

## The story of Dawn Poltava

Many centuries ago in the dark depths of the Black Forest, lands occupied by peaceful slavic peoples, a little girl lived with an old woman. The girl called the old woman Baba, and the old woman called the girl Malishka. The old woman and the little girl lived alone in the forest, eating food from their small garden and taking shelter in a cozy little hut. The cozy little hut was built from carefully fitted stones and sheltered with vines so that even in the coldest of winter nights it was kept quite warm by a small fire. And it was disguised into a small hill that was covered over by towering conifers, so that it was nearly impossible to find unless you knew just where to look. Baba and Malishka would have been considered to be very poor, if they had considered it, but they had each other and they were quite happy.

They received very few visitors at their secret hut in the depths of the forest, and there were no paths which led to them. There was one particular visitor who came to them often though. She was a powerful warrior whom they called Vaclava, and she would bring to them fine cloths and beautiful jewelry. And she told them stories of all the places she had gone, and of the battles she had won, and of the christians she had killed. And she brought them news from their leader Anaxeldova. Neither Malishka nor Baba had ever met Anaxeldova, but they knew her to be wise and caring and they helped with her work. When Vaclava left after a few days visit, she would always be carrying away with her certain pouches and containers filled with the medicines they had made.

So even though Baba and Malishka lived deep in the Black Forest, they knew about everything that was happening in the world. They knew about how the christians were invading their land and murdering all of the witches and believers of the Old Ways. They knew about the lies being told, and the secret deals being done, and the diseases being spread by the southerners. And they knew that the christians hated them and would try to murder them too, even though they lived in their secret hut and bothered nobody. Baba and Malishka hated no one, they were believers in the philosophy of continuous improvement and were helpers of Anaxeldova.

As Malishka grew older she became very skilled in the preparations of the medicines which were so helpful for the other pagans. Vaclava told her that the name of Malishka was famous throughout the land, and that she was well known as a great healer even though her age was still tender. Even Baba said that Malishka's skill now surpassed even her own. And as her medicines grew in strength and effectiveness, so did the demand for them. But Vaclava well understood that Malishka and Baba needed time and space to concentrate on their magic, and she never tried to press them hard. Others though, did not understand nor appreciate the hard work and time required for the preparations of effective medicine. These people were called The Greedy Capitalist Pigs, and they searched violently for the secret hut of Baba and Malishka so that they might force them to work harder and make more medicines.

Vaclava moved through the forest silently and left not the slightest trace of her passing, and so it was impossible ever to find out how and where from whence she came or to hence she went. Those who wished to find Baba and Malishka searched

deeper and deeper into the forest, and it was became obnoxiously irritating and really inconvenient trying to avoid them. Alas, it was inevitable that the day would come when they would be overrun by The Greedy Capitalist Pigs.

Now as it happened, Vaclava was not the only person who knew how to find them. Certain other villagers also knew, but rarely did any of the others wish to take the long and perilous trek through the forest to get to the hut of Baba and Malishka. One day Baba's sister arrived at their hut (it wasn't actually quite day yet though, it was just before daybreak). Sister's daughter had just given birth to her first child, and Daughter and Child were both very sick. Sister was afraid they would not live long enough for Vaclava's next visit and so she came herself to get the medicine they needed.

After a long consultation about the nature of the illness, Malishka started to work on the appropriate medicine. Finally the medicine was ready and Sister returned home in the middle of the night. It was an overcast and foggy night, the dew absorbing all noise and masking all movement and so Sister was barely noticed arriving home at early dawn. But in her haste to reach Daughter and Child with the medicine, she took a few shortcuts and wasn't entirely unnoticed. The good news is that Daughter and Child recovered speedily with the help of the medicine; the bad news is that someone back tracked Sister, and came very near to discovering the secret hut of Baba and Malishka.

Now by this time Baba was very old. Contrary to legend, witches do not live forever. She was sitting by the fire one morning when Malishka returned from gathering roots, and Baba said to her: "Malishka means The Woman Who is Surprisingly Smart". Your name did not mean this when your mother gave it to you; you are the one who gave that meaning to the name. It should not be such a surprise that you are smart, but people do not expect a beautiful woman also to be smart; and so they are surprised. You cannot be proud that you are smart, and you cannot be proud that you are beautiful. These things you were born with, and they are not anything that you have earned for yourself. What you should be proud of, and what you have earned, is your great skill at healing, and the wisdom you have learned by listening to the plants, and the knowledge you have gained from watching closely and remembering. This year on Samhain I will leave this world. Vaclava will be here and she knows what to do. Then you will go with her."

