

THE GHOST RIDER

ISMAIL KADARE

Translated from the French of
Jusuf Vrioni by Jon Rothschild
Updated, with new sections added, by
Ismail Kadare and David Bellos
Introduction by David Bellos



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GUIDE TO PRONUNCIATION

Most letters of the Albanian alphabet are pronounced more or less as in English. The main exceptions are as follow:

c	<i>ts</i> as in <i>curtsy</i>
ç	<i>ch</i> as in <i>church</i>
gj	<i>gy</i> as in <i>hogyard</i>
j	<i>y</i> as in <i>year</i>
q	<i>ky</i> as in <i>stockyard</i> or the <i>t</i> in <i>mature</i>
x	<i>dz</i> as in <i>adze</i>
xh	<i>j</i> as in <i>joke</i>
zh	<i>s</i> as in <i>measure</i>

CHAPTER ONE

Stres was still in bed when he heard the knocking at the door. He was tempted to bury his head in the pillow to blot out the noise, but the sound came again, louder this time.

“Who the Devil would pound on my door before daybreak?” he grumbled, throwing off the blanket.

He was on his way down the stairs when he heard the hammering for the third time, but now the rhythm of the metal knocker told him who it was. He slid back the bolt and opened the door. There was no need to say, “And what possesses you to wake me before dawn?” for the look on his face and his bleary eyes conveyed the message well enough.

“Something’s happened,” his deputy hastened to say.

Stres stared at him sceptically, as if to say, “It better be good to justify a visit at this ungodly hour.” But he was well aware that his aide rarely blundered. Indeed, whenever he had been moved to rebuke him, he had found himself compelled to hold his tongue. Still, he

would have been delighted had his deputy been in the wrong this time, so that he could work off his ill humour on him.

“So?”

The deputy glanced at his chief’s eyes for an instant, then stepped back and spoke.

“The dowager Vranaj and her daughter, Doruntine, who arrived last night under very mysterious circumstances, both lie dying.”

“Doruntine?” said Stres, dumbfounded. “How can it be?”

His deputy heaved a sigh of relief: he had been right to pound on the door.

“How can it be?” Stres said again, rubbing his eyes as if to wipe away the last trace of sleep. And in fact he had slept badly. No first night home after a two-week mission had ever been so trying. One long nightmare. “How can it be?” he asked for the third time. Doruntine had married into a family that lived so far from her own that she hadn’t been able to come back even when they were in mourning.

“How, indeed,” said the deputy. “As I said, the circumstances of her return are most mysterious.”

“And?”

“Well, both mother and daughter have taken to their beds and lie dying.”

“Strange! Do you think there’s been foul play?”

The deputy shook his head. “I think not. It looks more like the effect of some dreadful shock.”

“Have you seen them?”

“Yes. They’re both delirious, or close to it. The mother

keeps asking, 'Who brought you back, daughter?' And the daughter keeps saying, 'My brother Kostandin.'"

"Is that what she says: Kostandin? But, good God, he died three years ago, he and all his brothers . . ."

"According to the local women now gathered at their bedsides, that is just what the mother told her. But the girl insists that she arrived with him last night, just after midnight."

"How odd," said Stres, all the while thinking how *ghastly*.

They stared at each other in silence until Stres, shivering, remembered that he was not dressed.

"Wait for me," he said, and went back in.

From inside came his wife's drowsy "What is it?" and the inaudible words of his reply. Soon he came out again, wearing the regional captain's uniform that made him look even taller and thinner.

"Let's go see them," he said.

They set out in silence. A handful of white rose petals fallen at someone's door reminded Stres somehow of a brief scene from the dream that had slipped so strangely into his fitful sleep.

"Quite extraordinary," he said.

"It beggars belief," replied his deputy, raising the stakes.

"To tell you the truth, I was tempted not to believe it at first."

"So I noticed. It's unbelievable, isn't it. Very mysterious."

"Worse than that," Stres said. "The more I think about it, the more inconceivable it seems."

"The main thing is to find out how Doruntine got back," said the deputy.

"And then?"

"The case will be solved if we can find out who accompanied her, or rather, if we can uncover the circumstances of her arrival."

"Who accompanied her," Stres repeated. "Yes, who and how . . . Obviously she is not telling the truth."

"I asked her three times how she got here, but she offered no explanation. She was hiding something."

"Did she know that all her brothers, including Kostandin, were dead?" Stres asked.

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"It's possible she didn't know," Stres said. "She married so far away . . ." To his surprise his jaw suddenly felt as heavy as lead, making it difficult for him to speak. What's wrong with me? he wondered. He could feel a heaviness in his lungs too, as if they had filled with coal dust.

He pressed forward, and the exercise helped to clear his dulled mind.

"What was I saying? Oh, yes . . . She married so far abroad that she's not been able to return home since her wedding. As far as I know this is the first time she's been back."

"She can't have known about the death of her nine brothers or she would have come then," said the deputy. "The dowager complained often enough about her daughter not being at her side during those grief-stricken days."

"The forests of Bohemia where she lives lie at least

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two weeks' journey from here, if not more," Stres observed.

"Yes, if not more," repeated his deputy. "Almost at the heart of Europe."

As they walked, Stres noticed more white rose petals strewn along the path, as if some invisible hand had scattered them during the night. Fleetinglly he recalled seeing them somewhere before. But he couldn't really remember his dream. He also had a faint pain in his forehead. At the exact spot where his dream must have entered last night, he thought, before exiting the same way later on, towards dawn perhaps, irritating the wound it had already made.

"In any event, someone must have come with her," he said.

"Yes, but who? Her mother can't possibly believe that her daughter returned with a dead man, any more than we can."

"But why would she conceal who she came back with?"

"I can't explain it. It's very unclear."

Once again they walked in silence. The autumn air was cold. Some cawing crows flew low. Stres watched their flight for a moment.

"It's going to rain," he said. "The crows caw like that because their ears hurt when a storm is coming."

His deputy looked off in the same direction, but said nothing.

"Earlier you mentioned something about a shock that might have brought the two women to their deathbed," Stres said.

“Well, it was certainly caused by some very powerful emotion.” He avoided the word *terrible*, for his chief had commented that he tended to overuse it. “Since neither woman shows any mark of violence, their sudden collapse must surely have been caused by some kind of shock.”

“Do you think the mother suddenly discovered something terrible?” Stres asked.

His deputy stared at him. He can use words as he pleases, he thought in a flash, but if others do, he stuffs them back down their throats.

“The mother?” he said. “I suspect they both suddenly discovered something terrible, as you put it. At the same time.”

