I am partially responsible for what has happened to you. You think me a bastard, but you must admit even bastards at times feel a pang of conscience. I regret perhaps being the cause of yet another misfortune that has befallen you. I would like to make it up to you. I don’t know what it is that you are planning on doing, but I would like to be of service.”

“No one can help with what I am planning on doing. I am looking for someone.”

“In this castle?”

“Yes, here.”

“I heard you take a weapon from the weapons room.”

“You did? I have your word that you neither heard nor saw anything.”

Nera took a pistol from her dress and showed it to Siniša.

“Here, this is what I took. If anyone notices, you haven’t seen or heard anything suspicious. You don’t know Countess Auersperg’s chambermaid.”

Having said that, Nera left the room. Siniša threw himself into an armchair, feeling as if what had just happened must have been a short, terrible dream.

‘Could he have dreamt that he would find her here, and in this condition? Why had she done this to herself? Who is this man she is searching for? Who is the pistol for? Could it be for Krajačić or Dvojković? Could it be for Skerlec? That might be the most plausible answer—he deserted her at a time when she needed protection. Yes, perhaps it’s mostly his fault that she is reduced to this state. It would have been easy for him to defend her. If he had gone to see the Queen, everything would have worked out well. Perhaps she found out the identity of the person who had prevented Oršić from getting an audience with the Queen.’

As he sat there thinking, he thought of her face and he shuddered. ‘How could she have done this to herself? Had she truly had enough of living?’

Siniša never went to sleep that night; instead, he paced the rooms like a madman. A deep sorrow, melancholy, anger at his fate, despair and fear of what was yet to come all raged through his soul like a hurricane. He was still agitated the following day when he joined the loud and merry guests. They did not suspect the turmoil in Siniša’s soul, but they kept asking him why he was so pale and distracted. He managed to dismiss their inquiries about his behavior with a joke or two. He felt very excited that whole morning; whenever a door would open his heart trembled, expecting that it would be—her. When he went to his room that afternoon to change for a hunting expedition, he unexpectedly ran into her in the hallway. She was wearing the same black dress that she wore the first time he saw her at the well, and that same kerchief that hid her face so well. He held his breath when he saw her, and shuddered through and through but he passed her calmly and without giving her a second glance, just as she passed him without acknowledging his presence. He quickened his pace to get to his room, and he locked the door

behind him. He kept seeing her, with her altered face, in her black dress, kerchief on her head, working as a chambermaid. But regardless, he would have been so happy if she would but look at him amicably.

A moment later he started to change, and people were already knocking at his door. 'I am not superstitious,' he said to himself, 'but I feel a foreboding! I am afraid! I see danger all around, as if terrible omens are inscribed in the very air I breathe! But what could it be? Is there anything more terrible than what I lived through yesterday?'

## Chapter 55: Prelude to Battle

At about noon on Christmas Eve day, a whole host of elegant sleighs entered the spacious courtyard of Mokrice town bringing new guests. Siniša and Filip stood in the left-wing hallway watching the aristocratic ladies and gentlemen disembark.

“Look!” Filip whispered. “It’s Governor Nadaždi, Counts Erdody, Contessas Ženka and Terka, Countess and Count Drašković and nobleman Malakoczy. And look at all the others—an army of visitors. It’s almost like we’re celebrating a wedding!”

“I have no idea what they’re all doing here. The Countess didn’t tell me she had invited them,” Siniša replied grouchy. “I can’t recall her ever entertaining so many guests at Christmas Eve.”

“It looks as if she’s got a special celebration planned.”

Countess Auersperg’s Mokrice drawing room was suddenly crowded, reverberating with merry laughter and loud chitchat. Siniša mingled with the guests and greeted them all. His appearance evoked scrutiny; everyone noticed his slimmed figure and the pallor of his face, which made him even more handsome than before. His eyes appeared dreamy against his pale face, and his black hair looked even darker. All the ladies and demoiselles pined for him and wished that he would approach them with a word. He greeted them one by one, kissed their hands cavalierly and said a few kind words. Shortly the castellan invited the guests to see the rooms he had prepared for them, and they left. Terka was the only one to lag behind, and she whispered to him:

“Why are you already here?”

“I should be asking you why you’re here at all?”

“The Countess invited my father and Drašković, so it was only natural that I should join them. They have no idea of my rivalry with the Countess. I am only troubled by the warm welcome that the Countess has given me.”

“I can’t think of a reason for that.”

“I find your demeanor very strange. You haven’t approached me at all since that night.”

“I didn’t approach you then, either—you lured me in. And believe me, I don’t find that very entertaining.”

“Siniša, your attitude will cost you.”

“You can threaten all you like! I’m in control of my fate. I find it distasteful to have a woman throw herself at me, even if it was in secret.”

The Contessa grew pale with rage. She wanted to respond, but the sound of the sleigh bells came in from the yard. Siniša went to the window and, to his surprise, saw the Remetins. They jumped off the sleigh like birds and flew up the steps. Siniša went to meet them and expressed his joy at seeing them freed at last.

“The Governor mediated,” Tito said, “so they finally let us go. We heard that he was coming here so we rushed after him. We wanted to speak with him.”

The Captain went to the Governor and announced that the students had come and that they would like an audience. The Governor received them in a small salon, and greeted them warmly. He shook hands with each of them, patted them on the shoulders and said a few kind words.

“And now, be reasonable!” Nadaždi said. “You are young, you lost your hearts to a pretty girl, and you felt it was your chivalrous duty to save her from a terrible fate—after all, this is no crime, but it is against the law.”

“No, Your Eminence,” Francesco said in a serious tone, a somber expression on his face. “We came here to thank you for your role in procuring our freedom, but we also felt that it was our duty to tell you the whole truth. We did act to save Contessa Nera, but our convictions were another reason we rebelled against the law. We are not only certain that she is no witch, but we believe that the entire procedure is unjust.”

“All right then,” the Governor said. “You are free to believe what you wish, but you shouldn’t have acted on it. You know that you attempted to kidnap her from the hand of the law, and this is a punishable offense.”

“But what if we had come to the conclusion that the law is outdated, and that it’s nothing but a consequence of old superstitious fallacies?” Tito Krajačić interjected. “We have had plenty of laws before that proved to be bad and were done away with.”

“Even King Koloman had issued a law in which he forbids the belief in witches and magic, and King Karlo the Great had done the same. He punished by death anyone who spread the belief in the existence of witches.”

“But then many theological books came out, ensuring us that the witches are real. And the laws changed again when Pope Innocent the VIII. Issued a law in which he commanded us to believe in the existence of witches.”

“But, Your Eminence, we do not believe in them and we never will, no matter what happens to us. It’s just terrible to witness the way these things have been handled in our country.



I am convinced that Your Eminence does not believe that real flesh and blood women are capable of flying in the air and causing hail and storms.”

“All I am doing is respecting the law!,” the Governor replied.

“But we won’t rest until this law is abolished.”

“Are you in the business of inciting a revolution, my dear children?”

“If common sense and enlightened minds are a revolution, then this is precisely what we want! We will tell you honestly that we have kept our beliefs to ourselves so far, and we have only spoken about them during our meetings in the hut in Remete, but from now on we will speak out publically and without fear, come what may.”

“But for God’s sake, children, don’t do this! You are familiar with the consequences...”

“Yes, we know what’s in store for us! Don’t you think, Your Eminence, that the only reason that Contessa Nera was accused of being a witch is because she publically denounced the existence of witches?”

“You know that she had hidden the accused Kušenka!”

“Neither the Judge nor the Council Commissioner would have been bothered by that; they would have made excuses for it and nothing bad would have happened to Countess Ratkay’s granddaughter had it not been for Krajačić’s hatred of Nera.”

“The only reason she suffered such an injustice is because she mocked his superstition about the witches, and because she told him straight to his face that she did not believe in them,” Malakoczy continued. “This is what caused Krajačić’s animosity to Nera which ultimately led to him illegally imprisoning her. We are all too familiar with that—look, Krajačić’s son is here, and he can vouch for the truth of our statements.”

“The only reason Nera was prosecuted was because of her convictions and her enlightenment,” Tito confirmed.

“And we will follow in her footsteps even if this means that we will suffer the same fate. Nera’s name will be inscribed on the banner that shall lead us bravely and openly forward. Your Eminence is now made aware of our position, and in case Krajačić were to persecute us or accuse us of witchcraft Your Eminence can be sure that this will be the result of our efforts to deliver our people and our society from the terrible evil that had torn up so many family homes and that had led so many innocent women to die at the stake.”

