

Bara no Konrei

The Vampires' Prelude

Von Flokati

Kapitel 3: Beware

The days that followed were horrible. Even if the village calmed down slowly but surely for a second time, I couldn't. I felt so empty, so uneasy, so alarmed. I jumped inwardly when my name was said or called, I was afraid if someone wished to talk to me. I didn't eat right, I hardly slept. I felt like I had no real protection at all, as if they regarded me as their pray, only waiting for the moment I wouldn't pay attention to jump out of their hidehood and tear me into pieces. Everytime I saw the young master in the streets by chance, he looked at me with sad eyes, then quickly turned his face away. My heart grew heavy every time he looked at me, every time he turned away it was pierced with pain. Feelings, I never had before. And even if I had only a vague idea of what had happened to me, others weren't that oblivious not to realise that I was nothing else but lovesick.

It was a cloudless night, the night following sister Catherine's funeral, when I woke suddenly again, my whole body sweaty and shivering. I had dreamt it again. The man, the red-gleaming eyes ... I was drawn to him spreading my arms for him, but again, before he had reached me, I had woken startled. I lifted my body in an upright position, whipping away the sweat with my blanket. My heart was bumping against my chest so hard it hurt. I swallowed and got up, searching for the basin. With my hand, gulped some water, then used it to cool my forehead. I had to lean on my other arm for support, my legs refused to find their natural strength to carry my body. Why was I so attracted by that man? And why only in the dream? I did not want him to touch me. He wasn't allowed to, no one was. I was a nun, getting touched or even deflowered is like committing an unforgivable crime. It would mean to break the promise I had made in the past to God. I would not allow anyone to interfere.

Thinking of how I could possibly avoid any more dreams about desiring a man with devilish eyes, I got a horrible feeling. The last time I dreamt the dream, Catherine had died. And I had seen her last. I could not move back into bed, I stood there paralyzed. Who was the one I had seen last? And almost immediately, I saw the young master in my inner eye. No, I told myself, you have not seen him last. No point in worrying about him. Yet his picture before my eyes was somewhat like a curtain, hindering me to see clearly the shape of the one I wished good night last. All those thoughts twirled in my mind and I tried to focus so badly, but it didn't work. But even more I refused to give up trying it could rescue and innocent's life ... and for the young master, I didn't even dare to consider it again.

By the time I woke again some hours later, I realised that I had sat down on my bed

again and then fallen asleep once more.

„Mana, what is wrong with you the last few days?“ a sister scolded me. She had apparently been sent to my room to wake me. „You don't eat, you're day-dreaming and now you're sleeping until noon missing prayer and other things!“

I rubbed my eyes and was beyond relief, that I had had brains enough to hide my blond hair under my nightgown just for cases like these. Luckily, she didn't pay attention to me additionally, she was too busy to go on scolding me.

„Great Sister Ann is just as worried, because you miss things. You should've been at-“

„Has anything happend?“ I asked.

„What?“

„Has anything happened?“ I repeated my question.

„No, why?“

I sighed. It didn't mean anything, but I made me breath easier.

„Why? Listen! I'm talking to you!“

„Sister, if I may interrupt?“

Great Sister Ann was standing in the door. She looked sternly to us and the lumb was back in my throath again.

„I would like to have a word with sister Mana alone.“

„Yes, of course.“ she answered, leaving obediently.

Great Sister Ann closed the door, then came to me and sat down on the edge of my bed. She seemed to pity me, all of a sudden, but her voice was as clear and stern as before.

„Mana ... when I told you, you should stay away from the young master, I didn't know what was happening.“

My heart froze. Whatever now came, it couldn't be anything good. I was so scared something could have happend to him, but as long as I didn't know, I tried not to show how worried I was.

„Is he alright?“ I wanted to make sure. The thought of him being dead was breath-taking, silently I already prayed to God he was fine and alive.