As they continued to speculate about the shock mother and daughter had presumably inflicted on one another (both Stres and his deputy, warped by professional habit, increasingly tended to turns of phrase better suited to an investigative report), they mentally reconstructed, more or less, the scene that must have unfolded in the middle of the night. Knocks had sounded at the door of the old house at an unusual hour, and when the old lady called out – as she must have done – “Who’s there?” – a voice from outside would have answered, “It’s me, Doruntine.” Before opening the door, the old woman, upset by the sudden knocking and convinced that it couldn’t be her daughter’s voice, must have asked, to ease her doubt, “Who brought you back?” Let us not forget that for three years she had been desperate for some consolation in her grief, waiting in vain for her daughter to come home. From outside, Doruntine answered, “My brother Kostandin brought me back.” And the old woman receives the first

shock. Perhaps, even shaken as she was, she found the strength to reply, "What are you talking about? Kostandin and his brothers have been in their graves for three years." Now it is Doruntine's turn to be stricken. If she really believes that it was her brother Kostandin who had brought her back, then the shock is twofold: finding out that Kostandin and her other brothers were dead and realising at the same time that she had been travelling with a ghost. The old woman then summons up the strength to open the door, hoping against hope that she has misunderstood the young woman's words, or that she has been hearing voices, or that it is not Doruntine at the door after all. Perhaps Doruntine, standing there outside, also hopes she has misunderstood. But when the door swings open, both repeat what they have just said, dealing each other a fatal blow.

"No," said Stres. "None of that makes much sense either."

"I agree with you," said his deputy. "But one thing is certain: something must have happened between them for the two women to be in such a state."

"Something happened between them," Stres repeated. "Of course something happened, but what? A terrifying tale from the girl, a terrifying revelation for the mother. Or else . . ."

"There's the house," said the deputy. "Maybe we can find out something."

The great building could be seen in the distance, standing all forlorn on the far side of an open plain. The wet ground was strewn with dead leaves all the way to the house, which had once been one of the grandest and most

imposing of the principality, but now had an air of mourning and desertion. Most of the shutters on the upper floors were closed, the eaves were damaged in places, and the grounds before the entrance, with their ancient, drooping, mossy trees, seemed desolate.

Stres recalled the burial of the nine Vranaj brothers three years earlier. There had been one tragedy after another, each more painful than the last, to the point that only by going mad could one erase the memory. But no generation could recall a calamity on this scale: nine coffins for nine young men of a single household in a single week. It had happened five weeks after the grand wedding of the family's only daughter, Doruntine. The principality had been attacked without warning by a Norman army and, unlike in previous campaigns, where each household had had to give up one of their sons, this time all eligible young men were conscripted. So all nine brothers had gone off to war. It had often happened that several brothers of a single household went to fight in far more bloody conflicts, but never had more than half of them fallen in combat. This time, however, there was something very special about the enemy army: it was afflicted with plague, and most of those who took part in the fighting died one way or another, victors and vanquished alike, some in combat, others after the battle. Many a household had two, three, even four deaths to mourn, but only the Vranaj mourned nine. No one could recall a more impressive funeral. All the counts and barons of the principality attended, even the prince himself, and dignitaries of neighbouring principalities came as well.

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Stres remembered it all quite clearly, most of all the words on everyone's lips at the time: how the mother, in those days of grief, did not have her only daughter, Doruntine, at her side. But Doruntine alone had not been told about the disaster.

Stres sighed. How quickly those three years had passed! The great double doors, worm-eaten in places, stood ajar. Walking ahead of his deputy, he crossed the courtyard and entered the house, where he could hear the faint sound of voices. Two or three elderly women, apparently neighbours, looked the newcomers up and down.

"Where are they?" Stres asked.

One of the women nodded towards a door. Stres, followed by his deputy, walked into a vast, dimly lit room where his eyes were immediately drawn to two large beds set in opposite corners. Beside each of these stood a woman, staring straight ahead. The icons on the walls and the two great brass candelabra above the fireplace, long unused, cast flickers of light through the atmosphere of gloom. One of the women turned her head towards them. Stres stopped for a moment, then motioned her to approach.

"Which is the mother's bed?" he asked softly.

The woman pointed to one of the beds.

"Leave us alone for a moment," Stres said.

The woman opened her mouth, doubtless to oppose him, but her gaze fell on Stres's uniform and she was silent. She walked over to her companion, who was very old, and both women left without a word.

Walking carefully so as not to make a noise, Stres

approached the bed where the old woman lay, her head in the folds of a white bonnet.

"My Lady," he whispered. "Lady Mother" – for so had she been called since the death of her sons – "it's me, Stres. Do you remember me?"

She opened her eyes. They seemed glazed with grief and terror. He withstood her gaze for a moment and then, leaning a little nearer the white pillow, murmured, "How do you feel, Lady Mother?"

Her expression was unreadable.

"Doruntine came back last night, didn't she?" Stres asked.

The woman looked up from her bed, her eyes saying "yes." Her gaze then settled on Stres as though asking him some question. For a moment, Stres was unsure how to proceed.

"How did it happen?" he asked very softly. "Who brought her back?"

The old woman covered her eyes with one hand, then her head moved in a way that told him she had lost consciousness. Stres took her hand and found her pulse with difficulty. Her heart was still beating.

"Call one of the women," Stres said quietly to his deputy.

His aide soon returned with one of the women who had just left the room. Stres let go of the old woman's hand and walked noiselessly, as before, to the bed where Doruntine lay. He could see her blond hair on the pillow. He felt his heart wrench, but the sensation had nothing to do with what was happening now. An ancient pang that went back to that wedding three years before. On

that day, as she rode off on the white bridal steed amidst the throng of relatives and friends, his own heart was suddenly so heavy that he wondered what had come over him. Everyone looked sad, not only Doruntine's mother and brother, but all her relatives, for she was the first girl of the country to marry so far away. But Stres's sorrow was quite unique. As she rode away, he suddenly realised that the feeling he had had for her these last three weeks had been nothing other than love. But it was a love without shape, a love which had never condensed, for he himself had gently prevented it. It was like the morning dew that appears for the first few minutes after sunrise, only to vanish during the other hours of day and night. The only moment when that bluish fog had nearly condensed, had tried to form itself into a cloud, was when she left. But it had been no more than an instant, quickly forgotten.

Stres stood at Doruntine's bed, looking steadily into her face. She was as beautiful as ever, perhaps even more beautiful, with those lips that seemed somehow full and light at the same time.

"Doruntine," he said in a very soft voice.

She opened her eyes. Deep within them he sensed a void that nothing could fill. He tried to smile at her.