“I am pleased that you have decided to be frank with me,” the Governor replied. “I can only advise you to tread carefully and not to cross the limits of the existent laws. We will discuss the next steps some other time!”

The young people left the Governor. Siniša waited for them at the dining room door and asked them to follow him to the tower. Once the Captain had closed the door of the weapons room behind them and they were alone, he said in a half-whisper:

“I tried to get through to you several times when you were under arrest, but it was no use.”

“Sanda told us that you attempted to speak with us,” Tito replied. “But we didn’t know what this was about.”

“Ever since I learned that you had attempted to save Contessa Nera, I suspected that you did not believe in witches. And since I too believe that this is nothing but a delusion based on ignorance and stupidity, it seems that we are on the same page.”

The students looked at each other with surprise.

“You must find it quite unbelievable for me to speak this way. But look past my uniform, my dear young friends.”

“Forgive us, Hon. Captain,” Tito said. “While it may be true that you do not believe in witches, I must remind you that you were the one who brought on Contessa Nera’s misfortune. You testified that you had found her at the crossing one night.”

“Me?” Siniša cried and jumped from his seat. “Who told you this?”

“I broke into my father’s office and found your testimony in the ledger.”

“In the ledger!” Siniša cried.

He was quiet for a few moments, remembering that Nera had accused him of the same thing.

“Gentlemen,” Siniša said ceremoniously, “I give you my word that I had testified the exact opposite for the ledger, that I had read the testimony and signed it in my own hand.”

“The testimony I had read was not signed,” Tito replied.

This greatly impressed the young people.

“Since we must believe the Hon. Captain’s word, it’s clear that the testimony Tito had found was a forgery.”

Siniša recounted the experience of testifying before Krajačić, and the Remetins came to the conclusion that someone had indeed forged the ledger. Tito kept quiet, but was privately worried that it was his own father who had done this, while others claimed that it must have been Mikica.

“The ledger was written in Mikica’s hand,” Tito said.

Siniša added immediately:

‘We can’t be sure if he did it of his own accord or if someone hadn’t instructed him to do so.’”

“We will discover the truth! From this day forward we wage our battle against the persecution of witches loudly and publically, just as we had informed the Governor. But we would also love to trace that ‘devil’ that kidnapped Nera! This man must be the same one that had attempted to kidnap her once before. We are convinced that this devil is a ‘Lucifer’ and that he’s a member of a gang of the same name.”

“And why would this ‘Lucifer’ kidnap the Contessa?”

“His intentions most certainly were not honest. And if we ever discover who it was, he will pay with his life,” Tito replied in a tone of voice that implied deeper reasons for his hatred of the man.

“Hon. Captain, you are our ally from this moment on, are you not?”

“Yes, young gentlemen,” the Captain replied.

They all shook hands with the Captain and then bid him goodbye. Tito was the last to leave, and he took advantage of them being alone to ask Siniša:

“Did you perhaps hear anything in your circles about the identity of the man who betrayed our plan to save the Contessa?”

“No. But perhaps I could find out if I were to ask some of the gentlemen from the Magistrate.”

“Please do! I am afraid that the traitor is among us. It would behoove us to know who it is before we start this battle. As you can see, Hon. Captain, I trust you. Even when your testimony against the Contessa incriminated you, I still couldn’t quite believe that it was your doing.”

“You won’t be disappointed in me,” Siniša replied and escorted the young man from the castle.

## Chapter 56: Countess Auersperg's Schemes

The Christmas Eve celebration was under way in the great ballroom of Mokrice town. Over thirty guests in festive attire had gathered around the enormous table. Champagne was poured, toasts and greetings were made and the hostess, Countess Auersperg, shone with happiness and pleasure. She was seated at the head of the table; as the lady in waiting to the Queen this was her place of honor everywhere, including at her own home. She was the highest-ranking lady after Countess Ratkay, since the Governor had no wife.

The Countess had the Governor seated to her right, and Siniša to her left. The guests had never before seen her so kind and happy—in fact, she looked as if she had regained some of her youth. No one noticed for a second that she was already thirty-seven, since the Countess looked more beautiful and vibrant than the girls, as well as the young Countess Čikulini.

“Why does your uncle spend so much time around Countess Auersperg?” Terka asked her fiancé, the young and timid Karlo Erdody.

“I couldn't tell you,” he replied.

“Don't you think it's possible that she will marry Kristofor?”

“She used to look at him kindly, but that's a thing of the past now. Kristofor enjoys playing cards, and I don't think the Countess approves of that.”

“Wait—look, the Count is getting up! He is giving a toast.”

Everyone was quiet, watching the cavalier who arose with a glass of champagne in his hand. The Count's elegant figure evoked a lot of interest in Countess Auersperg's ballroom. His pale face with a black beard in which a fair amount of silver was strewn appeared very festive.

Everyone expected him to say something important so they paused their conversations with their neighbors. The Count started in a clear voice:

“Highborn ladies and gentlemen! Since Her Eminence Countess Auersperg bestowed upon me the great honor of presiding over this noble table, I am happy to announce something that will bring joy to us all and clarify the reason behind tonight’s invitation to her castle.”

Everyone curiously looked at Count Erdody, and then at Countess Auersperg. Only Countess Čikulini smiled mysteriously, as if she already knew what the Count was about to reveal.

“I am particularly happy to have the pleasure to announce to Your Highnesses that Her Eminence has today become engaged to our army’s most courageous hero who is known throughout the country under a single name: Siniša!”

Siniša turned pale. Instantly, Counts Vojkffy and Dvojković arose and started to shout:

“Vivant! Congratulations!”

In the blink of an eye, the Countess and the Captain were barraged by well-wishers—she accepted them graciously, while Siniša remained silent and bowed in a military fashion. Terka had remained seated; she dared not move because she shivered with excitement. Having noticed Terka’s distress, the Countess continued to taunt her by casting ironic smiles across the table.

No one sat back down, and the guests spread across the ballroom discussing the surprise development. Everyone watched as Siniša stood calm and pale, mutely accepting the congratulations with a military salute. Then he turned to his fiancée, offered her his arm and escorted her out of the ballroom. Wordlessly he led the Countess through the room into her quarters. When they entered the Countess’ private salon, he let go of her. She watched him calmly, almost mockingly.

“You’re being very ceremonial!”

“I was about to ceremoniously deny the engagement in the same tone as Count Kristof’s announcement...”

“Still, you changed your mind!”

“That’s because your two guards, Hon. Vojkffy and Dvojković, were so well prepared as to immediately offer their congratulations. It was clear to me that any denial on my part would have caused a scene that would dishonor my position as an officer!”

“So you respect your rank more than me.”

“I never had any reason to respect you...”

“Perhaps. Either way, it doesn’t matter. You might be a vehement brute, but I will prove to you just how much I care about you. I refused to marry a duke ten years ago, but I have changed my mind today. It’s true, you are no nobleman, but I made sure to correct that as well. Here, this is your certificate of nobility. The Queen bestowed the title of Baron on you, which I shall give to you on our wedding day.”

The Captain’s face reddened with rage that seethed in his eyes and every pore of his face. He tore the certificate from the Countess’ hands, shredded it to pieces and threw it at her feet.

“Do you realize what you have done?”

“Do you realize that I will never marry you? Never, and for no reason. I’d rather die.”

The Countess laughed.

“On the gallows?”

“Even so...”

“Alright then. I’ll have Notary Sale and Council Commissioner come in, hear my accusation and arrest you.”



Siniša laughed.

“Arrest me? If they lay a hand on me I’ll break their backs.”

The Countess made to leave, but Siniša blocked her path:

“What are you threatening me with? You won’t leave this room until you tell me!”

There was so much rage in those words that the Countess retreated a little toward the tapestry covered wall.

“Speak! What do you know?” Siniša repeated.

“I know that you are a murderer.”

“You would first have to prove it.”

“Very easily. I have two men who are ready to testify.”

“That’s impossible. No one could have known!”

“Really? How else would I find out about the events that transpired one night ten years ago?”

Siniša stared mutely at the Countess, his face troubled.

“I know it was wintertime, as it is now. Something unusual took place late at night in a small, isolated castle. A passionate young man, almost a boy still, tired of his lover and he choked the beautiful, young Countess he had stolen from another to death. That same night, the young man disappeared and a fire started in the castle. And miraculously, the room that burned down was precisely the room with that beauty’s body. In fact, people say that she wasn’t dead yet, and that she was burned alive in the fire that the young man had set. The young murderer ran away and appeared one day as a member of the Trenk guard, and is now a soldier in the King’s army. Do you know him, Siniša?”

