

# A tale of a young witch's frustration

by Daniela Weber

Once the last piles of snow melted around her hut, the first animals awake from their deep slumber greeted her at the round window on the first floor. Their curious eyes outside the window were as much a part of her daily view as the utensils in her home. The walls, which were dozens of logs stacked on top of each other, were covered in various bundles of flowers and herbs. Jars filled with colourful powder, inks or animal blood lined the shelves and shared the space with books. They lay scattered around the floor and on top of the stove, which took up the entire eastern corner of the house. The stoves' white walls carried the cooking utensils, more herbs, and drawn on spells to protect her home. A ladder led to the second floor where the owner's bed and a single box with clothes was. On the first floor was just a bench and a table with two chairs.

A red squirrel jumped around the table, leaving inky pawprints on the wood and the book she was consumed by. Usually, the witch of the house (or *Vedma*, as they called themselves in this land) would usher the squirrel out. But today, she has welcomed a visitor who was intensely focused on punching ink in her own skin with a needle and only looked up when the squirrel halted in front of her.

"Aren't you lovely?" the young friend of the homeowner exclaimed and showed her hand to the little animal. "See, we both are full of ink now."

"And so is my book," the homeowner said, pulling back her brown hair.

"Zhiva..." Her friend rolled her eyes before her attention returned to the squirrel. Admitting that she lost to the furry guest, she resumed skimming through the ancient-looking book.

*How to ease an angered forest spirit, Spells to cleanse cursed land, Charms for troubled minds.*

"That one would do you some good!" a high-pitched voice declared.

Zhiva's house spirit appeared at the corner of the table. He resembled a pitch-black shadow of a tiny man, and one could barely make out his facial features.

"If your tongue wasn't so disgraceful, my mind would be less troubled," Zhiva answered and found the page she was looking for: *Resurrection of memories at a specific place.*

She knew every word of this chapter by heart and has read it over and over again. But something was amiss, or that's what she told herself. Zhiva was gifted with the art of

controlling memories, but primarily those of others and not her own. She was the first one in hundreds of years and only the second one existing with this gift after all. Had someone from her folk still been alive, no one would have been able to teach Zhiva. But then – would Zhiva still have that burning desire to resurrect her memories at her old home if that was the case?

“You will kill yourself someday if you continue to try it,” the spirit said.

“Then I shall die.”

“You *know* what will happen when the Gods punish you for being ungrateful with your limited powers.”

Zhiva ignored the last sentence. After two years in this house, she grew sick and tired of the same discussion every day. Why would she listen to him? He was simply the soul of an ancestor who has died in this house and has been too afraid to bid this world farewell. “What *will* happen?” her friend asked, the squirrel now sitting on her shoulder. Both looked at Zhiva with dark eyes and their heads tilted to the left side.

“None of your con- “

The house spirit interrupted her: “The gods will take most of her powers, only leaving so little that she could be seen as human. Then she will be exiled from this forest and be cursed with a darkened heart and immortality. Believe me, being bound to a world for eternity sounds great until you must experience it yourself. Or the spell will ruin her own body by straining too much power, leading to her death. The latter would be a greater pleasure.”

The woman widened her eyes in shock. “By the Gods, you’ve lost your mind.”

“You should listen to Verlene,” the spirit said, audibly proud that she sided with him.

“*I’ll put rocks in my dress and drown myself in the sea,*” Zhiva thought while studying the page.

*As the Vedma returns to her chosen place, she carries a piece of memories on the right, heart on the left hand.* Zhiva only owned one dress from her old life and always took one of its buttons with her as a piece of memory. The heart was a complicated matter. In the beginning, she had drawn a heart on her left palm, trying to make it look as realistic as possible. First with black ink, then red ink, then animal blood. After weeks when she had become desperate, a doe had passed away in front of her house. With hysterical tears and her stomach’s contents reaching up to her throat, she had cut the body open and retrieved the heart. Then she had burned the body while praying for the doe’s safe arrival in the afterlife.

*Between each row of lip and teeth, she sticks a folded leaf of a blessed birch. The easiest part, by far. Zhiva had blessed the birch in front of her hut and used its leaves every time.*

*Reaching the point of no return, she shall kneel on the earth.*

The 'point of no return' was in front of her former home. On the tragic day, she had stumbled outside, jerked awake from her afternoon sleep, and saw the whole village burning to the ground. Where her life had turned around, where she realized that nothing would be the same anymore.

*There, she lays her possessions in front of her, keeping the memory fresh in her mind. The small finger of the right hand draws the sign of God Rod. Then, the Vedma must whisper the following words...*

It was a spell written in their ancient language. Maybe Zhiva wasn't articulating the words correctly due to the leaves in her mouth?

"Promise me, please, that you will only try this spell one more time if I help you. If you fail, you will never do it again," her house spirit suddenly spoke. Her eyes slid away from the pages down to the shadow on the table.

"Why would you want to help me suddenly?"

"I have a guess on what you are doing wrong, and I feel your pain about wanting to see your family again," he admitted, and his voice became soft. Sometimes Zhiva forgot that the spirit was an ancestor, and his duty was to watch out for the family members living in this house. "Only one more time, promise me?"

"How sure are you that your guess is correct?" she asked, thinking hard if she should bind herself to him with a promise. Should she break an oath with an ancestor wandering the earth as a spirit, the Gods' punishment would be inevitable.

"The Gods shall put my soul in eternal damnation if I am wrong."

Without hesitation, Zhiva picked up one of the clean needles lying on the table, scratched it across her finger and let three blood drops fall on the spirit's shadow. "If you give me your clue now, I promise you, I will give the spell only one last try."

"Why is everything that has to do with Vedmas so radical, my friend?" Verlene asked the squirrel while she teased it with a nut.