"Doruntine," he said again. "Welcome home."

She stared at him.

"How do you feel?" he said slowly, carefully, unconsciously taking her hand. She was burning hot. "Doruntine," he said again, more gently, "you came last night after midnight, didn't you?"

Her eyes answered "yes." He would rather have put

off asking the question that troubled him, but it rose up of itself.

“Who brought you back?”

The young woman’s eyes stared steadily back at his own.

“Doruntine,” he asked again, “who brought you back?”

His voice seemed alien to him. The very question was so fraught with terror that he almost wanted to take it back. But it was too late.

Still she stared at him with those eyes in whose depths he glimpsed a desperate void.

Get it over with now, he told himself.

“You told your mother that it was your brother Kostandin, didn’t you?”

Again her look assented. Stres searched her eyes for some sign of madness, but could find no meaning in their utter emptiness.

“I think you must have heard that Kostandin left this world three years ago,” he said in the same faint voice. He felt tears well up within him before they suddenly filled her eyes. But hers were tears unlike any others, half-visible, almost impalpable. Her face, bathed by those tears, seemed even more remote. “What’s happening to me?” her eyes seemed to say. “Why don’t you believe me?”

He turned slowly to his deputy and to the other woman standing near the mother’s bed and motioned to them to leave. Then he leaned towards the young woman again and stroked her hand.

“How did you get here, Doruntine? How did you manage that long journey?”

It seemed to him that something strained to fill those unnaturally enlarged eyes.

Stres left an hour later. He looked pale, and without turning his head or speaking a word to anyone, he made his way to the door. His deputy, following behind, was tempted several times to ask whether Doruntine had said anything new, but he didn't dare.

As they passed the church, Stres seemed about to enter the cemetery, but changed his mind at the last minute.

His deputy could feel the glances of curious onlookers as they walked along.

"It's not an easy case," Stres said without looking at his deputy. "I expect there will be quite a lot of talk about it. Just to anticipate any eventuality, I think we would do well to send a report to the prince's chancellery."

To His Highness's Chancellor. Urgent

I believe it useful to bring to your attention events that occurred at dawn on this 11 October in the noble house of Vranaj and which may have unpredictable consequences.

On the morning of 11 October, the aged Lady Vranaj, who, as everyone knows, has been living alone since the death of her nine sons on the battlefield, was found in a state of profound distress, along with her daughter, Doruntine, who, by her own account, had arrived the night before, accompanied by her brother Kostandin, who died three years ago, alongside all his brothers.

Having repaired to the site and tried to speak with the two unfortunate women, I concluded that neither showed any sign of mental instability, though what they now claim, whether directly or indirectly, is completely baffling and incredible. It should be noted at this point that they had given each other this shock, the daughter by telling her mother that she had been brought home by her brother Kostandin, the mother by informing her daughter that Kostandin, with all her brothers, had long since departed this world.

I tried to discuss the matter with Doruntine, and what I managed to glean from her, in her distress, may be summarised more or less as follows:

One night, not long ago (she does not recall the exact date), in the small city in central Europe where she had been living with her husband since her marriage, she was told that an unidentified traveller was asking for her. On going out, she saw the horseman who had just arrived and who seemed to her to be Kostandin, although the dust of the long journey he had just completed made him almost unrecognisable. But when the traveller, still in the saddle, said that he was indeed Kostandin, and that he had come to take her to her mother as he had promised before her marriage, she was reassured. (Here we must recall the stir caused at the time by Doruntine's engagement to a man from a land so far away, the opposition of the other brothers, and

especially the mother, who did not want to send her daughter so far off, Kostandin's insistence that the marriage take place, and finally his solemn promise, his besa, that he would bring her back himself whenever their mother yearned for her daughter's company.)

Doruntine told me that her brother's behaviour seemed rather strange, since he did not get off his horse and refused to go into the house. He insisted on taking her away as soon as possible, and when she asked him why she had to leave in such haste – for if the occasion was one of joy, she would don a fine dress, and if it was one of sorrow, she would wear mourning clothes – he said, with no further explanation, "Come as you are." His behaviour was scarcely natural; moreover, it was contrary to all the rules of courtesy. But since she had been consumed with yearning for her family for these three years ("I lived in the most awful solitude," she says), she did not hesitate, wrote a note to her husband, and allowed her brother to lift her up behind him.

She also told me that it had been a long journey, though she was unable to say exactly how long. She says that all she remembers is an endless night, with myriad stars streaming across the sky, but this vision may have been suggested by an endless ride broken by longer or shorter intervals of sleep. It is interesting to note that she does not recall having travelled by day. She may have formed this impression either because she dozed or slept in

the saddle all day, so that she no longer remembers the daylight at all, or because she and her escort retired at dawn and went to sleep, awaiting nightfall to continue their journey. Were this to prove correct, it would suggest that the rider wished to travel only by night. In Doruntine's mind, exhausted as she was (not to mention her emotional state), the ten or fifteen nights of the trip (for that is generally how long it takes to travel here from Bohemia) may have blended into a single long – indeed endless – nocturnal ride.

On the way, pressed against the horseman as she was, she noticed quite unmistakably that his hair was not just dusty, but covered with mud that was barely dry, and that his body smelled of sodden earth. Two or three times she questioned him about it. He answered that he had been caught in the rain several times on his way there and that the dust on his body and in his hair, thus moistened, had turned to clots of mud.

When, towards midnight on 11 October, Doruntine and the unknown man (for let us so designate the man the young woman took to be her brother) finally approached the residence of the Lady Mother, he reined in his horse and told his companion to dismount and go to the house, for he had something to do at the church. Without waiting for an answer, he rode towards the church and the cemetery, while she ran to the house and knocked at the door. The old woman asked who was there, and then the few words exchanged

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between mother and daughter – the latter having said that it was she and that she had come with Kostandin, the former replying that Kostandin was three years dead – gave to both the shock that felled them.

This affair, which one is bound to admit is most puzzling, may be explained in one of two ways: either someone, for some reason, deceived Doruntine, posing as her brother with the express purpose of bringing her back, or Doruntine herself, for some unknown reason, has not told the truth and has concealed the manner of her return or the identity of the person who brought her back.

I thought it necessary to make a relatively detailed report about these events because they concern one of the noblest families in the principality and because they are of a kind that might seriously trouble people's minds.

Captain Stres

After initialling his report, Stres sat staring absently at his slanted handwriting. Two or three times he picked up his pen and was tempted to lean over the sheets of paper to amend, recast, or perhaps correct some passage, but each time he was about to put pen to paper his hand froze, and in the end he left his text unaltered.