“I do! And if it’s necessary I will report him to the military tribunal myself, let them shoot him, strip him of his uniform and hang him. And at least then he will be able to justify his actions and tell the truth about what happened, since you added blatant lies and sordidness.”

“I just repeated the story I was entrusted with!”

“And who told you this?”

“I can’t tell you, not even to save my life.”

“I would never dirty my hands with such filthy blood.”

Someone knocked at the door and a woman’s voice was heard:

“Alma, dome! The guests are puzzled by your absence.”

“Straight away!” the lady in waiting replied, warning Siniša: “Here, Countess Čikulini has come to advise us to rejoin the guests.”

“I have never had someone else tell me what to do, and that is not about to change,” Siniša replied.

“I hope you’re not going to create a scandal?”

“I already told you I have too much respect for my uniform to cause a humiliating scandal over a woman. But I will tell you once more: I will never marry you. It’s up to you how and when you will break this engagement. You’re free to arrange things however you see fit.”

“And what will you do?”

“That’s not your concern.”

Siniša went straight to the left tower where Filip was staying. He found him in his room, reading.

“How come you’re here at this hour?” Filip asked.

“I came to warn you to be prepared for anything. I might be gone within the next few days.”

“You’ve not been yourself lately, Siniša. You’re on the edge, blazing—you’re half mad.”

“I feel it, too. But how could I stay sane? Listen to this.”

And he told him about his unexpected engagement with the Countess and all she had told him in her drawing room.

“Siniša, this will be the end of you. You’ll have to marry the Countess.”

“Never. Mark my words: never!”

“I can’t help but feel like you will.”

“I have made my decision.”

“But how could she have found out?”

“Perhaps from—him?”

“That can’t be. Does he even recognize you? He hasn’t seen you since you were ten, so how could he suspect your identity?”

“Perhaps he is suspicious, perhaps he found out somehow and is now taking his revenge.”

“Then he would know exactly what had happened, and he wouldn’t have lied.”

“Perhaps he wanted to portray me as a fiend.”

“But why?”

“Who knows? Why worry about it? It’s sufficient to know that the Countess does have something over me. Go to bed now, Filip. I’ll go, and try to avoid a scandal.”

Siniša returned to the packed ballroom a few moments later. The red of his ceremonial uniform complemented his olive skintone and his pale and manly, determined face. When he cast

a glance at the guests, the men felt envy and the women lusted after him. Their looks sent sighs and kisses his way, completely oblivious of the turmoil in his heart.

## Chapter 57: In the Tower

The clock had struck midnight long ago. Celebratory bell ringing had died out from the valley, as did the song of the villagers as they returned home from the Midnight Mass. Siniša stood in the hollow of the weapons room, looking into the distance. Moonlight glistened against the window bars and shed its silver glow over Siniša's dark curls. His heart was heavy and troubled, so he was no longer able to stand the ruckus party in the ballroom. He hid away here for a short respite.

The tower was quiet, so he was able to become engrossed in his thoughts. There was so much to think about! So much had accosted his soul since he first stepped foot in this castle. He needed solitude so that he could gather his thoughts and think about what to do, but everything came down to staying in the castle as a fiancé just so he could be close to Nera. He turned around, thinking he had heard a rustle, and stared in shock at an eerie image he saw.

A woman with a sick, yellow face stood before him, staring at him with her big, black eyes. He started to approach her.

“Stay there, until I take off your mask!”

‘She has gone mad,’ Siniša thought desperately. ‘I won’t resist her, because this might upset her more. I will wait to see if I can calm her down.’

But there was no time to wait. The same threatening voice said:

“I found you out, murderer!”

‘Murderer?’ the Captain thought, taking a better look at Nera’s disfigured face.

“If you’re not a coward, stay there until I give my verdict.”

“Contessa, what is happening with you?”

“I always suspected you were a bastard and that nothing in this world was beneath you, but I never dreamed that you were a murderer as well.”

“Contessa, what are you talking about? I had no idea what had happened to you.”

“Nothing! Nothing at all. You must have felt that the chimney would be the death of you. Your guilty conscience led you to discover that secret passage that even Countess Auersperg knows nothing about.”

“I don’t follow.”

“I have to fulfill the purpose that brought me to this castle!”

‘She is mad,’ Siniša thought, his soul writhing in agony. Her eyes stared at him terribly, and he could make out the feverish shiver of her lips. He wanted to approach her, but she cried:

“Don’t move.”

Siniša was further convinced that she had lost her mind.

“Murderer!” she yelled.

“Murderer?” Siniša repeated quietly. “What is the meaning of this?”

“You pretend you don’t know, but upstairs in the Countess’ drawing room you were able to remember everything that had happened ten years ago? You didn’t ask what the meaning of that was when you were upstairs?”

The young man now felt as if he must be going crazy as well. ‘How could she know what had happened ten years ago? How could she know about his conversation with the Countess? Perhaps she was eavesdropping? But what does this have to do with her?’

She continued:

“Do you remember when those black figures broke into the hunting castle and spoke of you? One of them mentioned my dead mother, saying that he knew who the killer was and that he was being paid to keep quiet. You let those men escape. So I ran away from the castle, I disfigured my face in my unbridled desire to reach Mokrice as soon as I could. I planned on discovering who the murderer was here. Both my grandmamma and that burglar knew that the man was Countess Auersperg’s lover. I sneaked around the house like a ghost; I eavesdropped and looked for a way to reach the Countess’ chambers. And I found it: that chimney. I climbed up to the Countess’ chambers and waited. And today was my lucky day.”

“Have you heard everything I spoke to the Countess about?” Siniša asked.

“I heard her accuse you of murder, and threaten you. She said that you grew tired with the beautiful young Countess, that you strangled her and set her body on fire, and finally—that she may have burned to death alive. You did not defend yourself against these accusations!”

“Not everything she said is true.”

“What isn’t true? Tell me? Did you kill a young Countess or not?”

“Yes, but I never lured her anywhere, and I didn’t even know her before I committed that unfortunate act.”

“My mother was a prisoner in your castle for a year!”

“Contessa, I never knew who she was. It’s not possible that the woman I killed was your mother.” His voice shivered with anxiety, as if he were afraid that there was a chance that it might have been her.

“You protest in vain. Everyone knew Countess Keglević—she was a beautiful young black-headed woman, the whole of Grič called her the ‘beautiful Olga.’”

These words hit Siniša like a hammer; he felt as if someone was banging a plank against his temples and screaming: “Olga!—Olga!...”

The room spun before his eyes, it seemed to him as if the weapons on the walls started to bang against each other, screaming: “Olga! Olga! Olga!”

“One thing is true,” Siniša finally said. “I did kill a woman. But it was an accident, and not murder. I neither knew her before nor did I light the castle over her dead body. I did not do it out of malice—but I can’t tell you what happened. If this was your mother, I would be happy to atone for my crime in death.”

His words were so determined, sincere and manly that they touched her soul like a cold compress on a burning temple. She collapsed onto the table and was silent, collecting her strength.

Candelabra shone at the door in the castellan’s hand, and Countess Auersperg entered the room along side him.

“Siniša, where are you, I’ve been looking all over for you! What are you doing in the dark weapons room?”

Her voice sounded sharp and unpleasant. Only then did the Countess notice that Siniša was not alone. She looked at his changed face, noticed his unbuttoned shirt, laughed ironically and turned to the castellan:

“Have Matija come up, please!”

“What are you doing?” Siniša asked the Countess quietly.

“That is none of your business. Go to the guests, everyone is sufficiently perturbed by your absence.”

“I will stay here!”



“Look at the freak I caught you with! But it’s not your fault, you’ve had too much to drink.”

The Castellan returned, followed by a huge, bony hunk of a man with a brutal face. He was the one the servants feared the most—a home-style executioner, he whipped and imprisoned the unruly help and everyone ruled by the town’s masters. Two lads came in with him, too. The Countess ordered him:

“Matija, this nasty girl needs to be whipped in front of the servants, and then put her in stocks for two days and nights. This should get her to think about a woman’s modesty.”

Matija started toward Nera but Siniša blocked his path and shouted:

“Get out!”

Everyone looked at the Captain in shock.

“He had too much to drink!” the Countess told the Castellan.

“Please, Hon. Captain,” the Castellan begged, “don’t prevent a servant from executing his mistress’ command.”

