

**Kadir Azlak**

**THE STRANGER GOD**

It has already been four months since I came to this city, full of strange things such as trade hustles, strong horses, rivermen, trade guilds, cobblestone roads, narrow alleys which smell of gingerbread, a great watchtower—similar to nothing I'd seen before—and workers who have dirt in their hands from the hard work they do all day. Those were the first things to strike my eyes. Yet I wouldn't forget the first day I arrived in Torun, as I made my way surrounded by curious eyes towards a man addressing the crowd in the square where Nicolaus Copernicus statue was located. There I met the detective, my beloved friend Piotrek, who had just solved a mystery murder that was bothering the town for almost a week by the time I saw him. He was trying to ease the crowd's panic. A village girl had been found with her neck broken. After chasing the murderer for some time, Piotrek finally caught him eating grass in the field almost a mile away. It was a dark horse and the girl was the owner. I never told Piotrek I was in Torun before and I knew the girl who died in this terrible accident. She was the girl of one of my former workers named Wiktor. He was a good hardworking man just like anyone else in the town and I needed to see him but it took me three days to travel along the Vistula river to reach my destination.

Piotrek looked like any other man except for his eyes: he had the fiery blue eyes of a giant which can see through a man's soul. Later I would learn that he was a good detective and a skilled interrogator, but that was yet to come. He quickly realized that I was an outsider, and he offered to help me to my destination which was written on a small piece of paper I was holding in my hand. I felt a strange connection to that man as I saw him as my equal, as a

gentleman. He knew every stranger who came to the city and those who left it but for the first time he was surprised that one of them wanted to stay in a long abandoned house in the middle of the most problematic neighbourhood. I had the money to restore my old house and start a new business—a tavern which serves the traditional wine of Ephesus. I couldn't make the wine as I lacked the main ingredient, that is, grapes from the mild weather of Ephesus of the west coast of Ottoman Empire, populated by Greeks and Turks but I could definitely sell it thanks to the good trade routes helping my wine come to me. The trade policy for foreigners was excellent and Torun was thriving with wealth because it was a free town allowing many foreign investments. I believe this city was treated differently, which was a huge help. After my success in the wine-selling business, Piotr would call me Bacchus—the Greek God of wine and spiritual ecstasy. Bacchus was a stranger god and he was also known as Dionysos; he would bring his dizzy wisdom upon people of the city he travelled to and punish those who reject his spiritual guidance. I was surprised that a man far away from my home knew such a thing. I guess he had the opportunity to read, a luxury for the times we were in. Piotrek was a successful private detective by the time we met but the city was under Prussian rule and they didn't like him as much as I did for they thought that formal detectives and the town guards were more than enough to keep the peace. That's why they tried to insult him for sticking his nose in their business by deliberately giving him the horse murderer job. It was an official offer which couldn't be rejected by a simple private detective, so he took it and managed his way through it. The town was very relieved after he explained that there was actually no murderer. According to Piotr, the horse was innocent—a beautiful dark horse who loved his owner. The whole situation was merely an accident. 'Horses have innocent eyes, they deserve better after we put them through all this misery, yet they still help us and are kind enough to love their owners after all,' he said once. 'They are messengers of the blowing wind, they have the boots of Hermes. They ordered the hanging of the horse by the neck, you know? They hanged the horse! Can

you believe? I still dream of the day: I take the horse for a final walk through the woods, then they take it from me when we arrive to the court; they find him guilty and take him to the executioner. The executioner puts a rope around his neck and two horses pull the car the rope is bound to. They kill the dark horse, using two more horses—just like humans kill each other, they kill each other. The horse neighs for the last time but he doesn't stop, letting bubbles out of his big mouth, looking down to people underneath the shadows of the comfortable buildings. It took him hours before he stopped moving that day. Most people couldn't bear to watch and left after ten minutes. The story of the murderer horse shadowed the city for days, but you already know that, don't you? Luckily, you arrived the day after it happened, my friend,' he stared depressingly into my face. There it was. The look of the giant, it wasn't questioning this time. His eyes were as sad as sad they can get. Those were the eyes of the dark horse; I saw it through his eyes. 'They hanged the horse to prove that we, humans, are the ultimate law makers but I think there is a bigger force than us and we don't make laws, we just imitate our brutal nature, that is the wildness of our predecessors.' Funny that he brought up such an argument. I was a Turkish businessman and my father often told me stories about our ancestors and how they valued their ancestors who lived before them. Maybe he didn't know about my shamanic roots. In the steppes the most valuable animals were horses and killing them was punishable by death. My ancestors valued their ancestor's souls and the horses' lives at the same time. Why wouldn't people do that here? *It was arrangeable.*

My business was getting better day by day. My best customers were priests and foreign workers along with some locals. Especially Mr. Tang's workers were always in my tavern when they didn't work. I even got a couple of complaints from the greatest Asian tradesman regarding this. He was also the leading guy in construction business. I ignored his teasings because quarrels were never good for business. I'd always call him with his first name which made him often more angry. He told me that it was disrespectful to call

someone like that when you were not a member of their family or a close friend. Zi Xuan would be angry with me anyway, he believed I led his good men to the evil of the Drunk God, making them unproductive during the day. He had a point, but that was my business after all.