And on Samhain it all happened just like Baba said that it would.

They started the fire with the body of Baba on top; and her body vaporized and vanished in the way that is customary for witches. Vaclava cried unconsolably for three days and nights. Malishka cared for her during this time, made soup for her and wiped her face and held her closely.

Just before daylight, Vaclava woke up suddenly and jumped to her feet. "They are coming here right now, we must leave immediately! Her magic is dissipating and they will find us." She grabbed Malishka's hand, swung on her pack, and they ran into the dark forest.

The sun was warm and they were taking a rest near a small brook. "Vaclava, where will we go now?" asked Malishka. Even though she was very familiar with the forest,

Vaclava had taken them on such a circuitous route that she couldn't figure out where they were trying to go.

"Eventually we will go to the mountains of Bohemia. We have friends there, and even though you don't know them, they know about you. But for now we will go around in circles. The magic here will soon blow away now and we will have to rely on good old fashioned woodcraft to loose them. There are one or two really exceptional trackers in that village who can follow us. They will follow us for a while, but they won't be fast enough to catch us. So we will lead them around in circles and confuse the tracks so much that they will eventually lose interest in us."

"What magic? Why would they want to catch us anyway?" Malishka was beginning to think that there were some things which Baba had never told her.

"You knew her only as Baba, and she was to you a mother and a grandmother and a teacher and a friend. But the rest of the world knew her by a name that strikes fear in their very souls. They all wanted to burn her at the stake for decades, but she was too powerful. Her magic was best for bringing death and destruction, and that was always dissappointing to her. She was the kindest and most loving person I ever knew, and so she almost never used her magic in the way that she could have. You are her joy; you have the gift to bring life and healing. You can do what she could not, and so she used her power to keep you safe and to make you stronger. Now I must do that in her stead."

They arrived in Bohemia during yule. An old man was working on a stone fence as they approached a small cottage, and he stopped his work and stared hard at them. "Vaclava!! Do you bring to me my granddaughter?" He rushed to them and took Malishka into his arms sobbing. "Dearest girl, you look just like her, you are my Ralitsa brought home to me."

"Come, you must be hungry after your trip," he said after a while. "Let's go in, I have some soup warming up and it will be ready now." The cottage was small but clean and tidy, and they sat on a bench by the fire and ate soup and black bread.

Yule tide is the time for telling stories. After dark, which comes early in the mountains of Bohemia during the winter, and when the work was finished, Malishka learned about her family. "Your mother was our only child who lived past childhood. Her health and energy were amazing and everyone admired her. All of the young men wanted to marry her, and all of the young women were her friends. She was honest and hard working, but she also loved to dance and to sing. You look exactly like her, and I can see her thoughtfulness in your eyes."

"Ever since she was a little girl, Ralitsa cared for the sheep. If a lamb got sick she could nurse it back to health when nobody else could. If they ever got injured she doctored them up, and they healed so quickly and perfectly it was amazing. As she got older and better at caring for them, they never got sick. They were fatter and healthier than anyone's sheep. I asked her how she kept them in such beautiful health, and she would just laugh and say, 'You just have to pay attention to what they are eating.'"

"Ralitsa paid very close attention to everything. She would not let anyone else shear

the sheep because she said they were careless and hurt the sheep. She always understood what weather was developing and was never surprised. She could tell exactly when each flower would start blooming. She noticed what the birds were doing, I sometimes think that she could talk to them.

"Everybody loved her because she was so gentle and compassionate. Nobody would dream of hurting her. Even the wolves would not bother her or her sheep, I think she charmed them with her singing. She had a beautiful voice and she loved to sing and dance.

"One spring, at the Celebration of Beltane, a young man was there whom nobody knew. He was well dressed and had a lot of money. Many of the young women thought he was handsome, and he danced with all of them. But he was infatuated with Ralitsa and said that he wanted to marry her. Your mother was not interested in him though, and told him to leave her alone. Then one evening she did not come home with the sheep at the normal time. I went out looking, and I found the sheep but I could not find Ralitsa. I knew that she had been stolen by the young man. I am a farmer, I am not a hunter. I tried to follow them and to find them but I never could. Poor Amelia (she was your grandmother) cried for Ralitsa every day and was never happy again. The joy was gone from our lives. I wish my dearest Amelia were still alive to see you now!"

Vaclava then took up the story. "The young man was a petty noble: lazy, irresponsible, and vapid. His father was no better, and though they pretended to be wealthy and important, they squandered their wealth and were despised by everyone. The Old Useless nobleman was pretentious and proud, and he thought that Ralitsa was not good enough for his son. And the Vapid Son was happy enough to abandon your mother and go chase after other women; he had a reputation for assaulting women. But by this time your mother was pregnant with you, and she was left alone and without any family in a foreign land. Not entirely though, the mother of Vapid Rapist Son loved your mother and so she took her son to account over his behaviour.