He got up slowly, put the letter into an envelope, sealed it, and called for a messenger. When the man had gone, Stres stood for a long moment looking out the window, feeling his headache worsen. A crowd of theories jostled one another to enter his head as if through a narrow

door. He rubbed his forehead as though to stem the flood. Why would an unknown traveller have done it? And if it was not some impostor, the question was even more delicate: What was Doruntine hiding? He paced back and forth in his office; as he came near the window he could see the messenger's back, shrinking steadily as he threaded his way through the bare poplars. And what if neither of these suppositions was correct, he suddenly said to himself. What if something else had happened, something the mind cannot easily comprehend? Who knows what lies hidden inside us all?

He carried on staring at the windowpane. That rectangle of glass which, at any other time, would have struck him as the most ordinary and innocent thing in the world now suddenly seemed fraught with mystery. It stood in the very midpoint of life, simultaneously separating and connecting the world. "Strange," he mumbled to himself.

Stres managed to snap out of his daydream, turned his back on the window, called his deputy and strode down the stairs.

"Let's go to the church," he said to his deputy when he heard the man's footsteps, then his panting, at his back. "Let's have a look at Kostandin's grave."

"Good idea. When all is said and done, the story only makes sense if someone came back from the grave."

"I wasn't considering anything so ludicrous. I have something else in mind."

His stride lengthened as he said to himself, why am I taking this business so much to heart? After all, there had been no murder, no serious crime, nor indeed any

offence of the kind he was expected to investigate in his capacity as regional captain. A few moments ago, as he was drafting his report, this thought had come to him several times: Am I not being too hasty in troubling the prince's chancellery about a matter of no importance? But some inner voice told him he wasn't. That same voice told him that something shocking had occurred, something that went beyond mere murder or any other crime, something that made assassination and similar heinous acts seem mere trifles.

The little church, with its freshly repaired bell tower, was now very near, but Stres suddenly veered off and went straight into the cemetery, not through the iron grille, but through an inconspicuous wooden gate. He hadn't been in the cemetery for a long time, and he had trouble getting his bearings.

"This way," said his deputy as he strode along. "The graves of the Vranaj sons must be over here."

Stres fell in step beside him. The ground was soft in places. Small, soot-blackened icons streaked with candle wax added to the serene and melancholy atmosphere. Some of the graves were covered with moss. Stres stooped to right an overturned cross, but it was heavy and he had to leave it. He walked on. He saw his deputy beckon in the distance: he had found them at last.

Stres walked over. The graves, neatly aligned and covered with slabs of black stone, were identical, made in a shape that suggested a cross as well as a sword, or a man standing with his arms stretched out. At the head of each grave was a small niche for an icon and candles. Beneath it the dead man's name was carved.

"There's his grave," said the deputy, his voice hushed. Stres looked up and saw that the man had gone pale.

"What's the matter?"

His deputy pointed at the grave.

"Take a good look," he said. "The stones have been moved."

"What?" Stres leaned forward to see what his aide was pointing to. For a long moment he examined the spot carefully, then stood up straight. "Yes, it's true. There's been some disturbance here."

"Just as I told you," said the deputy, his satisfaction in seeing that his chief shared his view mixed with a new surge of fear.

"But that doesn't mean much," Stres remarked.

His deputy turned and looked at him with surprise. His eyes seemed to say, sure, a commander must preserve his dignity in all circumstances, but there comes a time when one must forget about rank, office and such formalities. A battered sun strove to break through the clouds. They looked up, in some astonishment, but neither uttered the words each might have expected to hear in such circumstances.

"No, it doesn't mean anything," Stres said. "For one thing, the slabs could have subsided by themselves, as happens eventually in most graves. Moreover, even if someone did move them, it might well have been an unknown traveller who moved the gravestones before perpetrating his hoax to make it look like the dead man had risen from his grave."

The deputy listened open-mouthed. He was about to

say something, perhaps to raise some objection, but Stres carried on talking.

"In fact, it is more likely that he did it after leaving Doruntine near the house. It's possible he came here then and moved the gravestones before he went off."

Stres, who now seemed weary, let his gaze wander over the field that stretched before him, as if seeking the direction in which the unknown traveller had ridden off. From where they stood they could see the two-storey Vranaj house, part of the village, and the highway, which disappeared into the horizon. It was here on this ground, between the church and that house of sorrow, that the mysterious event of the night of 11 October had occurred. *Go on ahead. I have something to do at the church . . .*

"That's how it must have happened," Stres said. "Unless she's lying."

"Unless *she* is lying?" his deputy parroted. "And who, sir, might *she* be?"

Stres didn't answer. The sun at their back, though still a little hazy, now drew their shadows on the ground.

"She . . . Well, Doruntine herself, or else her mother. Or anybody: you, me . . . What's so mysterious about that?" Stres exclaimed.

His deputy shrugged. Little by little the colour had returned to his cheeks.

"I will find that man," Stres said suddenly, raising his voice. The words came harshly through his teeth, with a menacing ring, and his deputy, who had known Stres for years, felt that the passion his chief brought to the search for the unknown man went well beyond the duties of his office. As they walked away, the deputy allowed himself

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to glance now and again at his boss's shadow. It revealed more of Stres's disquiet than the man himself. It even seemed to him that one of the two halves of Stres's twin characters was standing beside the other, to help him solve the mystery.

CHAPTER TWO

Stres issued an order that reached all the inns and some of the relays along the roads and waterways before the day was out. In it he asked that he be informed if anyone had seen a man and woman riding the same horse or two separate mounts, or travelling together by some other means, before midnight on 11 October. If so, he wanted to be informed which roads they had taken, whether they had stayed at an inn, whether they had ordered a meal for themselves or fodder for their horse or horses, and, if possible, what their relationship seemed to be. Finally, he also wanted to know whether anyone had seen a woman travelling alone.

“They can’t escape us now,” Stres said to his deputy when the chief courier reported that the circular containing the order had been sent to even the most remote outposts. “A man and a woman riding on the same horse. Now that was a sight you wouldn’t forget, would you? For that matter, seeing them on two horses ought to have had more or less the same effect.”

"That's right," his deputy said.

Stres stood up and began pacing back and forth between his desk and the window.

"We should certainly find some sign of them, unless they sailed in on a cloud."

His deputy looked up.

"But that's exactly what this whole affair seems to amount to: a journey in the clouds!"

"You still believe that?" Stres asked with a smile.

"That's what everyone believes," his aide replied.

"Other people can believe what they like, but we can't."

A gust of wind suddenly rattled the windows, and a few drops of rain splattered against them.