Great Sister Ann nodded. „Yes, yes, he is fine.“ Then she looked seriously at me. I was suprised. „He's here to see you.“

My heart had jumped.

„Why does he want to talk to me?“ I asked.

„He didn't say it, but Mana, I have to make sure one thing before I can allow him to see you.“ she looked worried and sternly at the same time. I was rather confused. „Who is it to whom you have made a vow?“

„To God.“ I said, matter-of-factly.

„Mana, I believe you. You are a faithful young woman. But I think your mind is not with God the whole time.“ she said. „I am worried about you, but you have got to make a decent cut, your feelings for the young master will kill you. And I'm not only talking of giving the people a target to aim at, you cannot handle the situation you're in, you barely eat. Your body won't cope with that for a longer time, so promise me you will make clear to him you have chosen to serve God and that you will forget about him.“

She had spoken it all aloud and she was right, but I would not want it to be true. But what else could I have done but promising to her I would forget about the young master and ban him from my heart? Great Sister Ann's worries could not justify the decision I had to make ... was there anything the human heart would ever accept as a rightfully reason if the love it longs for is denied to it?

I swallowed down my inner protest and nodded, gave in to what I would not want.

God knows this is better for me, too, I kept telling myself.

„I know it's hard for you ... but I only want to help you.“ Great Sister Ann said compassionately, then she got up from my bed. „Get dressed, I will send the young master to you, then.“

She left my with that.

I got up, quickly searching for my robe and cornet. I threw my nightgown on my bed and pulled the robe over my head. I fished for my brush to tidy my hair and I was so nervous during the whole process of dressing, I believed it would still take an eternity to finish and hearing footsteps approaching didn't do me any better, either.

The young master knocked.

I threw the cornet away, stuffed my hair under my robe and called to come in. I forced myself to be as settled as I could be, but when I saw him, I wasn't so sure how I could ever do what I had been told. He didn't look well. His skin was paler than ever and he seemed thinner.

„I ... well ...“ the young master began, but broke halfway.

„I thought we had decided not to meet again?“ There I went again. Cruel, cold self-protection.

„I know, I know!“

„Then what business brings you to me?“

„I had the dream again ... I saw that man with you, I saw you dead ...“

„Well you see, I am perfectly fine.“

The young master approached me again. „Mana, I know those dreams are real. Mary had them, and she is dead. I dream it and the next day a sister of yours is dead as well.“

„I know.“

„But you don't believe it.“

„I believe it. I have those dreams as well.“

He stared shockedly at me. „You ... have those dreams, too?! Since when?“

„Since you had them. I had the same dream the same night.“

„Why didn't you tell me?!“

„To what purpose?“

„Mana, I was nearly dying because I was so worried about you!“ he accused me. „When I came here this morning, asking where you'd be and no one could tell me – have you any idea of what I imagined?!“

„So you come running to me everytime you dream it?“ I replied, anger rising.

„I can't believe you could be so cold to this!“

„I have to be.“

„And why? What gives you the right to treat me that way?“

„I am not yours.“

He retreated. „Mana, please ... I know there is something else that makes you act the way you do, what is it?“

„Why should I tell you?“

„Mana, I do want to help you. You cannot do everything on your own. And besides us nobody knows of that mysterious man. I am not going to tell anyone, it would mean sentencing us both. So whatever it is that bothers you, I beg you to trust me.“

„I only trust God.“

„But God won't rescue you!“ he exclaimed. I showed no reaction to it, I just stared. But he could tell he had said something he shouldn't have better said to a nun.

„I ... Mana ... I'm sorry! I didn't mean it that way!“

He walked to me again, laid his arms around my neck and pulled my to his body.

„Honestly ... I'm just so worried ... I did not want to insult you ...please.“ he whispered to me, regretting it honestly.

