

The Bone Mother

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Vaclav closed the inner shutters of the cottage window, and hobbled over to the stove. He tossed another log into the fading fire inside. Wincing in pain, he eased onto the seat of the bench next to the stove. He rubbed his hands together, and sighed. The abscess in his leg had grown larger and more painful, but worse was his constant state of worry.

It had been three days since Ludmilla left the cottage to fetch the physician to attend to Vaclav's leg, and the snow outside was beginning to pile up. Worse still, because their daughter Jitka was an infant of nursing age, Ludmilla was forced to take her along on the journey. Vaclav had never felt so helpless, or so foolish.

He silently admonished himself for building their cottage in the mountains. It was easily two days from the village where the physician lived, and a good half-day's ride to the next cottage. Why must he be so proud? Why must he feel the need to prove to himself he could thrive in the mountainous wilderness the way his great-grandparents had?

Still, he held to a glimmer of hope. It wasn't nearly so cold when Ludmilla left, and the snow hadn't started to fall. Surely, if she hadn't arrived at the village, she had at least made it to the neighbor's cottage, and was warm and safe by the fire with dear little Jitka. Perhaps they had an ointment he could use to ease his pain and break his fever. That's it! Any moment now, his neighbor Jakub would be calling out through the snow, leading his beloved Ludmilla and Jitka right to Vaclav's door. Oh, how he'd embrace his dear wife and baby girl, and give kind Jakub a large bundle of salted meat and dried mushrooms for his troubles. He'd even give him the last of the sheep's cheese. He'd be so grateful!

Vaclav laughed, and after swaying a bit, fell to the floor in a dizzy heap, smashing his nose into the wood slats. He was sure he'd broken it as his face throbbed while thick, dark blood flowed freely into his bristly black mustache, running through the cleft in his chin, spattering the floor.

"You mock me, God?" Vaclav spit toward the ceiling, smirking. He realized those are the first words he's uttered aloud since he'd been alone.

His fever was getting worse. After using a wet cloth to wipe most of the blood from his face, he limped to the bed to get some rest. His head was pounding, the throbbing matched by his infected leg. Shivering, he crawled beneath the floral-patterned blanket sewn by his mother when he was a child. Ludmilla said she loved the blanket, but Vaclav knew better. He loved her for humoring his attachment to the relic of his childhood. Exhaustion overrode his intense pain, and he fell asleep.

Screaming, Vaclav shot upright in bed. His dark hair was matted to his forehead with sweat. He rubbed his eyes, his face stained with tears. He frantically looked around the cottage for his wife and child, but aside from the crackle

of the stove and the whispering wind outside, all was quiet and still. His dreams were of terrors and tragedy he hoped to soon forget.

With a wince, he stood up, steadying himself on a shelf. The need to piss grew urgent for the ailing man. He grabbed his walking stick and limped out the door. His leg was hot and the nerves near his abscess screamed. The skin of his thigh had grown tight and swollen to the point Vaclav feared it would burst. The freezing wind hit his face, and for a moment, he forgot his ailment.

Relieving himself near a pine tree roughly thirty meters from the cottage door, he was startled by a piercing cackle. Thin and gravelly like the laughter of a crone, though abnormally loud. The sound seemed to be all around him, whirling about him like a flock of territorial birds. He fell while turning to look behind himself too quickly, piss soaking his leather trousers. All became quiet as soon as and as sharply as the cackling began. There was no one to be seen.

“Hello?” he called. Nothing. Vaclav felt like a fool, and struggling, made it to his feet. He began to trudge back to the cottage, the snow falling steadily.

Once inside, he realized his fever had broken, though his leg felt worse. Soon, Vaclav grew ravenous. Nearly falling more than once, he made his way to the pantry, where he fetched himself a length of dried deer sausage and a small onion. He used a paring knife to cut a slice of each, whistling an old song about a Protivin castle in the mountains between bites. When the sausage was gone, he felt his hunger was sated enough. His thirst was another matter. Vaclav reached across the table for a small glass and filled it with slivovitz. The plum brandy was immensely strong, for Vaclav’s old family recipe ensured a high alcohol proof.

He downed two slugs of the stuff, and savored the harsh warmth washing through his insides. Mercifully, his mouth was empty when there came a sudden, forceful pounding at the window. Forgetting his pain, Vaclav stood with more speed and certainty than he had in days, and limped quickly to the window.

Throwing open the shutter, his eyes had first told him no one was there. Though it had been grey and snowy all day, he noticed the light was dimming. It must be dusk. He felt his eyes were playing tricks on him, as through the snow he now saw a tall, slim figure in a rustling black cloak standing near the tree line. He squinted, and was certain there was someone there. The figure was too far away for him to make out a face. His heart jumped. Perhaps it was Jakub, or at least someone with news of Ludmilla and Jitka! Grabbing his walking stick, he hurried to the door. Within two steps, he saw plainly the figure was gone. He took a few further steps to be sure. His eyes had been playing tricks after all. His spirits sank a bit as he turned and entered his cottage.