"Mid-autumn," Stres said thoughtfully. "I have always noticed that the strangest things always seem to happen in autumn."

The room grew silent. Stres propped his forehead with his right hand and stood for a moment watching the drizzling rain. But of course he could not stay like that for long. In the emptiness of his mind, a pressing question emerged and persisted: Who could that unknown horseman have been? Within a few minutes, dozens of possibilities crossed his mind. Clearly, the man was aware, if not of every detail, at least of the depth of the tragedy that had befallen the Vranaj family. He knew of the death of the brothers, and of Kostandin's *besa*. And he knew the way from that central European region to Albania. But why? Stres almost shouted. Why had he done it? Had he hoped for some reward? Stres opened his mouth wide, feeling that the movement would banish his weariness.

The notion that the motive had been some expected reward seemed crude, but not wholly out of the question. Everyone knew that, after the death of her sons, the Lady Mother had sent three letters to her daughter, one after the other, imploring her to come to her. Two of the messengers had turned back, claiming that it had been impossible to carry out their mission: the distance was too great, and the road passed through warring lands. In keeping with their agreement with her, they refunded the old woman half the stipulated fee. The third messenger had simply disappeared. Either he was dead or he had reached Doruntine but she had not believed him. More than two years had passed since then, and the possibility that he had brought her back so long after he set out was more than remote. Perhaps the mysterious traveller meant to extort some reward from Doruntine but had been unable to pass himself off to her as Kostandin. No, Stres thought, the reward theory doesn't stand up. But then why had the unknown man gone to Doruntine in the first place? Was it just a commonplace deception, an attempt to kidnap her and sell her into slavery in some godforsaken land? But that made no sense either, for he had in fact brought her back home. The idea that he had set out with the intention of kidnapping her and had changed his mind en route seemed highly implausible to Stres, who understood the psychology of highwaymen. Unless it was a family feud, some vendetta against her house or her husband's? But that seemed unlikely as well. Doruntine's family had been so cruelly stricken by fate that human violence could add nothing to its distress. Nevertheless, a careful consultation of the noble family's archives – the wills, acts

of succession, old court cases – would be wise. Perhaps something could be found that would shed some light on these events. But what if it was only the trick of an adventurer who simply felt like galloping across the plains of Europe with a young woman of twenty-three in the saddle? Stres breathed a deep sigh. His mind's eye wandered back to the vast expanse he had seen on the one occasion he had crossed it, when his horse's hooves, as they pounded through puddles, had shattered the image of the sky, the clouds and the church steeples reflected in them, and the trampling of such things in the mud had struck him as so destructive, so apocalyptic that he had gone as far as to cry out to the Lord for forgiveness. A thousand and one thoughts tumbled through his mind, but he kept returning to the same basic question: Who was the night rider? Doruntine claimed she hadn't seen him clearly at first; she thought he was Kostandin, but he was covered with dust and almost unrecognisable. He had never dismounted, had declined to meet anyone from his brother-in-law's family (though they knew each other, for they had met at the wedding) and had wanted to travel only by night. So he was determined to keep himself hidden. Stres had forgotten to ask Doruntine whether she had ever caught a glimpse of the man's face. It was essential that he ask her that question. In any event, it could not reasonably be doubted that the traveller had been careful to conceal his identity. It was insane to imagine that it could really have been Kostandin, although that was by no means the only issue at stake here. Obviously he wasn't Kostandin, but by this time Stres was even beginning to doubt that the girl was Doruntine.

He pushed the table away violently, stood up and left in haste, striding across the field. The rain had stopped. Here and there the weeping trees were shaking off the last shining drops. Stres walked with his head down. He reached the door of the Vranaj house in less time than he thought possible, strode through the long corridor where he found even more women attending the afflicted mother and daughter, and entered the room where they both languished. From the door he saw Doruntine's pale face and her staring eyes, now with blue-black crescents beneath them. How could he have doubted it? Of course it was her, with that look and those same features that her distant marriage hadn't altered, except perhaps to sprinkle them with the dust of foreignness.

"How do you feel?" he asked softly as he sat down beside her, already regretting the doubts he had harboured.

Doruntine's eyes were riveted on him. There was something unbearable about that ice-cold stare into the abyss, and Stres was the first to look away.

"I'm sorry to have to ask you this question," he said, "but it's very important. Please understand me, Doruntine, it's important for you, for your mother, for all of us. I want to ask you whether you ever saw the face of the man who brought you back."

Doruntine carried on staring at him.

"No," she finally answered, in a tiny voice.

Stres sensed a sudden rift in the delicate relations between them. He had a mad desire to seize her by the shoulders and shout, "Why aren't you telling me the truth?"

How could you have travelled for days and nights with a man you believed was your brother without ever looking at his face? Didn't you want to see him again? To kiss him?"

"How can that be?" he asked instead.

"When he said that he was Kostandin and that he had come to get me I was so confused that a terrible dread seized me."

"You thought something bad had happened?"

"Of course. The worst thing. Death."

"First that your mother was dead, then that it was one of your brothers?"

"Yes, each of them in turn, including Kostandin."

"Is that why you asked him why he had mud in his hair and smelled of sodden earth?"

"Yes, of course."

Poor woman, thought Stres. He imagined the horror she must have felt if she thought, even for an instant, that she was riding with a dead man. For it seemed she must have spent a good part of the journey haunted by just that fear.

"There were times," she went on, "when I drove the idea from my mind. I told myself that it really was my brother, and that he was alive. But . . ."

She stopped.

"But . . ." Stres repeated. "What were you going to say?"

"Something stopped me from kissing him," she said, almost inaudibly. "I don't know what."

Stres stared at the curve of her eyelashes, which fell now to the ridge of her cheekbones.

THE GHOST RIDER

"I wanted so much to take him in my arms, yet I never had the courage, not even once."

"Not even once," Stres repeated.

"I feel such terrible remorse about that, especially now that I know he is no longer of this world."

Her voice was more animated now, her breathing more rapid.

"If only I could make that journey again," she sighed, "if only I could see him just once more!"

She was absolutely convinced that she had travelled in the company of her dead brother. Stres wondered whether he ought to let her believe that or tell her his own suspicions.

"So, you never saw his face," he said. "Not even when you parted and he said, 'Go on ahead, I have something to do at the church?'"

"No, not even then," she said. "It was very dark and I couldn't see a thing. And throughout the journey I was always behind him."

"But didn't you ever stop? Didn't you stop to rest anywhere?"

She shook her head.

"I don't remember."

Stres waited until she was once again looking him straight in the eyes.