„I know ...“ I said and amazingly, once again, my voice wasn't sharp anymore, but soft. The young master began rocking slightly and I closed my eyes. It felt so good, so endlessly right. We often had such moments ... fighting, because we both worried too much about the other, ending up in an embrace, expressing ourselves with our bodies that spoke a language our tongues were forbidden to form into words. His hand started slowly caressing my shoulder and soon, I responded by putting my arms around him and I knew for sure, I would never be able and courageous enough to send him away. No matter if being with him meant my death, right in this moment I was willing to pay the price and I had so many burdens in life, why not finding salvation in death, a sweet death of love.

The young master moved his head to look at me and I saw he smiled, I had to smile as well.

„What?“ I asked.

„Your hair ... I see its colour for the first time. A nice brown colour.“

I smiled torturedly. „Thank you ...“

„You're beautiful ...“

His eyes were searching for approval and I didn't even hesitate to offer it. Soon I was caught by a touch so gentle and loving it made me freeze and burn at the same time. His lips caused all this to me, I let him do as he pleased, nusing my own, getting carried away by the very emotion, that reigned over all others.

We didn't care about anything, time, place, the people that might entered my room. I didn't even realise he was toying with my hair, but as long as we kissed, the world around us was shut out. I was so anxious about kissing him, I felt so embarassed, when he had let go of me, smiling and telling me it seemed I wouldn't want to stop until we died of suffocation. The young master knew this was even more special for me than for him, he just pecked my lips again and smiled happily.

„Will you continue to ignore me?“ he asked softly.

I didn't answer, just nuzzled my head to his shoulder and hold him tightly.

„Couldn't ask for more.“ he said, contently, stroking through my hair. „But I guess, I should leave, hm?“

„I know ... just a little.“

I heard him chuckling. It was just so comfortable at his shoulder, in his arms ...

„Your hair is blond, too?“ I heard him say in an astonished voice.

My eyes flashed open and my fingers clenched in his jacket more tightly.

„Is it natural this way?“

„I didn't do anything.“ I answered nervously, trying not to get upset and remembering that the young master probably would believe the truth, because he had seen that man in his dreams as well. I continued explaining myself, just to avoid him getting ideas about how I could make my haircolour change. „My hair has turned blond by itself ... the morning after I had dreamt about that man for the first time ... I don't know how it has happened ...“

The young master didn't say anything to it and I got even more nervous than I was anyway.

„I really did not do anything.“ I insisted and faced him again, a little panic in my eyes.

„I believe you.“

Again, I buried my face in his shoulder. „I don't know how ... I really don't ... what if

someone found out ...? Someone, who doesn't know about that man ...?"

„So it's the the fear of people getting to know about your hair and the dreams that scared you so you quit every contact to humans?"

I nodded to his shoulder. „You know they suspect me ... I cannot explain, they would probably make something up, twisting everything, maybe they say I'm a witch ... God knows I'm innocent, but they don't."

„You told me they wouldn't find proves, so they won't." he tried to comfort me.

„Mana, I would do anything to help you. But I have to go now, I'll meet with you again."

I looked up to him. „You promise?"

„I promise."

And his lips sealed mine, too short to enjoy, but long enough verify their touch and meaning.

„You'll hear from me. Be careful."

„You better be, too. We've become sinners ..."

He let go of me and I mirrored the movement, but he put his hands on my cheeks, focusing me.

„But I love you. And if love was a sin, something about God's teachings must be incredibly wrong."

He drew his hands away gently and left my room with a smile.

Maybe he was right ... but only that this would not turn out to be an ordinary love between man and woman and I didn't even dare to think about it, when the young master would ever want to make love to me. I truly hoped for being a nun, he would never consider it.

Great Sister Ann had from that morning on an constant eye on me and avoided to let me leave the convent or church alone. Maybe she could tell from my regained easiness, that I might had done anything but a decent cut. Some of the other nuns were talking as well. By the time sister Jane, from whom we all knew she had still a great liking for men, had come to my the next day, trying to give me some advice of how I should treat my lucky one, I knew how far the ,news' had already travelled. For me it wasn't funny in the least, even though sister Jane told me I should be happy. I was happy, but the circumstances didn't allow me to enjoy it throughoutly, even less I was allowed to show it openly.