The first time I saw it, I knew that it would be a bad thing for the business... It was just after closing time and I was taking the side alley home. Suddenly, my eyes caught a glimmering light in the distance. There was a shady figure at the end of the alley. The closer I got, the clearer it became. It was the priest of the Church of the Holy Spirit, sitting cross-legged on the ground surrounded by candles which were lined in a circular fashion. His head in his palms, he faced the bonfire and watched the night through its sparks. His tongue was missing, a lot of blood spilling from his mouth on the ground and from his neck on his robe, leaving red wine-colored blood stains. There was so much blood on the floor that it would dry the veins of Ephesus and I couldn't fail to notice that as a wine trader. The bonfire stayed lit until the morning while Piotrek and several officers looked for the priest's tongue all night. I lost a good customer and when the rumour of the murder was spread, my reputation as a businessman suffered a lot. Some customers stopped coming, my prices dropped low, it became hard to sustain deliveries. I decided to consult Piotrek about this matter, he assured me that when he found the murderer my business would be in good shape again. Then he promised he would manage that in the shortest time possible. I offered my best to help him as an eyewitness. Mr. and Mrs. Tang were happy due to the bad incident. Their workers were better at their job without me and this made their profit double over a week. Piotrek followed the suspicion and before he knew it, Zi Xuan was being questioned by both the officer responsible for investigation and Piotr. They decided to let him go because there was not any proof that indicated his involvement in the crime.

It became stranger three days later when people started to complain about seeing the dead priest at night carrying his covered bloody head in one hand and holding a candle in the other. The town went crazy for days because of the

rumours of the ghost priest. They believed that he was a sinner, that he lost his path in the misguiding claws of the devil, that the Lord punished him with half resurrection and he had to find the true path to his grave every night. All this nonsense made it harder to find a credible eyewitness that would validate Piotr's theory on the incident. The killer was using the naivete of the common folk to manipulate the crowd, making the investigation harder and harder. The detective thought that there was a motive behind all of the killer's actions, he just couldn't quite uncover it yet. To him, it meant only one thing: a bloody head meant another murder.

Some lumberjacks informed the watchers at the gate of barracks that they found a body in the woods, missing a head along with genitals, later identified as male. No one was missing in town but there was a place that no one would look if someone who lived there went missing. The place was called 'The Burglar's Den', a wooden house that was built by criminals deep into the woods. Everyone knew that they were there, but no one took action until somehow Piotr managed to persuade one of the officers to arrange a small unit to go on a raid against the criminals. After some time through several interrogations, they told the detective everything, including the information that three members of their community went missing. They identified one of them as the victim, based on what he was wearing at the time he disappeared. Nobody looked for him, they were criminals after all, they thought he had been on a job since then. None of them expected any murder. At least Piotrek got rid of the ghost rumours. There WAS a second murder and the victim was a rapist as far as he (Piotrek) heard from his (victim's) 'colleagues'. No one knew his real name, they called him '*Bestia*'.

Again, a week later, another body was found in front of the church closer to the gingerbread factory where Zi Xuan ran his business. She was well covered by a nun's dress and crucified. Well we thought so until some soldiers realized that her body was not actually there. The victim was a prostitute, everyone knew that, including the deceased priest, but nobody was talking about it. Now

she was just arms, legs and a head sewn to a sack full of lamb's wool on the crucifix and the head was missing eyes. One could easily see the bigger problem, though: how did the murderer carry a crucifix big enough to crash a horse under its weight and put it in front of the church without being noticed by anyone? Piotrek understood the logic of the second act of the murderer. It worked perfectly for this mission. Even if the rumours of the ghost priest were gone, no one dared to walk in the streets after midnight. There were only workers in the area at late night that day, going back home from the exhausting work. They saw nothing unusual and nobody left the workplace before their time. All of this happened near the post office. They took what was left from the body off the crucifix before the crowd started their day. There was only a pool of blood on a Sunday morning.

