

To all my muses and O., the fire starter.



Copyright © 2022 Marion Terenko

All rights reserved.

Cover design by Jörn Bach 2022

Credits for images see chapter References.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the author.

ISBN: 979-8-4198-8963-7

Independently published.

Printed on Earth.

MARION TERENKO

Morijana

THE FORTUNE TELLER

An adventurous novel, richly illustrated



PART I

Morijana

THE FORTUNE TELLER —————

1 ACCORDING TO PLAN



hhh ... aoleo, mănce-te dracu! I hiss, regaining my balance by holding on to a fence post. This muddy village street is as slippery as a cowpat. I know it's risky to address *dracu*, the Devil, even as a jaunty swearword, but sometimes you can't help but touch upon the darkness.

It was a friendly gesture of the village people to scatter straw and gravel around to make the main (and only) street of Mureșel walkable in this rainy, rainy autumn. Yet the mud prevails over all.

I walk on, supported by my staff of hazel, gathering my heavy skirts with the other hand to avoid the slop seeping further up the fabric. Pointlessly, though. I've been wet and dirty from head to toe for days, since we left our summer camp in a mad rush to, once again, escape some impending riots.

I don't want to slip and fall, for all my haberdashery is stored in my *košaara*, a basket cabinet that I carry on my back: horn buttons, needles and yarn, little herb bags and tiny brown bottles with tinctures for and against infertility, as well as other drugs, perfumes and trading goods. God forbid, all that rolling in the mud!

Slung over my shoulder I carry another bundle, the weighty proof of my day's success. It contains a bag of maize, two cabb-

ge heads, a few boiled eggs, and half a chicken. The advantage of working alone – a behaviour considered reckless among my fellow clansmen – is that you don't need to share your hard-earned profit with anyone else. The downside is that you have to carry and guard it all by yourself, along with your own integrity. I'm not scared, though, not anymore. I know I'm quite good if it comes down to hand-to-hand combat. The main thing is to set aside your scruples and go for the neck, face and balls with all the violence you can muster.

Over the last few years, if not decades really, there has been no need to defend my honour or goods by brute force anymore. The lightest and most efficient weapon I possess, given the superstitious fear of the people around, is my dramatic talent. Fortunately, everyone is afraid of being cursed by a witch with my looks, including the scattered mercenaries and the dangerous, hot-blooded men of the hostile clans. They are all aware of the fact that a *bosorska* is able to transform a man into a horse and then ride him at night, or summon diseases and death.

I should be satisfied with the day's success, yet I still have further business on my mind! At the well I overheard the village women speaking in a nasty tone of 'Bredica the heartbroken' – a potential customer of my more discreet (and often more profitable) services? I discovered that she's the farmer's wife at the property behind the Rabbi's house which I already located on my stroll through the village.

Passing the Hebrew priest's house again, I notice that it is quite new, slightly larger and better constructed than the neighbouring ones. The walls are made of peeled fir trunks as usual, but it seems to be more spacious and comfortable. The roof is tiled with shingles instead of straw, and every side of the house enjoys the

luxury of two little windows. They are each closed by shutters now, as I observe them, wondering.

Actually, the whole property of the Jewish family seems shut tight. Maybe that's due to one of their special customs, about which I have never known very much since Jewish people aren't particularly numerous in the areas we pass through. Obviously, some were entitled to settle in this side valley of the Mureş. The local squire is said to be a tolerant man. I'm actually curious about him. He is next on my list.

Dancing clumsily through the treacherous mud, I finally arrive at the farmhouse whose fence begins where the Rabbi's ends. This property also speaks of the humble wealth and diligence of the owner. The wattle fence lacks not one single wicker, all wooden parts of the house, gates, stables and outhouses are sprinkled with lighter spots where the weathered slats have been continuously exchanged over the years.

As the dogs bay to announce a stranger's arrival, a flurry of children erupts from the house. At every height, noses get stuck through the batten grid of the gate. I keep on waiting, studying the carved ornaments on the gateposts: the tree of life, the solar wheel and the ringed cross, connected by zig-zag lines in a rope structure. How true is the meaning: all that is, is interwoven!

I had presumed that the men would be out in the fields at this time of day, digging potatoes out of the mud and, indeed, it's a middle-aged woman who steps out of the low side door of the barn. Upon seeing me she signals the older children to let me in.