"But didn't you wonder if he was hiding something from you?" Stres asked. "He didn't want to set foot on the ground, even when he came to get you; he never so much as turned his head during the whole journey; and judging by what you've told me, he wanted to travel only by night. Wasn't he hiding something?"

"It did occur to me," she replied. "But since he was dead, it was only natural for him to hide his face from me."

"Or maybe it wasn't Kostandin," he said suddenly.

Doruntine looked at him a long while.

"It amounts to the same thing," she said calmly.

"What do you mean, the same thing?"

"If he was not alive, then it's as if it wasn't him."

"That's not what I meant. Did it ever occur to you that this man may not have been your brother, alive or dead, but an impostor, a false Kostandin?"

Doruntine gestured no.

"Never," she said.

"Never?" Stres repeated. "Try to remember."

"I might think so now," she said, "but that night I never had any such doubt, not for a moment."

"But now you might?"

As she stared deeply into his eyes once more, he tried to decide just what the main ingredient in her expression was: grief, terror, doubt, or some painful longing. All these were present, but there was more; there was still room for something more, some unknown feeling, or seemingly unknowable, perhaps because it was a combination of all the others.

"Maybe it wasn't him," Stres said again, moving his head closer to hers and looking into her eyes as though into the depths of a well. A wetness of tears rose up.

Stres tried to fathom an image in them. At times he thought that from deep down something like a ghost – the face of the night rider – would come into focus. But his impatient desire to grasp it was bound up with a no less acute feeling of fear.

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"I don't know what to do," she said between sobs.

He let her cry in silence for a while, then took her hand, pressed it gently and, after glancing at her mother in the other bed, where she seemed to be asleep, left noiselessly.

Reports from innkeepers soon began to come in. From long experience Stres was sure that by the end of the week their numbers would double. That would be due not just to greater awareness among innkeepers, but because travellers, knowing they were under surveillance, in spite of themselves, would start behaving in an increasingly suspicious manner.

The reports referred to all manner of comings and goings, from the most mundane, such as those of the *Saturdaners*, the peasants who, unlike others, went to market on Saturdays, to the wobbly gait of the simple-minded, the only ones who could make Stres smile even when he was in a bad mood. Two or three of the reports sounded like descriptions of his own movements on his last trip back home. "On 7 October, in the evening, someone who was hard to make out in the half-light, was riding along on the Count's Road, about a mile from the Franciscan monastery. All that could be seen for sure was that he was holding some heavy burden in his arms, it could have been a person or a cross."

Stres shook his head. On the evening of 7 October, he had indeed crossed the Count's Bridge on horseback, about a mile from the Franciscan monastery. But he hadn't been clutching a living being or a cross. He scratched "No" across the top of each report. No, nowhere had

anyone seen a man and woman riding on the same horse or on two horses, nor a woman travelling alone, either on horseback or in a carriage. Although no reports had yet arrived from the most distant inns, Stres was irritated. He had been sure that he would find some trace of them. Is it possible, he wondered, as he read the reports. Could it be that no human eye had spotted them? Was everyone asleep as they rode through the night? No, impossible, he told himself in an effort to boost his own morale. Tomorrow someone would surely come forward and say that he had seen them. If not tomorrow, then the next day. He was sure he would find some seeing eye.

In the meantime, acting on Stres's orders, his deputy was sifting carefully through the family archives, seeking some thread that might lead to the solution to the puzzle. At the end of his first day's work, his eyes swollen from going through a great pile of documents, he reported to his chief that the task was damnable and that he would have preferred to have been sent out on the road, from inn to inn, seeking the trail of the fugitives rather than torturing himself with those archives. The Vranaj were one of the oldest families in Albania and had kept documents for two hundred, and sometimes three hundred, years. These were written in a variety of languages and alphabets, from Latin to Albanian, in characters ranging from Cyrillic to Gothic. There were old deeds, wills, legal judgments, notes on *the chain of blood*, as they called the family tree, that went back as far as the year 881, citations, decorations. The documents included correspondence about marriages. There were dozens of letters, and Stres's deputy set aside the ones dealing with Doruntine's marriage,

intending to examine them at his leisure. Some of them had been drafted in Gothic characters, apparently in German, and sent to Bohemia. Others, and these seemed to him even more noteworthy, were copies of letters sent by the Lady Mother to her old friend Count Thopia, lord of the neighbouring principality, from whom, it seemed, she requested advice about various family matters. The Count's answers were in the archives too. In two or three letters over which Stres's aide cast a rapid eye, the Lady Mother had in fact confessed to the Count her reservations about Doruntine's marriage to a husband from so far away, soliciting his view on the matter. In one of them – it must have been among the most recent – she complained about her terrible loneliness, the words barely legible (one felt that it had been written in a shaky hand, at an advanced age). The brides of her sons had departed one by one, taking their children with them and leaving her alone in the world. They had promised to come back to visit her, but none had done so, and in some sense she felt she could hardly blame them. What young woman would want to return to a house that was more ruin than home and on which, it was said, the seal of death had been fixed?

Stres listened attentively to his deputy, although the latter had the impression that his chief's attention sometimes wandered.

"And here," Stres finally asked, "what are they saying here?"

The deputy looked at him, puzzled.

"Here," Stres repeated. "Not in the archives, but here among the people, what are they saying about it?"

His deputy raised his arms helplessly.

"Naturally everyone is talking about it."

Stres let a moment pass before adding, "Yes, of course. That goes without saying. It could hardly be otherwise."

He closed his desk drawer, pulled on his cloak and left, bidding his deputy a good night.

His path home took him past the gates and fences of the single-storey houses that had sprung up since the town, not long ago as small and quiet as the surrounding villages, had become the county seat. The porches on which people whiled away the summer evenings were deserted now, and only a few chairs or hammocks had been left outside in the apparent hope of another mild day or two before the rigours of winter set in.

But though the porches were empty, young girls, sometimes in the company of a boy, could be seen whispering at the gates and along the fences. As Stres approached, they stopped their gossiping and watched him pass with curiosity. The events of the night of 11 October had stirred everyone's imagination, girls and young brides most of all. Stres guessed that each one must now be dreaming that someone – brother or distant friend, man or shadow – would some day cross an entire continent for her.

"So," his wife said to him when he got home, "have you finally found out who she came back with?"

Taking off his cloak, Stres glanced covertly at her, wondering whether there was not perhaps a touch of irony in her words. She was tall and fair, and she looked back at him with the hint of a smile, and in a fleeting instant it occurred to Stres that though he was by no

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means insensitive to his wife's charms, he could not imagine her riding behind him, clinging to him in the saddle. Doruntine, on the other hand, seemed to have been born to ride like that, hair streaming in the wind, arms wrapped around her horseman.