Everyone was in terror because they knew that someone was punishing the sinners but why kill the priest in the first place? He was the holy guide of the people and no one was sure whether he was a sinner after all. Little did they know that the one who kept silent in the face of a sin would also be responsible for the deed. I had never been a believer and I had always believed in reason and intellect for they would enable us to surpass even the creative power that was meant for God. Here we were witnessing someone finally taking God's place to punish the evil. As I also didn't believe in evil, I thought that people should be kept in line but was this really how it was supposed to be? Killing and terrorizing people to gain advance to a higher moral code might not have been the best way to replace God's mysterious ways. Wouldn't it be just taking the same way as the way of the punished? Maybe it wasn't for me to decide, but sometime later my business was in order again. Every citizen of Torun drifted in a disturbed peaceful sea of illusions. They refused to see who was behind all these murders—the murderer might be their next-door neighbour. Most men wanted to drink and forget about what was happening around them to calm their anxiety.

The next two weeks were so quiet that it almost drove Piotrek into madness. There were no clues. How did the murderer carry the crucifix? How could it be possible to fake that one had no head? Why was the tongue of the priest missing? Where were the eyes of the prostitute? Nothing matched any pattern after all. The first murder was represented as a shamanic soul-connecting ritual through a path to the other side; it had nothing to do with Christianity after all. The second murder was broadly inspired by the Hammurabi code, an eye for an eye. The third one was trying to say that Christ was wrong to forgive those who had sinned. All the murders were intercultural theatre scenes, but they seemed absurd when you tried to find any connection between them. They looked like three different murderers' doings, yet it was clear that one triggered the other. Murderers wouldn't possibly come together and start a cult. Piotrek remembered that eyewitnesses who saw the priest walk at night told him that he looked taller than usual. He was sure that it had to be the first murderer who had taken Bestia's head and walked around, yet there were two more burglars missing. Someone must have informed them before the raid. There was a snitch among the chain of command. He could not trust the officials anymore. A month later Piotrek got a letter from the murderer himself.

He gave him the address to the last murder and demanded that he would come alone—if he did so, the murderer would reveal his identity, meaning his surrender and an end to all. I was with him that night after he got the letter which had been tossed under his door in the morning hours. I knew he wouldn't trust anyone related to the case; he would go there alone. He wanted me to keep silent and stay at his home. I followed him to the Nicolaus Copernicus Statue, he didn't notice but there was only the murder but no murderer. He saw a kid, *Tang's youngest son*, lying in front of the statue, his chest cut open. The heart was missing but one could notice the heart the boy had grabbed. It looked as if it would fly with the slightest loose of his grasp. Piotr was furious when he kneeled in front of the body. It was **his** lack of skill that caused so much loss and his lack of attention. If only he had been more

careful and smarter! It was devastating for him as I could read it from his face. He was alone but there was no sign of the killer, he looked for a clue a bit and then he returned to his former position, silently crying. It was the first time that an innocent person was murdered. The murderer crossed the line... When he was silently crying he felt footsteps behind his back but it was too late for him to react as he raised his head he had already got hit by a wooden club at the back of his neck.

He tried to get up but staggered and fell back to the ground. He didn't know where he was, why we were there. After a stunned period, he looked at me demanding for an answer. He needed an explanation about the boy... 'He was innocent. All your murders have to do with some kind of sin but what did he do? This is evil even for you! You damned monster! Why did you do it? How did you murder others? HOW? I thought of you as my friend and accepted you as my intellectual companion trusted you with all my feelings about the job I do. Explain this thoroughly and then maybe your death will be an easy one depending on what you have to say about all this!' He was struggling to get rid of the ropes, shouting at me while I was slowly pushing a thin pointy blade through his heart, his struggle stopped. There was silence and wine. I gave him no explanation.

I could tell *Piotrek* that I killed the priest because he was supposed to warn people against sins but he stood there when they hanged an animal that *she* was supposed to protect, the beloved Goddess of mine, *Diana*. Who could believe such nonsense that an animal under the mercy of her would do such an act? The priest knew it wasn't her horse that broke *her* neck, he heard it from the prostitute but kept his silence. I took his tongue for he didn't need it. I could tell *him* that I killed the prostitute because she saw what happened but only feared for her body. I hired two criminals to carry her crucifix at night and I silenced them, threatening that they would have a bloody meal in their throats. I took the prostitute's eyes and body for she had no right to carry the burden. And... I could tell *him* that Bestia raped *her* and broke *her* neck and *HE*, the



glorious detective was nothing more than a stupid man to let this slip out of his understanding, occupied by small things such as insults from the officials. I could at least tell *him* that the boy was the only innocent. I killed the boy to punish myself and Piotr for the misdoings we had done, ***for there is no justice.***

I killed *him* without a word, for he could never understand, and he never would.