I didn't hear anything from the young master the next day and also not the day after. I was getting nervous again, but I couldn't blame him. I was better guarded by Great Sister Ann than the queen when leaving the palace. She was worried and I thanked her for the care I didn't deserve, considering I had disobeyed her plea and that I secretly wished, I would be allowed to go downtown, hoping I could catch some pieces of talk about the noble family. Just to make sure everything was all right. Naturally, I was too afraid to ask directly. I trusted neither of them, I still felt like pray of the human vultures.

The young master probably also had realised that meeting with me alone was becoming a major problem, for he wasn't allowed to enter the actual convent anymore and I, on the other hand, wasn't allowed to leave it. I was focusing my hopes on the next sunday were I could meet him up in the tower.

What truly came unexpectedly for me then was meeting the lady on saturday noon with her full painting equipment in the church. I saw her looking every now and then to the windows we both liked so much. Great Sister Ann was with me again, but I was

surprised to hear, that she knew about the lady doing a painting of the windows.

„Mylady, I hope you make some good progress?“ she asked, approaching the easel. I followed her with small steps.

„Yes, I have nearly finished, sister.“ she answered, stepping aside to let Great Sister Ann take a look. Then she noticed my presence as well. „Good day, sister Mana. It's nice to see you!“

„It's nice to see you, too.“ I answered.

„You were right about the windows.“ the lady told me with a smile on her lips.

„They're always bathed in a warm light somehow, even if it's grey and cloudy outside.“ I nodded, feeling a little fluttered. She waved, so I came closer to have a look myself at the painting.

„Beautiful.“ I said simply. The lady really had a great talent to use colours and brushes.

„I really hoped you'd like it.“

„I do. It looks like a copy, just on a canvas.“

„How long will it take you to finish?“ Great Sister Ann asked. „Sister Mana and I have come to arrange new ornaments on the altar.“

„Oh, don't worry. It doesn't bother me.“ the lady replied. „I should be the one asking about bothering, since you gave me the permission to do the painting, I still have to thank you.“

„It makes me rather honoured, that you have found interest in our little church, that you even paint it so beautifully.“

„It's a pleasure.“

They kept talking for a while, I just listened to them. Great Sister Ann was truly passionate about raising some more interest in the lady for the church. The building was old and some things needed to be restored, so I guessed she was hoping for some benefits. I had no interest in those formalities and went to the altar to start with what we had come for in the first place. The flowers had all lost their bloom and I went through the backdoor to throw them to the others, that would end up as fodder for animals in winter. Waiting some more seconds to enjoy the silence and the loneliness in the backgarden, I took a deep breath of autumn's cool air and stretched myself. Trees and bushes turned their dresses in colours of red, orange and yellow, as if they were on fire, encircling the whole sacred area. I liked these days of the year best. I drank a bit more from the fascinating sight that nature offered me and walked back in the church.

When I came back, my heart leaped to my throat. The lady was packing her equipment to go home and her son had come to help her with the easel, along with some servant I also recognized as the one who had opened the door on my first visit in the mansion. For a brief moment I thought of going back, but then, they had already seen me. I didn't know how I should behave. It wasn't that I was alone with the young master, now there were three others around and it made me anxious. It didn't take long until Great Sister Ann threw a warning glare at me, I shouldn't do anything I was not supposed to do.

„Sister Mana, please go fetch the flowers from the cellar.“ she ordered me to do. I turned again, having mixed feelings, but at least I knew young master was fine. I lit a candle and opened the door and the musty air filled my nose. Down there were no windows, just dust, cobwebs and the smell of earthly moisture.