"No," he said drily.

"You look tired."

"I am. Where are the children?"

"Upstairs playing. Do you want to eat?"

He nodded yes and lowered himself, exhausted, into a chair covered with a shaggy woollen cloth. In the large fireplace tepid flames licked at two big oak logs but were unable to set them ablaze. Stres sat and watched his wife moving back and forth.

"As if all the other cases were not enough, now you have to search for some vagabond," she said through a clinking of dishes.

She made no direct reference to Doruntine, but somehow her hostility came through.

"Nothing I can do about it," said Stres.

The clatter of dishes got louder.

"Anyway," his wife went on, "why is it so important to find out who that awful girl came home with?" This time the reproach was aimed in part at Stres.

"And what makes her so awful?" he said evenly.

"What, you don't think so? A girl who spends three years wallowing in her own happiness without so much as a thought for her poor mother stricken with the most dreadful grief? You don't think she's an ingrate?"

Stres listened, head down.

"Maybe she didn't know about it."

"Oh, she didn't know? And how did she happen to remember so suddenly three years later?"

Stres shrugged. His wife's hostility to Doruntine was nothing new. She had shown it often enough; once they had even fought about it. It was two days after the wedding, and his wife had said, "How come you're sitting there sulking like that? Are all of you so sorry to see her go?" It was the first time she had ever made such a scene.

"She left her poor mother alone in her distress," she went on, "and then suddenly took it into her head to come back just to rob her of the little bit of life she had left. Poor woman! What a fate!"

"It's true," Stres said. "Such a desert—"

"Such hellish solitude, you mean," she broke in. "To see her daughters-in-law leave one after the other, most of them with small children in their arms, her house suddenly dark as a well. But her daughters-in-law, after all, were only on loan, and though they were wrong to abandon their mother-in-law in her time of trouble, who can cast a stone at them when the first to abandon the poor woman was her only daughter?"

Stres sat looking at the brass candelabra, astonishingly similar to the ones he had seen that memorable morning in the room where Doruntine and her mother lay in their sickbeds. He now realised that everyone, each in his own way, would take some stand in this affair, and that each person's attitude would have everything to do with their station in life, their luck in love or marriage, their looks, the measure of good or ill fortune that had been their lot, the events that had marked the course of their life, and their most secret feelings, those that people sometimes

hide even from themselves. Yes, that would be the echo awakened in everyone by what had happened, and though they would believe they were passing judgement on someone else's tragedy, in reality, they would simply be giving expression to their own.

In the morning a messenger from the prince's chancellery delivered an envelope to Stres. Inside was a note stating that the prince, having been informed of the events of 11 October, ordered that no effort be spared in bringing the affair to light so as to forestall what Stres himself feared, any uneasiness or misapprehension among the people.

The chancellery asked that Stres notify the prince the moment he felt that the matter had been resolved.

Hmm, Stres said to himself after reading the laconic note a second time. The moment he felt that the matter had been resolved. Easy enough to say. I'd like to see you in my shoes.

He had slept badly, and in the morning he again encountered the inexplicable hostility of his wife, who hadn't forgiven him for failing to endorse her judgement of Doruntine with sufficient ardour, though he had been careful not to contradict her. He had noticed that this sort of friction, though it did not lead to explosions, was in fact more pernicious than an open dispute, which was generally followed by reconciliation.

Stres was still holding the letter from the chancellery when his deputy came in to tell him that the cemetery watchman had something to report.

"The cemetery watchman?" Stres said in astonishment,

eying his aide reproachfully. He was tempted to ask, "You're not still trying to convince me that someone has come back from the grave?" but just then, through the half-open door, he saw what appeared to be the watchman in question.

"Bring him in," Stres said coldly.

The watchman entered, bowing deferentially.

"Well?" said Stres looking up at the man, who stood rigid as a post.

The watchman swallowed.

"I am the watchman at the church cemetery, Mister Stres, and I would like to tell you—"

"That the grave has been violated?" Stres interrupted. "I know all about it."

The watchman was taken aback.

"I, I," he stammered, "I meant—"

"If it's about the gravestone being moved, I know all about it," Stres interrupted again, unable to hide his annoyance. "If you have something else to tell me, I'm listening."

Stres expected the watchman to say, "No, I have nothing to add," and had already leaned over his desk again when, to his great surprise, the man spoke.

"I have something else to tell you."

Stres raised his head and looked sternly at him, making it clear that this was neither the time nor the place for jokes.

"So you have something else to tell me?" he said in a sceptical tone. "Well, let's hear it."

The watchman, still disconcerted by the coolness of his reception, watched Stres lift his hands from the papers

spread out on his desk as if to say, "Well, you've taken me away from my work, are you satisfied? Now let's hear your little story."

"We are uneducated people, Mister Stres," the man said timidly. "Maybe I don't know what I'm talking about, please excuse me, but I thought that, well, who knows—"

Suddenly Stres felt sorry for the man and said in a milder tone, "Speak. I'm listening."

What's the matter with me? he wondered. Why do I take out on others the irritation I feel over this business?

"Speak," he said again. "What is it you have to tell me?"

The watchman, somewhat reassured, took a deep breath and began.

"Everyone claims that one of the Lady Mother's sons came back from the grave," he said, staring straight at Stres. "You know more about all that than I do. Some people have even come over to the cemetery to see whether any stones have been moved, but that's another story. What I wanted to say is about something else—"

"Go on," said Stres.

"One Sunday, not last Sunday or the one before, but the one before that, the Lady Mother came to the cemetery, as is her custom, to light candles at the graves of each of her sons."

"Three Sundays ago?" Stres asked.

"Yes, Mister Stres. She lit one candle for each of the other graves, but two for Kostandin's. I was standing very near her at the time, and I heard what she said when she leaned towards the niche in the gravestone."

The watchman paused briefly again, his eyes still fixed on the captain. Three Sundays ago; in other words, Stres thought to himself, not knowing quite why he made the calculation, a little more than two weeks ago.

"I have heard the lamentations of many a mother," the watchman went on, "hers included. But never have I shuddered as I did at the words she spoke that day."

Stres, who had raised his hand to his chin, listened avidly.

"These were not the usual tears and lamentations," the watchman explained. "What she spoke was a curse."

"A curse?"

The watchman took another deep breath, making no attempt to conceal his satisfaction at having finally captured the captain's undivided attention.

"Yes, sir, a curse, and a frightful one."

"Go on," Stres said impatiently. "What kind of curse?"