“Get out! Did you hear me?”

“You don’t know what you’re doing, Siniša,” the Countess whispered to Siniša quietly.  
“Come.”

And then she ordered Matija:

“Get the girl out and take her away.”

The tall ogre went to the window to try and bypass Siniša, but he lifted both of his arms, grabbed the huge Matija by his shoulders and threw him onto the door. The Countess escaped in terror, convinced that the wine had made Siniša lose his mind. The lads jumped in to try to get Nera from behind Siniša’s back, but he had already turned to hit the first one, who was closer, on

his back so that he immediately collapsed before his feet. Siniša walked over him to drag the other lad away from Nera and toward the door so forcibly that he fell over like a block of wood.

The Castellan tried to reason with Siniša, but it was as if he had welcomed the opportunity to fight someone. He swung his arm toward the Castellan, grabbed him by the shoulders and shouted: “Out!”

The Castellan tried to resist and grabbed Siniša’s chest. But the minute his hands touched him, the Captain lost his temper completely, grabbed both of the Castellan’s hands and pressed them against his body so that he stood immobilized before the Captain, then dragged him to the door and pushed him out into the hallway.

When everyone was in the hallway, Siniša banged the doors shut and locked them, then rushed to the other door which led to his bedroom and locked that one as well.

This whole time Nera had stood pressed against the wall by the window. She could still see the scene that had just played out before her so quickly and suddenly that she was only now starting to comprehend what had happened. When Siniša had locked the door, he turned to her. She was still standing on the same spot.

“What will happen now?” she asked quietly.

He didn’t expect this—she asked him as if she were looking for his advice.

“Whatever you wish,” he responded determinedly.

“If I stay here, the Countess is sure to punish me.”

“Do you want to leave this castle?”

“She won’t let me. She’ll whip me.”

“You will leave this place immediately.”

Siniša pulled the red bell ribbon that connected his and Filip's room. Shortly afterwards they heard footsteps and a knock at the door.

“Is this you, Filip?”

“Yes.”

Siniša turned to Nera and said quietly:

“You must absolve me of my promise not to divulge your identity. Filip must know about everything that has happened.”

“I accept.”

Siniša unlocked the door, and Filip entered the room. He was surprised to see Siniša locked in with the chambermaid they had mocked only two days ago.

“Get ready to go straight away, Filip. Only pack my weapons and my raincoat, then return here.”

Filip left and Siniša stayed by the door. In a few moments Filip returned with the required supplies, and the three of them left the room. They descended the dark steps of the left wing. When they reached the front door, Siniša ordered the doorman:

“Open the door!”

“Your Grace will have to excuse me, but the Countess ordered me not to let anyone leave the castle. If I let you out she will send me away.”

Siniša grabbed the doorman by his shoulder with one hand, but the man was obviously already familiar with what he had done to Matija and his lads, so he obeyed immediately. Siniša gave him a threatening look:

“Your job or your head: your choice.”

The doorman obediently reached for the key and opened the door.

“Hand over the gate key,” the Captain ordered. The doorman gave it to him and they entered the courtyard.

The façade of the castle was gloriously lit. Glass chandeliers shone through the windows with the glow of hundreds of candles. Siniša walked to the gate and unlocked it. Nera and Filip went out followed by Siniša who locked the door after them and pocketed the key.

“Go to the stables and fetch our horses,” Siniša told Filip. “Have them harness Governor Nadaždi’s sleigh, but without the bells. Just come back quickly!”

As Filip left, Nera stood with Siniša on the snow, some distance from the castle. They had not said a word to each other. It was only now that Siniša realized that Nera was scantily dressed and without a warm coat, so he took off his raincoat and said: “Allow me, I am much too warm...”

She felt the cold, so she wrapped his raincoat around her body without protest. In the meantime, Filip returned with the horses and the sleigh in which Siniša sat Nera down. Filip and he mounted their horses and started on the road to Samobor. The air grew colder, and the moon shone against the blue sky. Filip didn’t know what to think of this nightly adventure, but he kept quiet knowing that he was not allowed to ask before Siniša shared what had happened on his own accord. No one spoke during this journey; Siniša rode behind the sleigh and Filip to the side. Everyone was pensive.

They finally arrived at Samobor. The burghers were asleep and not a soul was to be seen on the street. Siniša halted the sleigh and asked Nera to descend, and then he ordered the coachman to return to Mokrice straight away.

“We’ll go up to the Samobor castle,” Siniša told Nera. “I have some good friends there.”

## Chapter 58: In the Silence of Samobor

Above the small houses on a snowy hill, the town of Samobor glistened in the moonlight. The front of the town's short and medium height towers was built on the slope of the hill while the rest of the town rose behind them. The tall white tower stretched above the town like the neck of a swan. Nera, Siniša and Filip climbed the narrow path to town, passing by the St. Ana chapel. Filip walked first, followed by Nera and then Siniša. From time to time Filip would turn around to look at the odd girl whose walk was confident and determined. She never once tripped or slid on the steep path. Siniša would stop occasionally to check on her in some dangerous spots, but she would just jump over or walk around crevasses, boldly stepping into the deep snow.

When they had climbed the hill they faced the huge city walls. Siniša turned to the small castle entrance and banged on the door with his saber. Shortly a voice was heard from inside.

“Who is it?”

“A royal officer.”

A small, round face appeared above the bars.

“Come on, Silvio, hurry up,” Siniša rushed him.

“O, o bonsignore?! I had not expected to see you,” a jolly voice sounded from above.

The door opened immediately, and a short, stout young man with a lantern in his hand lit the way though the dark and narrow hallway for the guests. The undulating ceiling was right above their heads.

“Are the masters at home?”

“Vero, vero, of course, but...”

“All right, all right! You don’t need to tell them I am here.”

“Bonsignore need only make his wishes clear. We are always ready to welcome you with open arms!”

“You will find us a place to sleep.”

The little Italian man bent over to Siniša and whispered:

“One room for yourself and the signorina...?”

“No! Why do you prattle about things that are none of your concern!”

“Bene, bene! What can you do, I am a terrible tattler. Please, follow me! There is a beautiful ballroom in this tower, and Your Grace has been here before. We’ve just had the fire started, and the lamps are still lit! Some folks have just gone back downstairs...”

“All right, all right, you’re always going on about things!”

Siniša let Nera pass, and Filip came in behind her. The room was round, warm and pleasantly lit. The little Italian man rushed to Nera, terribly curious to see the woman that the handsome Captain had brought in. But when he saw her face his eyes bulged wide and he looked at Siniša as if to say: ‘This guy must be blind!’

Siniša had Silvio bring some mulled wine and a bite to eat, and then he called Filip into the adjacent room. He pulled him to the window and asked quietly:

“Who do you think that woman is?”

“I don’t dare look at her. When I saw her climb the hill, her walk...”

“Look at her eyes, her neck and her chin. Your suspicions are true.”

Siniša quickly told him what had happened, and then he left him to recover from the shock while he rejoined Nera in the other room. She was standing by the window, looking down.

Some wine was steaming on the table, and the roast pork shoulder, cold cuts and cakes that the chatty Italian fellow had brought in smelled divine.

“May I ask you to take a bite to eat?” Siniša asked the girl.

She replied:

“Only some warm wine.”

Siniša and Nera sat down at the table, and he offered her a glass of hot wine. The young man was overcome by a strange emotion; this was the first time that he had shared a meal with her. When she was celebrated, beautiful and adored he never had a chance to sit down with her amicably. She was looking at the glass of wine that steamed in her hands. Filip stood by the door, ready to serve them if necessary. She only noticed him when he approached the table and made to leave again. Nera looked at him, placed her hand on the chair next to her and asked him kindly and quietly:

“Sit, Filip.”

He started, and his face mellowed.

“Sit!” she repeated. “The two of us used to be good friends.”

Filip became emotional, approached Nera and kissed her hand. ‘I have never kissed her hand,’ Siniša thought to himself. ‘She never offered. Not even the first time we met at Countess Čikulini’s.’

“May I?” Filip asked Siniša.

“Sit, since the Contessa requests it. As you can see,” Siniša added, “I have kept Filip by my side since you left the hunting castle. And I am not unhappy with him, but he kept pining after you. If you have need of him, you can have him back.”

“As you can see, I will no longer have any need of servants or maids.”