The shadow crept from the table onto Zhiva's body up until his head reached her ear so Verlene wouldn't hear him speak. "It's the first line you're wrong about. The heart stands for something else. Look in front of you."

Zhiva glanced over to Verlene and let out an annoyed groan. Why are so many spells concerning memories overly melodramatic? She ripped out an empty page of the book

and wrote down a note, so Verlene wouldn't know that she was their topic of conversation.

*"Are you suggesting that the heart stands for a person one holds dear?"* she wrote down.

"'Holding dear' isn't enough," he whispered after reading the message.

*"She simply is a friend,"* the second note said.

"Of course she is," the spirit whispered sarcastically.

*"What now? I should hold her hand all the time during the ritual?"* she wrote.

"Probably. My sister – surely I have told you that her gift focused on memories? – always used to say that the sole purpose of memories is to share them with loved ones. I would not be surprised if the ritual only works if a second person accompanies you."

She looked again at Verlene, who now paid attention to her. As if her heart wanted to confirm the spirit's ideas, it started to beat faster. Zhiva swallowed and tried to calm herself. "I need your help, Verlene."

"I will not be an accomplice of your death or fall from grace," she responded.

"This will be my last try, and it will neither kill my grace nor me." She reached her left hand out to Verlene. Zhiva would ask for her help, but she would never admit the importance Verlene has. "Please, put a heart with ink on my palm. Afterwards, accompany me to the ruins and hold me by my hand. I need your support."

Verlene let out a sigh, took Zhiva's hand in hers and before she poked the ink in the palm, she gave her palm a brief kiss. A shiver went down Zhiva's spine while her expression remained expressionless. Her teeth bit down on her bottom lip to divert her from the stinging pain in her palm. After an hour, Verlene was finished and smeared green balm on the hand to close the wounds and ease the pain. Zhiva's forehead was covered in sweat. How could Verlene stay calm when she was punching in the ink in her own skin? The squirrel had left them alone when Verlene's attention wasn't on him anymore.

"Shall we go?" Zhiva asked after the pain eased. She picked up the dress button and put the leaves behind her lips.

"We shall go."

Hand in hand, they went through the forest and soon reached the burned place that once was her home. All the trees, the ground, the wooden houses were black from the fire. No vines were crouching up the ruins. Not a single flower was growing from the dirt. It was nothing but a black stain in the forest.

"You might get an odd feeling when you first enter the black ground," Zhiva warned her. "The curse still lingers here."

As a response, Verlene gently squeezed Zhiva's hand, and together they stepped on the damned land. Raging fury instantly rose in Zhiva's body, but she tried to keep it low with her memories. Zhiva vividly remembered the festivity of the lunar eclipse when she was seventeen. A memory she treasured with her entire heart. They walked among the burned homes and across a grand open space, which once was filled with dances, trades and ceremonies. At the head of the central place stood the burnt ruin of a mighty house – her former home. Her birthplace and childhood home, where her mother and grandmother have treated the ill, taught the young Vedmas of the village and prepared great spells and rituals. Both kneeled in front of the door. Zhiva let the button fall before her knees and pressed her other hand, still holding Verlene's, down on the earth. She felt her pulse in her throat. Then, she drew the God's sign in the black dirt, whispering the spell, felt the tingling in her veins that appeared every time she cast her powers and then – nothing. The tingling was gone, and she was still in the present time.

"Try again," Verlene whispered softly.

So she did. Verlene's voice lifted the fog of rage in her, and now Zhiva not only wished to see her memories for herself but also to show them to Verlene. She wanted to share her happy moments with somebody else for the first time. Again, she drew the sign, said the ancient words, her veins tingling, her skin felt as if it was burning, her head spinning so much that she closed her eyes, a howling wind surrounding her. Suddenly, she heard voices behind them.

" – those old legends are a delight." It was her own.

"Zhiva, you – Oh, the Gods!" exclaimed Verlene. Zhiva, still not believing that she did it, turned around hesitantly and nearly choked when she opened her eyes. The village was there again. In the middle of the central space rose a tall bonfire and logs arranged as seats around it. On the nearest trunk, she saw the back of her younger self, holding a bottle of mead and an arm wrapped around her older sister. She wore a floral wreath made by her aunt on her head. Children were playing catch around them, adults devouring the feast and sharing bottles of ale. She looked up and saw that the lunar eclipse was over. Those were the moments after the grand ritual.

"Ah, yes, what a delight! My little sister, who has her head in the skies, is told by the legends that she will be the greatest of us all!" her sister joked and pinched her arm. "Why,

why couldn't father and mother conceive me later so I would be seventeen on this lunar eclipse!"

"I will gladly share my wisdom and greatness with you, my dear!" Zhiva's younger self replied dramatically before raising the bottle of mead to her lips and gulping it empty.

The real Zhiva, still kneeling at the same place, felt the tears forming in her eyes as the grief rose. Grief for her dead family, her dearest sister, her entire folk that had been slain within minutes. Grief for the feasts they've held, the traditions she could never carry on alone. Grief for her younger self that didn't know that this was one of the last evenings before anger, frustration and the need for revenge would wipe out her happy little self. Grief for the great future she would never have again.

"I am so proud of you," Verlene said and patted Zhiva's shoulder. She was still holding her hand and gently kissed its back. "Thank you for allowing me here with you."

For the upcoming hours, Zhiva and Verlene sat in the dirt and watched Zhiva's memories of the lunar eclipse feast unfold. How Zhiva danced with her father, her younger brother letting the fire's spark dance around him, everybody mumbling songs after a long evening full of mead and yale. Verlene put her head on Zhiva's shoulder and watched the feast with pure glee in her eyes. The Vedma leaned into the fondness she felt for her companion and kissed the top of her head, interweaving their fingers.