"It is hard to remember the exact words, I was so shaken, but it went something like this: 'Kostandin, have you forgotten your promise to bring Doruntine back to me whenever I longed for her?' As you probably know, Mister Stres, I mean almost everybody does, Kostandin had given his mother his *besa* to—"

"I know, I know," said Stres. "Go on."

"Well, then she said: 'Now I am left alone in the world, for you have broken your promise. May the earth never receive you!' Those were her words, more or less."

The watchman had been observing Stres's face as he spoke, expecting the captain to be horrified by his terrible tale, but when he'd finished it seemed clear that Stres was

thinking of other things. The watchman's self-assurance vanished.

"I thought I ought to come and tell you, in case it was any use," he said. "I hope I haven't disturbed you."

"No, not at all," Stres hastened to answer. "On the contrary, you did well to come. Thank you very much."

The watchman bowed respectfully and left, still wondering whether or not he had made a mistake in coming to tell his story.

Stres still seemed lost in thought. A moment later, he felt another presence in the room. He looked up and saw his deputy, but quickly dismissed him. How could we have been so stupid? he said to himself. Why in the world didn't we talk to the mother? Though he had gone twice to the house, he had questioned only Doruntine. The mother might well have her own version of events. It was an unpardonable oversight not to have spoken to her.

Stres looked up. His deputy stood before him, waiting.

"We have committed an inexcusable blunder," Stres said.

"About the grave? To tell you the truth, I did think of it, but—"

"What are you babbling about?" Stres interrupted. "It has nothing to do with the grave and all these ghost stories. The moment the watchman told me of the old woman's curse, I said to myself, how can we account for our failure to talk to her? How could we have been such idiots?"

"That's a point," said the deputy guiltily. "You're right." Stres stood up abruptly.

"Let's go," he said. "We must make amends at once."

A moment later they were in the street. His deputy tried to match Stres's long strides.

"It's not only the curse," Stres said. "We have to find out what the mother thinks of the affair. She might be able to shed new light on the mystery."

"You're right," said the deputy, whose words, punctuated by his panting, seemed to float off with the wind and fog. "Something else struck me while I was reading those letters," he went on. "Certain things can be gleaned from them – but I won't be able to explain until later. I'm not quite sure of it yet, and since it's so out of the ordinary—"

"Oh?"

"Yes. Please don't ask me to say more about it just yet. I want to finish going through the correspondence. Then I'll give you my conclusions."

"For the time being, the main thing is to talk to the mother," Stres said.

"Yes, of course."

"Especially in view of the curse the cemetery watchman told us about. I don't think he would have invented that."

"Certainly not. He's an honest, serious man. I know him well."

"Yes, especially because of that curse," Stres repeated. "For if we accept the fact that she uttered that curse, then there is no longer any reason to believe that when Doruntine said, from outside the house, 'Mother, open the door, I've come back with Kostandin' (assuming she really spoke those words), the mother believed what she said. Do you follow me?"

"Yes. Yes I do."

"The trouble is, there's another element here," Stres went on without slowing his pace. "Did the mother rejoice to see that her son had obeyed her and had risen from the grave or was she sorry to have disturbed the dead? Or is it possible that neither of these suppositions is correct, that there was something even darker and more troubling?"

"That's what I think," said the deputy.

"That's what I think too," added Stres. "The fact that the old mother suffered so severe a shock suggests that she had just learned of a terrible tragedy."

"Yes, just so," said the aide. "That tallies with the suspicion I mentioned a moment ago . . ."

"Otherwise there's no explanation for the mother's collapse. Doruntine's is understandable, for now she learns of the death of her nine brothers. The mother's, on the other hand, is harder to understand. Wait a minute, what's going on here?"

Stres stopped short.

"What's going on?" he repeated. "I think I hear shouts—"

They weren't far from the Vranaj residence and they peered at the old house.

"I think I do too," said the aide.

"Oh my God," said Stres, "I hope the old woman's not dead! What a ghastly mistake we've made!"

He set off again, walking faster. He splashed through the puddles and the mud, trampling rotting leaves.

"What madness!" he muttered, "what madness!"

"Maybe it's not her," said the deputy. "It could be Doruntine."

"What?" Stres cried, and his aide realised that the very idea of the young woman's death was unthinkable to his chief.

They covered the remaining distance to the Vranaj house without a word. On both sides of the road tall poplars dismally shook off the last of their leaves. Now they could clearly make out the wailing of women.

"She's dead," said Stres. "No doubt about it."

"Yes, the courtyard is thick with people."

"What's happened?" Stres asked the first person they met.

"At the Vranaj's!" the woman said. "Both are dead, mother and daughter."

"It can't be!"

She shrugged and walked away.

"I can't believe it," Stres muttered again, slowing his pace. His mouth was dry and tasted terribly bitter.

The gates of the house yawned wide. Stres and his deputy found themselves in the courtyard surrounded by a small throng of townspeople milling about aimlessly. Stres asked someone else and got the same answer: both of them were dead. From inside came the wailing of the mourners. Both of them, Stres repeated to himself, stunned.

He felt himself being jostled on all sides. He no longer had the slightest desire to pursue the inquiry further, or even to try to think clearly about it. In truth, the idea that it might be Doruntine who was dead had assailed him several times along the road, but he had rejected it each time. He simply could not believe that both no longer lived. At times, even though the idea horrified him, it was

Doruntine's death that had seemed to him most likely, for in riding with a dead man, which was what she herself believed she had done, she had already moved, to some degree, into the realm of death.

"How did it happen?" he asked no one in particular in that whirlwind of shoulders and voices. "How did they die?"

The answer came from two or three voices at once.

"The daughter died first, then the mother."

"Doruntine died first?"

"Yes, Captain. And for the aged mother, it's plain that there was nothing left but to close the circle of death."

"What a tragedy! What a tragedy!" someone near them said. "All the Vranaj are gone, gone for ever!"

Stres caught sight of his deputy, swept along, like himself, in the crowd. Now the mystery is complete, he thought. Mother and daughter have carried their secret to the grave. He thought of the nine tombs in the churchyard and almost shouted out loud: "You have left me on my own!" They had gone, abandoning him to this horror.

The crowd was in turmoil, diabolically agitated. The captain felt so stressed that he thought his head would burst. He wondered where the greater danger lay – in this swirling crowd or inside himself.

"The Vranaj are no more!" a voice said.

He raised his head to see who had uttered those words, but his eyes, instead of seeking out someone in the small crowd, rose unconsciously to the eaves of the house, as though the voice had come from there. For some moments he did not have the strength to tear his eyes

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away. Blackened and twisted by storms, jutting out from the walls, the beams of the wide porches expressed better than anything else the dark fate of the lineage that had lived under that roof.