“Not all is lost for you. You still have the Oršić family that you can trust. We should send word to Vienna—they don’t know what has happened. They would be thrilled to learn that you are alive. And then there are the Remetins who told me that they were preparing for a great battle against the witches. They went to see the Governor and they told him what they thought of the laws against witchcraft and the people who order the burning of those unfortunate women.”

“They told him this openly?” Something flashed in Nera’s eyes. “Did they really decide to do that?”

“Yes, Contessa, they did and they asked me for help.”

This evoked her curiosity, and Siniša could tell that the topic refreshed and invigorated her.

“I am very interested in it, especially since I found those two old Dugan women red-handed.”

“You did? Where?” Nera asked curiously.

Siniša told her everything that had happened at Medvednica and at Notary Sale’s. As he spoke, her face seemed to come alive, and when he had finished his story she cried excitedly:

“So Sale and Krajačić let those women go? Don’t you think that’s suspicious?”

“I noticed something was odd about it, and I can’t stop thinking about the situation. I decided to join your conspirators’ efforts. Besides, the Governor had asked me to investigate an unusual visit that the witches paid a castle at night, and to do so without Sale and the magistrate gentlemen’s knowledge.”

When he told Nera what had happened at Countess Drašković’s Bukovac castle, she seemed to have come alive.



“It’s really fortunate for us that the ‘witches’ decided to pay a visit to the Countess’ castle, or else the Governor would not concern himself with the break-in. We could really take advantage of this situation.”

The young Captain noticed that the conversation energized Nera and took her mind off of her current situation. Since they had discussed it at length, he suggested she go and get some sleep.

“You’ll be perfectly safe and at peace here.”

Filip immediately arose and bid his former mistress goodbye. Siniša got up to leave, but he first stopped to say:

“Contessa, I won’t leave the matter that came between us today unresolved. The man whom you consider to be the destroyer of your home and your life must be punished. I never swore to anyone before in my life, but I swear to you now, at the close of Christmas Eve, on my honesty and on my word as a knight, that I will find the culprit and surrender him to you dead or alive—even if that man turns out to be me.”

Her calm gaze surprised him; he hoped that she would look at him with hatred and anger, but she looked straight ahead. Then she suddenly returned his gaze.

“Captain, you know that so much has happened to lead me to doubt you. I don’t know who you are, and everything I have heard about you as well as my own experiences justifies these qualms. But perhaps not everything that happened was your fault. I don’t know whether it was or not, but I will accept your word—and I hope I am not wrong to do so.”

“You aren’t. I give you my life and my honor!”

For the first time in her life, Nera had to admit that she believed him, but she could not quite understand why. Even just a few hours ago she was convinced that this young man was the

greatest villain in the world, that he was the worst of the brutes and the ruffians. However now she trusted the word he gave her.

“I have one more thing to ask of you, Contessa.”

“What?”

“Tell me what you’re planning to do, and where you’re planning to go.”

“I’m going to Grič.”

“To your enemies’ lair?”

“Don’t I have friends there as well? You said so yourself.”

“But they’re still too weak to protect you from danger. What if Krajačić should get his hands on you again?”

“Look at me. Would anyone recognize the former Contessa in me?”

The young man had ceased to notice her face. At first it had frightened him, but now, sitting here with her engaged in a pleasant and cordial conversation, he had completely forgotten that she was no longer a beauty.

“That’s true, no one will recognize you like this. But what would you do on Grič?”

“I have a great task before me. I will leave at dawn.”

“Please, Contessa, delay your departure for one more day! You need the rest, and you should also consider your plan of action. We could reconvene tomorrow night and decide on the best way to proceed.”

“Are you not going back to Mokrice today?” she asked.

“No!”

“That’s unwise. Your fiancée and her guests will condemn your absence.”

“I’ll provide them with a plausible justification for my departure.”

“Why would you do that, though?”

“I have inadvertently caused you to lose your grandmother and your home, and I feel it is my duty to aid you with whatever counsel I am able to provide. All I ask is that you let me.”

“All right. I will stay here tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Contessa!” he replied and walked to the door, stopping for a moment before leaving:

“Please feel free to lock the door, so that the servants don’t disturb you in the morning.

Good night, Contessa!”

Siniša bowed as if he were standing before her in a ballroom. Nera locked the door that led to the hallway and went to the window. The moon had set, and darkness spread over the snow-covered landscape. She couldn’t stop thinking about all that had happened that day, beginning with her witnessing Siniša’s conversation with the Countess from the old, dark chimney, when she heard about the murder and everything else Siniša had said. She remembered that the Countess was offering him a certificate of nobility, which he had refused telling her that he would rather admit to his crime than marry her. ‘After all, we must wait for proof. Who knows, perhaps that wasn’t my mother after all! Perhaps it’s true that he did not kidnap her and make her his lover. Of course, this is what the Countess accused him of, but perhaps she is wrong.’

Nera finally went to bed, but she could not fall asleep. She was barraged by a million questions as well as troubled by self-loathing: why did she trust this man’s word, when a terrible accusation has been made against him? She was about to surrender to slumber when she suddenly started at hearing voices: ‘What’s that? Wanton laughter, women’s shrieks, giggling?’

Where is this coming from?’ She stood up and tried to hear it better, but it was gone. When she sat back on the bed she heard the same unusual voices as before. She listened for some time. ‘There is a party going on downstairs! Why haven’t we seen a light or heard anyone before?! And that voice! It resembles Siniša’s. Perhaps he is down there as well.’ The longer she listened, the more certain she was that one of the voices was Siniša’s. ‘I can clearly make it out,’ she thought. The long windows of her room had started to turn bright as she continued to listen to the wild laughter and the shouting that the noise of the day slowly drowned out.

The first rays of the sun awakened Filip. He looked around the room and noticed Siniša sitting at the other end of the table. He was fully dressed, a lamp burned before him and his head rested on his shoulders. Filip couldn’t make out if he was asleep or merely pensive. ‘He must have written to her again,’ he thought. ‘This man will lose his mind—just like she did.’ He watched him for a long time without stirring, as he didn’t want Siniša to know that he had seen him in this state. Finally, the Captain moved, looked around the room, took a piece of paper off the table and burned it with the light of the candle. When Filip made out that Siniša had turned off the lamp and arose, he lifted his head and asked:

“You’re already up?”

“Yes, I can’t sleep, I can’t stay still.”

“Why?”

Siniša paced the room once or twice, and then he sat on the bed next to Filip and said to him quietly, his face pale and downcast:

“Filip, a terrible sentence has been given me.”

“What sentence? For what?”

“For my crime.”

“For killing that woman? She deserved nothing less!”

“Did you know that that woman was Nera’s mother?”

“How could that woman have been Nera’s mother?”

“I am more and more certain that this is who she was.”

Siniša told him what he learned from Nera the night before.

“It was her, without a doubt. Tell me, Filip, was Olga really the name of the woman I choked to death?”

“Yes. When I asked the servant who had come into the castle, he called her ‘the beautiful Countess Olga.’ And afterwards, when I followed you to the chamber, I found her dead in your arms.”

“Filip, this will end badly!”

“Why?”

“It would have been easier for me had I killed my own mother instead of hers.”

“Calm down, Siniša. You are really not yourself anymore.”

“I can’t calm down. Am I her mother’s murderer or not? The uncertainty is killing me.”

“So get some answers. Ask Countess Auersperg and have her tell you everything she knows.”

“Yes, I will ask her to solve this terrible riddle for me.”

## Chapter 59: In a Deadly Trap

Barica Cindek started to light the candles on her Christmas tree. Adam sat by her, joyously watching her round, capable hands light them one by one. His cheeks were flushed with excitement, and after she had lit the last candle and turned to him with a smile on her face he wrapped his arms around her waist and asked:

“Barica, you’re happy to have me, aren’t you?”

“Don’t ask, look—I’ll show you.”

Barica placed both of her hands on his shoulders and embraced him.

“Our life together is so wonderful! I have never had such a beautiful Christmas before.”

Presently someone knocked at the window.

“Who could this be?”

“Go check,” she said.

Adam went to the window and opened it, proclaiming in a half-whisper:

“Captain Siniša!”

“Something important must have happened if he has come here to see me. Go and get the door for him.”

A few moments later Adam opened the door for Siniša, Filip, and a woman wrapped in Siniša’s raincoat. Barica was convinced straight away that this was Nera.

“I need to speak with you briefly, Barica,” Siniša said.

“You are welcome to speak in front of Adam. He is my husband, and I keep no secrets from him.”

“You’re already married?”

“Yes, Hon. Captain,” Adam replied in Barica’s stead. “We decided on a quick wedding so that Barica doesn’t have to live alone in these dangerous times when every woman has reason to fear for her safety.”