"There was a violent row, and the spoiled, irresponsible Vapid Rapist Son beat his mother and threatened her. Baba cursed him with a violent curse. And a few days later Vapid Rapist Son died in a horrible, violent event that carried an uncanny resemblance to the curse. Nobody knew then of Baba's power, not even including herself. Baba took your mother into her own house and cared for the two of you as her own children. When the plague swept through the land, your mother proved to be very skilled at caring for and healing the sick; soon people were coming to her for every sort of medicine."

"There was a young woman who lived in the area, and whose entire family had died in the plague. Then she lived alone in the woods, surviving as best she could. This woman was one who had been cared for and healed by your mother, and she fell in love with your mother. Your mother also fell in love with her, and so they married each other in a secret pagan ritual. Soon Baba learned of their marriage and insisted that your mother's wife also move into their house with them. And Baba adopted the woman into their family. That was great, except that Old Useless was bigoted, narrow minded, a bully, and also Baba's husband."

“Old Useless had a coniction when he found out that the two young women were married to each other and were living in his ancestral mansion. He attempted violence against all of them, and again Baba threw a violent curse at her assailant. In this case the effect was immediate. He was thrown from the horse that he was on, and then the horse stomped his head into the mud. It was pretty obvious by now that Baba was a witch.”

“So they all came looking for us, to burn Baba at the stake and to murder us all. We fled north toward the Black Forest, and they chased us all the way. One of them got a lucky shot and struck Ralitsa with an arrow. Alas, we did not have her knowledge and skill for healing, and we could not save her life.” Vaclava grew quiet and tears came to her eyes, she put her face in her hands and sobbed gently.

Malishka put her arms around Vaclava and held her close while she cried. After a few minutes she asked, “then you are my mothers wife? You are the young woman who's family died in the plague?”

“I am Ralista's wife; I will always be. Her death does not change that. I love her more than anything, and I always will.” She paused for a moment, “We couldn't save her life, but I did hunt down and kill every single one of those bastards. Everyone who ever harmed her, or tried to, has been dealt with. Of course Baba had a hand in that as well,” Vaclava grinned.

“So then you are my evil step-mother?” Malishka grinned back at her.

“That's right wench! And you're my evil step-daughter.” Vaclava pulled her close and kissed Malishka lovingly on her forehead.

“After we had you and Baba safely hidden, I came to find Ralista's family, and eventually I did. I told your grandparents everything that had happened. I think Amelia always knew that Ralitsa was lesbian, and when I told her how much we loved each other she understood. I always hoped that I could bring you back here when all the fuss died down. But as the power of Baba's magic grew, and as your own reputation spread, it became ever more dangerous for you to be discovered. Amelia would be so proud to see you and to see how much like Ralitsa you have become.”

“So what do we do now then, Mom?” Malishka asked with a sly smile.

Vaclava looked at her sharply, “Mom? Wow, it's weird to hear you call me that.” She thought a moment, “Um, I have no idea. I'm just the murderous dyke, I don't do the thinking. Baba always figured everything out and I just did what she said. I don't know what to do now.”

Opy had been sitting quietly, and now spoke. “We will go and visit Zora tomorrow. She will be very happy to see you.”

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As they were nearing the small cottage hidden under the brambles, Vaclava suddenly stopped and stared intently at a hedge, her hand moving toward her sword. A figure seemed to materialize out of the hedge and became a woman of indeterminate age, wearing a dress that was at once ragged but also beautiful. She

spoke, "It is Ralitsa come back to life! What a happy day." The strange woman glided toward Malishka with open arms. "I am your Crazy Aunt Zora."

They sat in the grass all day and Crazy Aunt Zora told them stories of old lore and gossip. Even though it was the beginning of winter, the sun was warm, and they were sheltered and comfortable in the small clearing by the cottage. It quickly got chilly though, as the sun fell behind the trees. "But Crazy Aunt Zora, what do we do now?" Vaclava asked.

"You will come and visit me every day, and tell me about all of your adventures. I've heard so much about you, and now I want to hear the stories right straight from you."

"But what about Malishka? Where will she be safe? When everyone finds out who she is they will try to kill her, and now I don't have Baba's magic to help me protect her."

"That is not yet clear. You both will come and visit me every day. Soon it will become clear and then we shall know what we must do. But for now, rest. The winter is for resting, in the spring will be the time for action."

