

Marta

by *Karina Bezrukova*

Once upon a time, there lived a sister and a brother, Marta and Marko. Their mother died in childbirth. They were brought up by their father, Ivan.

When the children turned fourteen, the village Witch Doctor fell sick. No medicine could help him. People worried, “How can we live without him?”

Marko was the Witch Doctor’s disciple, but he was too young, so he didn’t know yet how to treat diseases or talk to the sky for wise advice.

Harvest time was close. Who will keep good weather? Who will drive away the winds? The villagers were concerned and keenly waited for the Witch Doctor’s recovery.

One summer morning, Marko brought news to his fellow villagers that the Witch Doctor had a vision of being healed with the water from the Abysmal Lake, sprinkled with human blood. He had seen the one who would be sacrificed. With tears in his eyes, Marko said the name of his father—Ivan.

The morning of the sacrifice ritual, Marko begged his father to hide or run from the village, but Ivan would not go. He had faith in his heart. His sacrifice wouldn't be in vain. He would save not only the Witch Doctor but also the whole village. And this would hopefully free him of his guilt for his wife's death.

The night before the sacrifice, Marta couldn't sleep. She was mournful and scared. She decided to walk to the whirlpool at the Abysmal Lake to think.

It was a moonlit night. Marta followed the path to the Abysmal Lake. On approaching it, the girl saw a strange figure of a small person sitting on the edge of the abyss.

"God bless you, mister," Marta said.

The figure spoke without turning around.

"I'm glad you've come. You are brave. Things are looking bad. Your Witch Doctor demands a human sacrifice. And that sacrifice is your father," the voice asserted, rather than asked. "You must know that the Witch Doctor knows that no sacrifice will help him."

The figure stopped speaking and turned to face Marta. The girl looked into its eyes and fell into the abyss. It had no end and was swirling with images, knowledge, words, faces. Marta recognized her mother in one of them. Even though she never met her, she was sure it was her. The face smiled at her and whispered, "Don't be afraid. You can do it. I love you."

Marta didn't know how long it took—a minute or eternity—but when she came to her senses, she saw the short little figure with long tousled hair and a long beard, still sitting in front of her.

"Abysman," it introduced itself. Marta was sure the creature didn't move its lips, but she heard it. Sometimes she noticed she heard people



speak when they were silent. She didn't do it on purpose, but some people were thinking too loud.

Ivan said a final farewell and embraced his son but didn't find his daughter in her bed. He left the house dressed in his best clothes. The whole village was waiting for him outside.

He was looking around, trying to find his daughter in the crowd. But all he could see were his fellow villagers' sad eyes. The Witch Doctor was supported by his assistants. He looked terrible—he had become thin, gaunt and grey.

It was time. Ivan sighed heavily. He climbed onto the rock hanging over the Abysmal Lake. He turned round to address his fellow villagers, wanting to ask for forgiveness for the death of his wife before his own death, but he suddenly realized that he couldn't move.

Meanwhile, the sky above the lake became clouded over. It thundered menacingly. The lightning cut through the sky. Wind arose and started whipping people's faces, tearing their clothes, but they couldn't move either, pinned to the ground by some invisible force. Only the Witch Doctor understood what was going on.

"I hear you! I hear you, Abysman!" roared the Witch Doctor.

As soon as he had said these words, everything calmed down. People were able to move again, and everybody turned towards the Witch Doctor.

"Yes, the truth must be told. I'm dying. No sacrifice will save me. I made a horrible mistake. I fell in love with a woman named Iryna, but she didn't choose me. She chose Ivan. My jealousy overwhelmed me, and it made my heart black and cruel.

"In nine months, scared Ivan came running to me at night. He told me that Iryna was giving birth to the twins and something went horribly wrong, and the midwife could do no more to help Iryna. I ran as fast as

I could, but it was too late. She died in my arms. I had lost the one whom I loved more than anything in the world. I blamed Ivan.

“When it was time for me to choose a disciple, my teacher visited me in my dream and showed Iryna’s daughter. But she resembled her mother so much that every time I saw her, my heart bled.

“I chose Marko. He looked like his father. I enjoyed being a strict and cruel teacher. Marko was a good helper yet had no healing abilities.

“I knew I was dying. But I didn’t want to go alone. I wanted to avenge Iryna’s death. But those who protect us will not let me.”

The Witch Doctor pulled himself together and went towards Ivan. He motioned to Ivan to step off the rock and climbed onto it himself almost effortlessly.

“Oh, dear God!” someone from the crowd sobbed. “What are we going to do? Are we doomed to starvation and death?”

“Hush!” the Witch Doctor hissed. “The sky has already ruled. Marta, come here.”

Marta came out of the trees and approached the crowd. She walked steadily, with confidence and her head held high. The villagers made way for her. Marta stopped, and the Witch Doctor stretched out his hand with the healing staff.

“Take it. There’s no time for ceremony. The one who saw the eyes of the abyss at night is ready to be the next Witch Doctor.”

Marta made a deep bow, took the staff in her hands, pointed to the lake and said:

“The Abysman is waiting.”

The Witch Doctor turned round, spread his arms like wings and flew into the abyss. He was nothing but a dying bird.

Now, it was Marta’s time to soar.