“Then I wish you all the best from the bottom of my heart,” Siniša said, helping Nera with the raincoat.

“I thought this was someone else—the Contessa. But I beg your pardon, who are you?”

“Barica, this is Filip’s daughter, and I would really appreciate it if you could let her stay with you for a short while.”

“It looks like the poor girl is ill, but that’s alright. I will be happy to have her. But please, join us.”

“Would you like a glass of wine?” Adam asked the Captain. And so the little group sat at the young married couple’s table and chatted. Nera was the only one who kept quiet. She sat a little ways away from the table, and Barica kept looking her way, approaching her and compassionately asking her if she would like one thing or another. At last Nera accepted a glass of mulled wine. Siniša was now convinced that no one would recognize Nera if Barica herself didn’t, but he still lingered. He engaged in a conversation with the hosts and almost forgot to leave. They mentioned Krajačić:

“Someone stole a whole barrel of wine from his cellar on Christmas Eve,” Adam said. “They say that the poor sap cries over it. Not one of the city guard dares to stay in the cellar; every time the wine disappears, they find a broom in its place.”

“Which is a sign that the wine had been stolen by the witches!” Siniša added. His gaze met Nera’s and he started to watch her carefully; it seemed to him as if she was trying to communicate something, but he couldn’t guess what it was.

“Is it true that no one dares to go to the cellar and set up an ambush for the witches?” she asked in a quiet voice that bore no resemblance to Contessa Nera’s.

“They tried, but they gave up in fear.”

Finally Siniša started to bid the young couple goodbye, leaving Nera with Barica who had promised to care for the girl that was entrusted her, and keep her for as long as she wished to stay.

Gray, snow-laden clouds dragged along the horizon, and snow crunched in the cold. Everyone had retreated to their warm homes—there was no one to be seen far and wide on the streets of Grič. The small burgher houses and the enormous palaces of the aristocrats appeared ghost-like in the dead of the night. From time to time lit windows glow into the night like fiery sets of eyes. A candle burned in front of the Mother of God icon. Siniša and Filip passed under the Stone Gate and left the city, walking toward Kaptol.

“Where are we walking to?” Filip asked Siniša.

“We’re going to Krajačić’s vineyard!”

“To wait for the witches?”

“You’re not afraid, are you?”

“The hell I am, but we could use our men.”

“We’ll do a better job organizing tomorrow. We’re just heading there now to keep a look-out.”



Filip realized that Nera's remark about no one daring to guard the cellar was the only reason Siniša was going to the vineyard. He thought it was crazy and imprudent for the two of them to go alone in this manner, but he didn't dare protest. It would not have done him any good, anyway—he could tell that Siniša would not have turned back now even if he were sure that death itself stalked him in the darkness. They trod through deep snow; at times their boots fell in up to their knees. The night blackened before them, and they were hard pressed to see even five steps ahead. The cold air pricked their faces, and snow-filled clouds hung overhead.

“Do you know the way to Krajačić's vineyard?” Filip asked.

“I know the direction it's in. The cellar is on a small hill over Remete. We can't be far now.”

They kept climbing and descending.

“Here's the monastery. Now we'll turn right up there, and this will take us to the cellar,” Siniša said.

They climbed the slippery mound. The Captain frequently stopped, surveyed the surroundings and listened for any signs of activity. But everything was quiet and deserted.

“This looks like the cellar,” Filip warned.

“Yes, this is it. Now be careful.”

The approached it slowly.

“We'll hide nearby,” Siniša said, walking around the bushes in search of a convenient hiding place. He suddenly tripped and one of his legs fell through into a hole, but he pulled it out and whispered to Filip:

“Let's shove the snow away, there's a pit of some sort here.”

They both got to work and started to clear the snow. They were stunned to find that a tunnel had been dug under the snow right by the cellar wall, through which a man could lower himself into the cellar.

“You see, this must be the ‘witches’ entrance to the cellar!”

Siniša lowered his legs into the pit. His head was still above the surface when he realized he had stepped on a barrel. He went further down, pulled his head through the hole and found himself surrounded by barrels.

“Come down,” he called to Filip.

Filip went down after the Captain, and then he pushed the snow back over the hole with his hands so as to cover up their presence.

“Do you have a candle?” Siniša asked.

“You know I always carry one on me,” Filip replied and lit it. They surveyed the space to locate a good hiding spot and situated themselves among the barrels turning off the candle to lie in wait for Krajačić’s ‘witches.’ An hour passed in which no one stirred. As the second hour dragged on, Siniša suddenly heard the creaking of snow overhead.

“Someone’s coming. Ready your pistol,” Siniša whispered.

In a moment they saw someone’s boots appear through the hole; a man was coming down the same way they had entered the cellar. Siniša listened closely. He could tell that his legs were in the cellar, and his upper body and head were still outside. He stood at the ready to grab the man and tie him with the belt he had unfastened from his saber. Filip was closer to the opening, and he felt the man kick against his thigh.

They heard the man outside say:

“Dammit, I feel like I kicked somebody down there.”

“Get out,” someone else said, and the man started to quickly pull his legs out.

But Siniša jumped to him, grabbed his legs and started to pull him into the cellar.

“Owe!” the man cried, and cursed. “Someone’s got me, they’re dragging me down into the cellar...”

Siniša could feel someone grab the poor man by the head to pull him out as they were trying to get him down into the cellar. But Siniša was stronger and he had already managed to pull most of the man’s body down, burning with desire to capture the thief. This was finally the moment in which they would reveal the ‘witches’ to Krajačić and Sale! This thought encouraged Siniša so that he doubled down pulling on the man, but he suddenly found himself and the man flung against the barrels.

“They let go of him so abruptly I almost cracked my head open,” Siniša yelled. He suddenly noticed the man’s body convulse in his grip like that of a chicken with its head cut off.

“Light the candle,” he whispered to Filip. He did as he was told, and both of them were aghast at what they saw.

A man’s headless body lay on the ground before them. Blood gushed out of his torso like water from a fountain, and steamed in the cold air like broth. A black hood lay by the headless corpse.

“His cronies cut off his head just to prevent us from identifying him,” Siniša cried. “Stay here, I am going after them.”

“Are you insane?! They could be lying in wait for you with that same bloodied knife.”

In the heat of the moment Siniša had almost forgotten about that, but he decided to first listen at the opening for any signs of the other men. The effort was in vain because he could not make anything out, so he held his pistol before him and carefully climbed out of the cellar. He

did not see anyone there. A large bloodstain darkened the snow, but the head was nowhere to be seen—the thieves must have carried it off. Siniša returned to the cellar and carefully examined the body. The suit was made out of luxury cloth in burgher fashion, his shirt was clean and the collar was made of pure silk. Judging by the suit, as well as his hands that showed no sign of hard or simple labor, the victim was a prosperous man. His body was strong, his muscles well developed.

“Let’s hide the hole and follow their trail,” Siniša said to Filip. “I want to at least see where they went.”

A few moments later they were rushing down the mount, following the boot trail. They were surprised to find that the trail led them straight to Grič, and they followed it with renewed diligence. The footprints revealed that at least two or three men in boots passed that way—since the snow was crisp, the prints were easily distinguished.

“Perhaps these are someone else’s footprints, but it doesn’t matter.”

They suddenly found themselves in front of a small house as the footprints headed straight for the door.

“This is Baba Urša’s house,” Siniša exclaimed. “Someone went in from the street, there is no doubt about that.”

The Captain did not hesitate; he struck the window, but there was no answer. No one answered the second or the third attempt at knocking, either. This made Siniša furious.

“If they don’t open the door, I will break into the house.”

Siniša climbed over the gate that led into the courtyard. Just as he was about to jump over it, a gunshot was fired and a bullet whistled right past Siniša’s head. He reached for his pistol and returned fire. The yard was very dark and narrow; a wall of Urša’s house to one side, and the

wall of the neighbor's house. But Siniša jumped into that black space. He had barely touched the ground when he felt someone's presence nearby. He pointed his pistol at the person and shouted sternly as he pulled his saber out of the sheath:

“Whoever lays a hand on me dies!”

Filip stayed on the street and listened to the exchange with fear.

“Get him,” a familiar voice rang out in the darkness.

“Siniša, for God's sake, what's that?” Filip yelled from the street.

The Captain retreated to the gate to protect his back and yelled:

“Come and get me if you dare.”

“Shoot him,” a familiar voice rang out of the darkness.