No doubt, this is Bredica, my target client. Her broad face is pretty yet reddened by exertion or crying. She's wearing the local costume with the heavy woollen skirt rags, striped in black and

red. Her thick braids of dark hair are mostly covered by a white bonnet. Watching her movements, I can tell she's with child again.

Soon after, the farmer's wife and I sit face to face at the table in the one good room. I noticed her hesitance to use the table for the intended purpose. It's a sacred place where new-borns, as well as the deceased, are laid to be baptised or anointed.

'The saints smile down upon those who treat their fellow men with affection,' I say reassuringly in our common language, Romanian. Meaningfully, I let my eyes wander around the Icons that deck the blackened walls, each adorned with a delicately embroidered linen cloth in red and white.

Between us a candle is placed on the table top. I allowed Bre-dica to light it, after she had asked incidentally; had I ever caught a glimpse into the other world? When I affirmed that I had, she sent the children out of the house, each one provided with a different task.



I take three tail feathers of a raven out of my basket and place them around the candle holder, forming a shiny black triangle. Laying my open hands to the left and right of the arrangement, I say: 'Give me your hands, dear woman. Look into the flame and think of the soul you want to reach. The bird of the dead and the purifying light of the candle will safely guide your thoughts.'

She sighs, but apparently follows my directions.

'What is the name?' I ask neutrally. I can see how mistrust and the urgent need to unburden herself battle in her chest. The latter seems to win.

'He is, well, he was the younger brother of the Rebbe, our new neighbour ... or actually not so new a neighbour anymore. Three weeks ago, a terrible accident happened when the men were felling oaks on the ridge of the northern mountainside. The trees up there grow slowly and therefore deliver harder wood that lasts even longer when cut during the waning moon ... he was badly injured by a falling tree and ... and died on the second day after the accident.'

'What is the name?' I ask again.

'Gidon' she whispers. 'They didn't allow me anywhere near his sickbed. I couldn't hold his hand. I couldn't tell him ...' She starts to cry.

'Bredica' I say softly, 'please relax. Think of Gidon. Look into the dancing flame. Trust in Morijana the Fortune Teller! I will try to reach out to him on your behalf.'

I stare into the flame and hold the woman's hands. For dramatic reasons I hum a repetitive melody, deep down in my chest. She wouldn't recognise it as a loan from a gypsy song, praising the many qualities of plums!

Bredica keeps on sobbing for a while. Her palms are hot. I feel that she sets a great deal of hope in me. I won't let her down.

Oh, it's so nice here in the dim and comfortable house that smells of beeswax, smoke and hay! I enjoy the break. Time passes. In my mind I contemplate the distribution of wealth and happiness amongst humans. The latter is not necessarily aligned with the former, nor are they entirely independent of one another. *You don't need to own a mule to pull your wagon, but it helps, as the Gypsies say.*

'Listen now!' I ended my humming all of a sudden. 'I'm receiving a message from a nearby hovering soul who calls himself Gidonel. Is that the one?'

'Why yes! Yes!' she cries happily. 'How can you know? That's what I've always called him, Gidonel, little Gidon, for he's a few years younger than me ... What does he say? Is he upset with me? Is he still suffering?'

'He told me to deliver the following message. Listen closely!'

I look in the direction of the flame and turn my gaze into the beyond. In a slow and monotone fashion, I say:

'With every little thing that happens, a plan that we cannot comprehend unfolds. An accident is no exception. The living shall live, the dead shall rest, undisturbed by destructive grief. The unborn shall be born and grow up, protected and cared for. A child is a living memory. Love is eternal, and you are loved, Bredica. Carry on with sure hope! Life is ongoing change, and change is according to plan.'

'Oh my God ... please, can you repeat the message?'

I do as she asks. And then again.

We leave the house together and climb down the boulders that form the entrance steps to the raised plank floor. This construc-

tion method is very popular here, the hard rocks will not be worn out even after generations of inhabitants. Soon another child will take the first clumsy steps here, a child of the neighbourly love between Jews and Christians. May God hold his hand over the sinful mother and the innocent child!

When we part at the gate, she almost hugs me. She's so relieved, she seems to float on air. I smile goodbye in true sympathy.

Humming along, I walk down the muddy street, buoyant despite the heavy bundle and basket cabinet I carry. In my skirt pocket three new copper coins clink gaily against one another.