Vaclav’s leg seared in agony due to combination of his infection and copious movement. He hobbled to the table, poured another shot of slivovitz, and downed it. Then he poured himself two more. He’d had enough. Of his leg, of the fever, of his helplessness. Tonight, he’d cure himself. Vaclav opened the stove and threw two more logs inside. After stoking the fire until it began to roar, he closed the stove door. Vaclav fetched a water tub, and went outside to fill it with snow. When the tub was filled, he returned to the stove and placed the tub atop it. He placed a knife blade-first into the coals and went to get a cloth.

After removing his trousers and wrapping his hand to pull the knife from the coals, he took a gulp of brandy straight from the jug. The slivovitz didn’t go down smooth this time. He grimaced, and figured the burning in his

chest was an omen of the discomfort to come. Vaclav tightly wound the cloth and placed it between his teeth, biting down hard. Steadying himself, he took a deep breath. With a sure hand gripping the knife's bone handle, Vaclav sliced deep into the flesh of his leg, bursting the boil. He screamed through gritted teeth. At first a low, guttural bellow, his pitch raised as the blade's edge separated his infected flesh. He looked down and watched hot, yellow, foul-smelling discharge spurt across the room as blood ran freely over his now-shaking hand. Dropping the knife, he squeezed around the cut as hard as he could, trying to empty the abscess. His scream twisted into angry, labored grunting. Just as he was finished, Vaclav's head started to swim. His eyes rolled back as he fell hard to his side, unconscious.

Vaclav woke stiff and sore, with a dry mouth and pounding head. He reckoned the pounding head was due to his fall, not the generous shots of brandy. Light was pouring through the cracks of the window shutter and beneath the door. It was morning, and he was cold. After stoking the coals to get the fire going, he made his way to the window where he noticed the snow had stopped falling. All was still, and deathly quiet.

After he dressed his wound and cleaned himself, Vaclav prepared a breakfast of stale bread and fermented cabbage. Though he was still in considerable pain and his limp had yet to subside, he felt a bit better. He was staring at a candle, lost in thought while the small flame danced. The pounding on the window shutters returned. It was louder than before, and though he knew it couldn't be possible, the noise sounded as if it were coming from inside the cottage.

"Either I've been cursed by God, or fortune shines upon me." His voice was dry and rough. The words came out a croaking chuckle.

What Vaclav saw when he opened the shutter froze the blood in his veins. What was out there may be a curse, but he could feel in his bones it was far older than God. It was a rail-thin crone, hook-nosed and ancient, the many lines in her weathered face carved as deep as the gorge of Kamenice. A strand of ragged silver hair fell from beneath her cloak, hanging nearly to the snowy ground below. Vaclav looked up at her though she stood a distance from the cottage. She must have been be what, eleven or twelve heads high? Her eyes were solid black pits, empty yet vast. They didn't shift or blink. They just stared, at him and through him. Her cloak matched her empty eyes, though always shifting and shiny as the raven feathers it looked to be crafted of.

He limped to a corner of the cottage, where his old saber sat. It's the weapon he earned in his youth as a hussar, fearless and wild. He gripped its hilt, hoping to recall some of the courage and bluster he possessed in those old days. The saber in his right hand, his walking stick in his left, he turned and trudged out the door to meet the deathless baba.

"What do you want? Are you here to take me to Hell?" He barked his questions angrily. The ominous silence ate his words. There was no echo. No wind, no birds calling. Nothing.

The primeval witch, unthinkable tall and utterly unknowable, slowly swayed her head toward the tree line. Vaclav followed her gaze with his own as multitudes of crows broke from branches toward the sky, mocking him with their calls.

Vaclav gripped both his saber and walking stick ever tighter and began his journey through the snow to the trees. Though his limp was still there, he'd all but forgotten the searing pain in his leg and the accompanying sickness that's plagued him in recent days. The snow was thick, but no higher than his boots. He arrived at the tree line, the wood appearing to him as a gaping maw, indifferent and hungry. He gathered himself and entered the forest going down

toward the village. Though fairly steep, there was a well-cut trail that made horse and wagon travel possible. No more than fifteen meters into the wood, he found a Hell worse than any described to him by a priest. His horse, Kral, lay dead on its side, and pinned beneath him, his beloved Ludmilla, her neck twisted and broken.

Shaking and muttering prayers under his breath, he bent down to kiss her and caress her hair one last time. With tears streaking his twisted face, he looked directly ahead of his dear dead wife and trusted horse, and saw his beloved Jitka. His baby daughter. Her body was nailed to an old oak tree with one massive, rusted iron spike. Her face a cold blue, and her eyes empty black pits.