“Filip,” Siniša yelled, “run to the Governor and have him send soldiers—this is the thieves' den.”

“I'm off,” Filip replied, and they could hear him running away in haste.

Everything was quiet: it was as if Siniša's enemies were stunned into silence. He expected a shot be fired at him at any moment, so he fired back without delay. A muffled bang rang through the yard. ‘What's that?’ No one returned fire.

‘What the hell is going on here? Did they run away? Are they trying to lure me farther into the yard? You'll have no such luck with me,’ Siniša thought. ‘Are they gone? But how? I would have heard them sneak out.’

“Robbers, thieves! Help! Help!” a croaky woman's voice suddenly screamed on the street.

‘Who is that?’ Siniša wondered, still standing his ground.

A commotion was heard in the street. People came out of the neighboring house and gathered around Urša's hut. Filip returned shortly with several servants from Count Drašković's palace, where the Governor was staying. In the ensuing tumult and uproar, everyone wondered what had happened. Siniša approached Baba Urša's house as she stood shouting at the window:

“The burglars broke into my house. They fired shots—and poor old me, I live here all alone.”

“And where is little Lovro?” Siniša asked.

“Lovro? He's at his grandmother Jana's house. He doesn't live with me.”

“But I've seen him here before!”

“How? Your Grace has never been to my house,” the old woman wondered.

“Perhaps I have, though” Siniša said. “Go on, lads, search the house and the basement, perhaps you'll find the thieves somewhere.”

Siniša watched Baba Urša carefully to see if she showed any signs of distress as they searched the brewery, but her face showed no emotion. They searched the whole house and Siniša went into the basement himself, but the effort was fruitless. The back wall of the neighboring house enclosed the yard, and no one could have got away in that direction without climbing onto the house and escaping over the rooftops, and they would have needed a ladder to do that. The other side of the yard was again enclosed by the back wall of noble Malakoczy's castle; it was impossible to exit Urša's backyard given that it was bordered by two neighboring houses' walls and a side of Urša's house that had barred windows. Therefore, Siniša was convinced that the black figures who had attacked him were still in the house, but though he searched everything over and over again, he could not find them.

The people who did not know of Siniša's attack in the yard concluded that Urša had dreamt of the thieves and had alarmed the neighborhood for no reason. But the old woman persisted in claiming that the thieves had fired shots, and she went to stay with her neighbors. Siniša had the house surrounded by the police that had come from the magistrate—they waited until dawn and searched the house again, but there was no trace of the men.

The next day Siniša went to retrieve the headless corpse in hopes of laying it out in the morgue for someone to recognize the suit. But the body had disappeared.

## Chapter 60: Allies

That same afternoon Siniša went to see Barica, whom he found alone and in tears.

“What’s the matter, Barica?” the Captain wondered.

“Oh, Your Grace, I know everything,” the baker whispered, her eyes filling with tears again. “The Contessa told me what she did. Who would have thought it possible?! She said the only reason she did not confide in me to begin with was to check if I would recognize her. But who could recognize her in the state that she is in?”

“But why are you crying?” Siniša asked.

“How could I not, Your Grace? The poor girl is out of her mind. How could a sane person disfigure herself like that? Beauty is one the most precious possessions one can have.”

“Well, she’s not that ugly.”

Barica looked at Siniša wide-eyed and stopped crying.

“You must really love her if that’s how you feel!”

“Who said I loved her?”

“Why else would you care for her this much?”

“It’s my duty to do so. You see, the crowd burned down her castle as well as the old Countess, who was the only family she had left—and all this because they thought that the devil had kidnapped her. It’s all my fault, so it’s my duty to look after her now.”

Barica kept her opinion to herself, but the Captain had not convinced her that his sense of duty was the only reason he cared about the Contessa’s fate.



“I would appreciate it if you would retrain from misunderstanding my actions or mentioning anything about it to the Contessa.”

“God forbid, I wouldn’t dare say anything to her. How could I? She’s not doing so well—she has lost her wits, Your Grace. She sits silently, staring at the wall without moving an inch; she’s been in this state since the morning. After all, it’s no wonder—the poor girl has been through so much.”

“Barica, will you continue to care for her?”

“Of course! I am indebted to her like no other. But tell me, Your Grace, why did she disfigure her face so?”

“She doesn’t want to be recognized.”

“But why did she have to use that terrible yellow root? That’s nasty business.”

“You know of it? Can her face ever be healed?”

“I don’t know, Your Grace. All I know is that some thieves wash their faces with the yellow root to gain the yellow appearance of illness so they can beg for money. They use the leaves of the plant as compresses on their hands to make them turn red and blistered, and they thus go to mass making it hard to tell whether they’re truly in need or if they’re crooks. I know that the red patches that the leaves cause disappear in two to three months, but I couldn’t tell you if the face can recover from the yellow root wash. But forgive my chattiness. Would you like to speak to her? Follow me.”

Barica showed Siniša into a clean and neat little room overlooking the yard. Nera sat pensively in the corner of the room. Barica left to give them some privacy.

The girl did not react to Siniša’s presence at all. He approached her and looked into her eyes that seemed to him so gloomy and opaque that he felt a pang of fear for her sanity as well.

Barica had warned him that Nera was soulsick and that she would go insane, so seeing her in this state made him believe that she might have been right. The thought of it broke his heart, so he remained silent for a few moments. She did not ask him any questions, and instead she sat there staring in front of her self as if he weren't in the room at all.

“I came to share some interesting developments with you.”

The way she looked at Siniša shook him to the core. She had never paid this much attention to him or listened to him so intensely before—her eyes opened more widely, her pupils dilated and grew brighter. He could feel her soaking up each word as if it were an elixir of life. He had noticed a similar reaction before, when he had told her about how he caught Jana and Urša. Only this time, the effect of his story was stronger: Nera arose, approached him and exclaimed:

“What social circle do you think the dead man belonged to?”

“By the looks of him he was a burgher, but I find it strange that a well-dressed burgher such as he would steal wine. It's almost as if the thievery had another purpose altogether. In either case, the criminals are unprecedentedly careful and soulless. Just think—they cut their own man's head off just so we wouldn't catch the whole gang because of him! Getting caught must be one hell of a problem for them!”

“If only we could guess who they were? If we could just catch them?”

“The Governor expressed that same sentiment.”

“Is he here?”

“Yes. He returned from Mokrice yesterday, and this gave me a good reason to excuse my sudden departure on Christmas Eve. The Governor has authorized me to do as I see fit and to even use the Governor's army if I need to.”

“And you won’t give up, Captain? You won’t, will you?”

“I consider it my sole purpose. But may I ask about your plans, Contessa?”

“I will wait for these thugs to be brought to justice.”

“Perhaps it would be better if you waited elsewhere.”

“I can’t leave. I won’t move an inch from here.”

“I heard that the Oršićs were due back in Zagreb. You shouldn’t hide from Count Petar.”

“No, no, I have nothing and no one to live for now, and my only desire is to find the villains. No one must know about me apart from you, Filip and Barica. I have ceased to exist for those I used to associate with; I am dead as far as they and myself are concerned. From now on I live to catch the criminals who abuse the law to murder people, destroy human souls and persecute reason and enlightened thought.”

“The road you have chosen is a dangerous one.”

“I know. It ends at the stake—but that will be the end of me either way.”

“This cannot be the end of you,” he said in a tone of voice that caused her to look at him strangely, if only for a moment. Then she returned to the subject of the dead man and Baba Urša:

“Why did the men in the courtyard let you go? Why didn’t you shoot when you heard a voice you thought was familiar command them to kill you?”

“They grew quiet when I mentioned the Governor. It’s clear to me now...and do you know what? I believe that they didn’t want anyone finding a dead man in Baba Urša’s yard since that might have been the end of their operation. I am positive I have heard their commander’s voice often before, I just can’t think of where that was.”

“And do you think that the men at Baba Urša’s were the same ones who escaped from the vineyard?”

“I’m sure of it, unless the footsteps somehow misled me. But I can’t figure out how they could have disappeared so suddenly?”

“Perhaps they retreated into the basement from which the hooded men appeared one night. I saw them with my own eyes as they climbed a ladder from the basement and into the house when I visited Urša. Yes, you must have heard of the goings-on at Baba Urša’s what with everyone gossiping about the love potions that she sells. Then I also saw a tall, masked man there who must have come for a love potion as well, but he had covered his face, as we had, to preserve anonymity. I never did find out who he was, but he caught up with us on our way home to warn us of some men who had set up an ambush for us. He wore a red cape”

“Was he perhaps connected to the men who came out of the basement?”