One day Crazy Aunt Zora said, "It is time for you to choose another name. Your name, and your intelligence, and your beauty were all given to you; these are not things that you made for yourself."

The girl answered, "I will be Poltava; I am Poltava. I spent my childhood in the land of Poles, hidden and protected by the Black Forest and its magic. It is there I practiced the art of healing and medicine. My mother was at my side; even though she could not be seen, I could feel her there and she guided my hands. I now understand that I am the Medicine Witch of the Black Forest."

At the May Day festival in the spring there was a handsome young man who took a liking to Poltava. "You are very beautiful and I have decided that I will marry you," he declared. Poltava laughed at him and walked away.

The young man chased her down and grabbed her. "I am the son of a famous Duke in Austria, you cannot laugh at me!" he screamed. "You shall marry me whether you like it or not, and you shall follow my orders." He tried to kiss her while she struggled and tried to push him away.

Suddenly a strong hand grabbed the young man's collar, yanked him back and threw him to the ground. Vaclava stepped between him and Poltava. "Keep your hands off my daughter, you fucker."

Vaclava was a tall and strong woman, she wore her hair in a cute bob and she wore pants. Often she was mistaken to be a man, and people usually expected her to follow men's rules. The punk charged her yelling, "I am the son of an Austrian Duke, you cannot do that to me!"

Vaclava punched him hard in the teeth and again he fell to the ground. "Take your scrawny punk ass back to Austria then, and stay away from my daughter."

"You will die for that!" he screamed as he drew his sword and attacked.

Vaclava thrust her dagger into his heart, and slit his throat with her seax before he even realized she was armed. Punk dropped into a quickly growing pool of blood.

Vaclava glared at him contemptuously and kicked his dying body in the face. "Stupid kid." She spat on him and turned around, to face the growing crowd.

"Go bring the sherriff over her." Vaclava stood over the dead and bloody body and waited for the sherriff.

When he arrived she told him, "This man attempted to rape my daughter and I stopped him. He drew his sword and attacked me so I killed him. What are you going to do?"

The sherriff well knew that the dead man was from Austrian nobility, and also knew that he was an obnoxious jerk who deserved what he got. But there would be big trouble with Austria because of this. The tall strange man had a disconcerting confidence that was vaguely threatening, but at the same time was relaxed. "I will have to investigate, and talk to the witnesses and get their statements. It is not my decision, I will discuss it with the magistrate. Where can I find you?"

"You can't," Vaclava replied flatly. "I will find you. Tomorrow I will come and talk to you." She took Poltava's hand and they walked away. Everyone watched them leave, but nobody dared follow them.

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Crazy Aunt Zora gave them each a cup of hot broth and thought about the story she had just heard. She put a small piece of root in her mouth and chewed on it thoughtfully. "Poltava should go to the land of the Bulgars. There are many followers of Anaxeldova's religion among the Bulgars and they will respect her knowledge. They will be eager to learn from her."

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The sherriff and the magistrate were discussing the situation when Vaclava entered. "Ah, here he is now, the man who killed Punk." Vaclava did not bother to correct his misgendering of her.

The magistrate considered Vaclava nervously; he was not very smart but he did have a politicians talent for squirming out of tight situations. "We find that you have not actually committed a crime here, but since Punk was the son of an Austrian duke it's an Austrian crime. We will notify Austria, and presumably they will want to take you there for a trial. Our information indicates that you are from Poland, and you are here visiting for a short time only. So we will inform the Austrians that you have returned to Poland and that they can find you there. Is there anything you would like to add to this?"

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Poltava and Vaclava arrived in the Rhodope Mountains with a letter from Crazy Aunt Zora for Snejana. When they found her, she read the letter thoughtfully. "I know of the place for you. There is a community who live in seclusion where you will be unnoticed."

So Poltava lived among the other women for a number of years, teaching them her healing skills and also learning from them. Girls who were in danger would come to them for protection, and they all lived and learned and worked together. Their individual names were carefully guarded so that outsiders knew of them only as the

Rhodope Nuns. Many of them moved away when they grew up, and carried their learning with them. Their work and reputation spread through the region. As always, Vaclava came and went regularly, bringing goods from distant places and taking away medicines and potions.

After one such visit Snejana came to see Poltava. "In the last letter brought to me by Vaclava, is a request for the Medicine Witch of the Black Forest. We have a community far to the north suffering from the plague, and they are in need of her healing skills."