I had taken the first steps of the staircase, when someone put his hand from behind on my mouth and I let out a muffled scream. With terrified eyes I stared right ahead, not daring to move again.

„Shhhh!“ I heard the familiar voice. „Mana ...“

The hand on my mouth was withdrawn and I felt a gentle kiss on my cheek.

„You shouldn't have followed me.“ I whispered.

„I know ...“ he said guiltily. „I guess your sister will run after us, once my mother isn't talking to her anymore.“

„You're putting us into trouble.“ I reminded him, as I felt his arms sliding around my waist.

„Not, if I return with you and the flowers in time.“

„Ah. You will?“

„Yes, I will.“ he said, sounding confident and taking my hand that was not holding the candle, leading the way down.

„I need to talk to you, but don't stop doing what you've been told.“

I nodded and headed straight to the only hole in the wall under which a wooden table was, full of colourful, pretty flowers in different vessels.

„I want you to come up to the mansion this evening.“

I nearly dropped the candle and quickly placed it in the table. My heart grew heavy, while I arranged a new bouquet of flowers. „Sir, you know I can't.“

„She forbids you to go outside, I haven't seen you in town the last few days.“

„She is just worried.“

„Yeah, worried about the reputation of the convent, it has nothing to do with you.“

I bit my lips.

„She knows the mayor and the sheriff suspect you, I even hear some people in town phantasizing about you.“ the young master continued. I did cut a thin rope to bind the flowers together. „She will treat you like a prisoner until something happens again, so she can be sure the blame won't be on her and her convent.“

„Why doesn't she expel me right away, if it's just that?“ I asked, starting on the second bouquet.

„Because she's lacking a reason.“

„You could be a reason.“

„Mana, she won't do it. You should have heard her talking to my mother, she wants us to benefit the church with money.“ he focused me with his eyes and I felt a slightly cold shudder running down my spine. „If she expelled you for having a love affair with me, surely she can't ask for money anymore. To avoid both troubles you bring, she makes you do everything with her, so she can control what you do.“

I barely could concentrate or remember which flowers I had already collected and which ones were still missing. What the young master had said seemed all so logical ... and I, sheepish as I was, had thought it all had to do with care. I didn't want to believe it. Great Sister Ann had always stood up for me, why should it all now vanish just like nothing?

„Mana, let me do this.“ he said, pushed me away from the flowers gently and finished the bouquet for me. Right on the clue, I heard Great Sister Ann entering the cellar and descending the stairs. The candle she held did not illuminate her face well enough to recognize the exact expression, but her eyes let me know, she had expected something else than seeing the young master arranging the flowers for me. For that, she did not know what to say, so I raised my voice.

„The young master was so kind to help me.“

„I can see it. That's really nice. But I guess you will have to finish the bouquets, sister Mana.“ she said, then addressed the young master. „Your mother wants to leave, sir. You better go up.“

He pulled on the ropes once again, then handed me the two fresh bouquets. „Well then, goodbye.“

„Goodbye. And thank you for your help.“ I said and saw him winking.

„Goodbye.“ Great Sister Ann said as well and the young master took the candle from the table and went upstairs. Great Sister Ann did wait a little, then told me to go back again and change all remaining flowers in the church. During the whole progress, I kept thinking about what the young master had told me. I couldn't believe it was true. And then, he expected me to visit him. But how should I achieve it, sneaking out of the convent when being watched every second ... with whatever pretext I would come up, I doubted I could persuade her to let me go. On the other hand, I was still battling with myself whether it was a good idea. The young master had just said I should come, but why, he had not mentioned. But he loved me, of course he wished to see me and I wanted to be with him as well. Still I was not obliged to have such thoughts. My conscience, my reason, my responsibility; they all told me I should stay where I was, but the longing of my heart seemed to conquer them easier than I hoped. After a while, I had made my decision. I would try to go and see him, for what reason I had to find out then. Mentally I apologized to Great Sister Ann and to God for being so helplessly in love and thus no good child. I still did not know when and how I would find a chance to escape, but maybe the chance would find me.