“I don’t think so. I had a feeling he was looking after me and that his shadow followed me all the way to the ‘Red Castle.’ I looked out the window late that night and I saw a tall figure standing there under a tree, as if he were watching after me.”

“Perhaps you are right. And you never found out who he was?”

“No. How could I have? He must have kept a low profile—no one wants to admit to visiting Baba Urša.”

Siniša listened to her story with a trembling heart, but he didn’t let on how much he was shaken by the Contessa’s account. He was the only one who knew that the man she was talking about was himself.

“Ever since then,” Nera continued, “I have known that these hooded men are connected with Baba Urša. They couldn’t find them then just as they couldn’t find them today. They must have a secret hiding place that we can’t see.”

“I thoroughly checked everything today and I am convinced that they could not have run away.”

“But why did Baba Urša cry for help?” Nera asked.

“I am convinced that she hid the thugs away first, and then she started shouting for help in order to convince people that she had been attacked. After all, the whole street heard the shots that had been fired, and she deflected any suspicion from herself by crying for help.”

“Yes, that could be what happened. That is so clever of you, Captain! My mind is at rest now. You are sure to reveal who the true witches are, I trust that you will.”

“It would make me truly happy to do so.”

“Happy? Why, have they done you wrong?”

“No, but I would be able to prove to you that I never let them escape that night at the hunting castle.”

Nera grew quiet and pensively looked down at the floor.

“Yes,” she said after a short silence, “perhaps it was wrong of me to accuse you of that. No, I am sure I was wrong. But please don’t hold it against me.”

“I never held anything against you.”

After a short silence, Siniša said:

“I have imposed on you for too long. Contessa, please allow me to send my Lieutenant to the Oršićs to inform them of your whereabouts. You can’t stay here.”

“I will stay here. I’m well taken care of.”

“But you are used to the comforts...”

“I learned to live off bread and water in the dungeon. I insist on staying here.”

“Why do you wish to stay?”

“As I have told you before, the purpose of my life now is to search for proof that witches do not exist.”

“All right. But please allow me to make one request.”

“What is it?”

“May I join you in this dangerous venture?”

She returned his warm, supplicating gaze:

“Yes, Hon. Captain. Please, be my ally.”

“I will devote my life to proving to the world that belief in witches—which had caused you so much pain, Contessa—is nothing but a terrible misapprehension.”

**The End**

## Summary of the *Grička Vještica* Book Series

### Part I. *Tajna Krvavog Mosta—The Secret of the Bloody Bridge*

The first book was originally intended to be a stand-alone work and is therefore tangentially related to the rest of the novels in the series. It takes place in Zagreb and the surrounding area, and from the references to historic events in the rest of the series we can deduce that the plot takes place in 1775. The central event of the novel is the mystery surrounding the murder of an aristocrat who was found at the Bloody Bridge along with a letter, indicating that eight others would also be targeted for an unknown crime. This event leads the people to suspect that the planned murders are the work of a recently sentenced witch, who had been burned at the stake in the city. The placement of the corpse at the Bloody Bridge proves significant, since it allows Zagorka to explore the history of Zagreb and relate the story of the enmities between the two original settlements connected by the bridge, Kaptol and Grič, though this same bridge later served as the locus of a bloody battle that ensued at the re-ignition of old hostilities. Zagorka thus reminds the readers that a divided Croatia is a weakened Croatia, and that Croatians should seek strength in unity.

Count Jurica Meško, refusing to believe in witchcraft, leads an investigation into the murder, and a subplot is developed as Baroness Lehotska attempts to induce him to marry her. Lehotska uses Stanka, an orphan servant girl whom she disguised as her nephew Stanko, to facilitate meetings with Meško. Lehotska, however, turns out to be responsible for the murders—in a way, a ‘witch’ did take the law into her own hands to avenge herself, since the nine men

targeted were the nine men who had sentenced Lehotska to the confinement of the nunnery for adultery, though she was at the time just a seduced and abused child. Zagorka thus introduces various issues regarding women's rights into the novel, as well as a critique of religion by having Lehotska use a hoodwinked priest to commit the murders for her. She manipulated the priest by claiming that she had a prophetic dream which indicated that the priest was called to fight the representatives of Satan—in this way, Zagorka gives about as much credence to religion as she does to the witch trials. Ultimately, Stanka and Meško fall in love and are married after exposing the criminal activities of a group of lawmakers and aristocrats who had joined together to plunder for profit. The underlying themes include the distrust of religious and government officials, and the denouncement of superstition.

**Part II.        *Kontesa Nera—Contessa Nera***

In terms of plot, *Contessa Nera* can be considered the beginning of the *Witch from Grič* series, since it introduces the series' protagonist. The novel takes place in Zagreb and the surrounding area as well as in Vienna, and describes the lamentable and corrupt processes of the inquisition that took place in and around Zagreb, Croatia. Contessa Nera exemplifies enlightened, humanitarian ideals that are under attack, just as she herself is persecuted for witchcraft. Her friends' fight for Nera's life and freedom is reflective of the people's struggle for an independent Croatia.

**Part III.        *Malleus Maleficarum—Hammer of Witches***

Part III. takes place in Zagreb and the surrounding area as well as in Vienna. Once the protagonists leave Croatia, they are forced to fight for their lives and their relationship to battle against the abuses afflicted on them by those in power, mirroring the struggle for Croatian national identity in the context of the country's desired political autonomy. Nera is brought to the



court of Maria Theresa of Habsburg, where the scientific-minded physician Van Swieten and heir to the throne Joseph II aid in her acquittal. Siniša is briefly incarcerated after turning himself in for the accidental murder of his father's lover, while Nera is blackmailed into marriage with the prospect of the return of her grandmother, who had been lost after the fire in the Red Castle and had suffered amnesia as a result of the cataclysm. Nera meets Stanka, who, in order to deceive the blackmailer, pretends to be Stanko again, and they enter into a mock marriage. After Siniša is released, he helps bring a band of aristocrats to justice for raping, plundering and abusing the law by operating as the 'devils and witches' in a secret underground space beneath the ruins of the Old City. Siniša and Nera marry, but the book ends with a Queen's summons that requires Nera to return to court alone.

**Part IV.       *Suparnica Marije Terezije I.—Maria Theresa's Rival, Part I.***

This book takes place in and around Vienna, where Nera is forced to return in order to help Maria Theresa secure her social power at court and her control over her husband. The Queen essentially plans to use Nera as bait to induce the King to break off his relationship with another influential lover. The crux of the conflict centers on the Jesuit exploitation of power aided by the blind religiosity of Maria Theresa, and the opposing, enlightened approach espoused by the heir to the throne, Prince Joseph. The Prince befriends Nera for her intelligence and honesty and eventually falls in love with her, which allows her to further inspire his benevolent attitude toward his people.

**Part V.       *Suparnica Marije Terezije II.—Maria Theresa's Rival, Part II.***

Part V. continues to follow the intrigues established in the first part. Nera continues to fight for her virtue and for Siniša's safety.

**Part VI.      *Dvorska Kamarila—The Court Coterie***

This book takes place in Austria, Italy, Bavaria and Croatia. At the beginning, it is unclear whether Siniša had died in prison and Joseph II, believing that to be the case, had hoped to marry Nera and relinquish his titles. The Jesuits scheme to kill the Prince and ruin everyone who supports him, but after the death of Francis I Joseph is named co-regent to his mother. Siniša and Nera are reunited, and declare their support for Joseph's vision.

**Part VII.     *Buntovnik na Prijestolju—Rebel on the Throne***

The final book takes place in Austria, Hungary, Croatia and Serbia. It covers Joseph II's rule and the accompanying conflicts of interest among various aristocratic and religious circles scrambling to gain or retain power over the crown. Joseph II, however, is portrayed as a humble and enlightened ruler, who believes that he is called to be King in order to serve the people. As King, Joseph II leads the Austro-Hungarian Empire in a war against Turkey, and initiates various reforms regarding religious tolerance that culminate in a papal visit to Vienna. These changes incite various revolts by both the aristocrats and the serfs, which cause Joseph II to undo his reforms in Hungary after he had already lost control of the Austrian Netherlands. The book ends with Joseph II's death and the ultimate failure of his lofty goals, but his followers state that Joseph's message will live on in those who share his ideals, and the happy image of Nera and Siniša's domestic bliss give the readers hope for a better future.