And so Poltava travelled to the German low lands. She lived there, caring for the sick and teaching her skills. Poltava was comfortable and happy among the deep forests where most people feared to tread. She felt safe among the giant trees, and she could easily disappear for days while gathering roots and herbs. With the new knowledge she had gained from the Bulgars, her magic grew rapidly. The reputation of the Medicine Witch of the Black Forest was powerful. And since Christians had not yet corrupted the German tribes, she was admired by them. Vaclava came to visit one day and said to her, "we must go visit Opy and Crazy Aunt Zora soon, they miss you very much."

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Poltava lived in Bohemia for the last few years of Opy's life. The neighbors knew her only as the old man's dearest granddaughter, and they never suspected that she was the Medicine Witch of the Black Forest. But she continued her work in secret, with Vaclava always somewhere around. One time Poltava asked Vaclava, "why are you so restless, why don't you stay home with us and relax?"

"My darling girl, I love you so much and will do everything for you. But you are so like your mother I can hardly stand it. Every day I miss Ralitsa terribly and I think of her constantly. I can never be far from you, and yet it breaks my heart to be near you. There are a lot of people who would try to kill you if they find out who you are, and I will never let that happen. I am the wife of Ralitsa, and it is my greatest privilege to keep her daughter safe; you are my daughter also and I love you more than anything on earth. I'm just a murderous dyke and I can't do much, but nobody will harm you, ever."

"But what if you get killed? Lots of people are trying to kill you too."

"You remember that Baba's power was best suited for death and destruction? In time, she learned to channel that in such directions where death and destruction could bring protection. I became such an effective fighter through her magic and guidance. Magic is many things, sometimes it is just knowing more than others around you. Even though Baba knew nothing about fighting, she taught me how to fight well. But she had more than that too, and she did things, casting spells or something, so I will not die as long as you are still alive. I do not understand those things and I don't need to. When I was alone and in danger, she accepted and protected me; I loved her as much as I loved my own mother. She learned to control her power and she taught me to focus my strength. Her power continues to work through me for your protection. For mine also, I guess, but that's irrelevant - I'm just a murderous dyke. I am grateful that she had the wisdom to implement measures which will allow me to protect you forever."

Even though her true work remained unknown by all the neighbors, everyone did make a lot of fuss about her beauty and charm. And all of the typical things

happened: men tried to seduce her; jealous people gossiped; and meddlers tried to set her up with their cousins. Mostly it was all normal; except that every once in a while some unwise person would get unusually forceful, and then that person would get disappeared. By the time that Opy's last days on this earth were finished, the situation in Bohemia had become rather uncomfortable for them. Crazy Aunt Zora recommended that they relocate to Turkey.

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They had been in Turkey for some years and Asya came to see Poltava. "I think my daughter is in love with you, what have you to say about that? Have you used your magic against her, to enchant her for your evil plans?"

"I do not have any magic such to make her fall in love with me. I can say only that I love Defne honestly, though she is much younger than I. She is such a sincere and considerate person. How can I not love her?"

"This is an abomination!! Allah will curse you all! It is sinful for two women to be lovers and you will both go to hell."

"Maybe, but I never met Allah and I don't care anything about that. And if you plan to be in heaven with Allah, then I would much prefer to be in hell with Defne. On the other hand, you might want to care about Vaclava, who is standing behind you right now."

Standing next to Vaclava was Defne, who had listened to the entire conversation. Vaclava commented dryly, "If someone were in a particular hurry to go speak with Allah, I can help with that right now....."

Poltava and Defne were entirely devoted to each other. They were so different: Poltava thoughtful and studious; Defne spontaneous and lively.

In a nondescript valley deep in the mountains of the border region, Defne and Poltava raised their daughter. She was strong, she was fast, she was smart, and she was dangerous. She learned to fight and to shoot and to run from Vaclava. She learned to question, and to listen, and to watch from Poltava. She learned to love, and to speak, and to dance from Defne. One cold morning she sat morosely by the fire, sipping her broth. "Mother" she tossed out indirectly to no one in particular, "I am going to leave now."

"My precious girl," Defne took her into her arms. "I know you have to leave us. I know there are things that you must do which shall never be known. You will leave the protection of Vaclava, and I am terrified for you. I think you will be pressed to do terrible things" ..... she broke down into sobs.

Poltava kissed her sadly, "We have always known this day must come. Your spirit is restless. There are things that you must do, and you have the strength and the wisdom to do them. You will do great things and you will do terrible things. And we shall always be with you, always. Though you will not see us, you will feel us in your hands and your feet and your eyes and your body. As my mothers have always protected me and given me strength, so too we, your mothers, shall always do so for you."

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Seventeen centuries later these events were transcribed onto electronic media from the original text by a true believer and follower of Anaxeldova's teaching.