The closer the evening came, the more stormy the wind grew and the raindrops beat hardly against the windows. I sat in my room alone looking outside without seeing anything because of the water running down the glass. In this weather I couldn't visit him. I watched my disappointed face in the window glass and the tears on my cheeks were the waters from heaven. Of course no one would expect me to leave in this weather, but I was risking my health with it and if I got a cold, it was too easy to find out where it came from. I tried to sigh my heavy heart away and abandoned the window. Soon it was time for dinner and I joined my sisters in the hall, where we used to eat together in the evening. I heard the rain getting heavier and still thunder and lightning were rulers of the skies above us. I ate my meal silently and only wished to return to my room as soon as I could, for I hated all the chatting around me when being so lost in my thoughts.

It was a sound as if the sky had crushed down on us. And within seconds, the windows were gleaming reddish. After the first shock was overcome, some of the sisters got up to the door to see what had happened. One by one went outside and I did as well. The old oak, the largest tree we had near the convent, had been hit by lightning and was burning from roots to tips. Gazes were fixed at the burning tree, upset people coming out of their houses and under the mask of confusion I didn't think anymore, just took advantage of it. My resolution was made within seconds. Taking some reassuring looks to my left and right to make sure everyone was occupied with the burning tree and not paying attention to me, I hastened to the gate and afterwards launched into a run down the path. Wisely I didn't take the actual street, but took a narrow path at the edge of the woods, that led to the noble family's garden. I reached the entrance panting and my robes were dirty on the hem. I saw some people of the house were outside as well to see what was going on and soon one of them had noticed me and they came running.

„Sister, what happened?“ they called even before they had reached me.

„The oak ... a lightning hit it .. it's burning ... we need help.“

At least I could pretend to have an actual reason why I had come up the mansion. I lifted my head and saw now the young master running to me as well.

„What's wrong?“ he asked, his voice worried, opening the gate.

„A tree caught fire downtown, sir. They need help, we go down there, see what we can do.“ one of the men explained.

„All right.“

They passed me and hurried in the village, heading to where the smoke emerged into the air. I stared after them, honestly praying everyone was still fine and it was just the tree dying.

„Mana, come in, you look terrible.“ the young master said. „I can't let you stay here. Running up here in this weather, you must be crazy.“

I smiled mildly. If it had been him, I knew he would have done the same thing. Together we walked up in the mansion and I was lead in the living room, where I should sit down. It didn't take long until a maid came to me with a blanket and wrapped it around my shivering body. I sank into its warmth and closed my eyes. I was finally where I wanted to be so badly but unrightfully, and I was happy with it. The young master returned soon and he carried a box under his arm. He sat down next to me and put the box aside.

„You're shivering ...“ he whispered quietly, looking in my eyes ever so romantically. I drowned again in his and his lips met mine to warm them. Right here in his arms, caught by the sweetest sin on earth.

„Here, I brought you something.“ he said as the kiss had ended and put the box on my lap. I looked surprised.

„My mother doesn't like it and besides, you need to get out of those.“ he tugged on my soaked robe. Encouraged by his demanding looks, I opened the box to find myself face to face with an amazing red satin dress with beautiful black lace on its hem. Unbelievably, I stood up, letting the box fall on the floor and examining the whole dress and its prettiness.

„I hope you like it.“

„You called me to give me a dress?“ I asked confused, still gazing fascinatedly at the present. The young master laughed.

„No, not only because of the dress. I had to see you again, Mana. But I have told you that already.“

„We're bad children, aren't we?“

„Very bad.“ he chuckled. „Go change. And ...“ - he patted my corset - „Don't use this again in here, they're used to two-coloured hair, look at my own.“

I stared at him disbelievably.

„Don't hide your beauty. Make yourself pretty.“