

Holiday in Strangesylvania

(Excerpt of the draft translation)

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— *Chapter 1* —

The Message with the Bat

Twilight draped over the ancient town of Carpathville, its dim light slowly creeping toward the cemetery gates. Shadows, deep and inky, unfurled across the cobblestone streets, embracing the venerable buildings and seeping into every hidden corner.

The October wind, fierce and biting, howled through the cracks of the ramshackle houses. It swept amber leaves from the gnarled trees, scattering them among the graves and tilting tombstones.

From within the cemetery, amid the whispering rustle of withered flowers, a faint, mournful melody drifted from a distant harmonica. The music, played slowly and mournfully, wove through the air like a pale mist between the gravestones. Viktor, the bored gravedigger, reclined on a cold stone slab next to a weeping angel, his gaze fixed on the mansion across the street as he softly played a melancholic tune.

Heavy steam escaped from Viktor's mouth, but his hardened demeanor and strong build made him barely notice the chill of the graveyard, despite his lean, lanky figure suggesting otherwise.

Viktor's dark shirt, faded trousers, and stretched suspenders showed clear signs of wear. Yet, despite his threadbare attire, he maintained a surprisingly neat appearance. His thick stubble, though speckled with black, was meticulously trimmed and shaped, and his well-worn boots gleamed with a polish that spoke of diligent care.

Viktor continued to play the harmonica, the mournful notes drifting through the chill evening air as his gaze lingered on the house across the cemetery. The tall, gloomy mansion loomed opposite the gates on Sorrowful Street, its ominous presence further heightened by its unfortunate address—number thirteen. This eerie combination of an unsettling address and the mansion's dilapidated appearance perfectly mirrored its inhabitants, the Murkoviches. Even the mere mention of their surname sent shivers down the spines of the locals, who whispered ridiculous rumors about the family with a mix of dread and unease. Fortunately, Sorrowful Street was home to many residents who might be considered “strange” or “eccentric” compared to the rest of the townsfolk. This was largely because the area across from the cemetery was the most affordable and accessible,

given its somber setting. The Murkoviches had been part of Carpathville long before it grew into a small but thriving town, and they had no intention of moving. They had grown accustomed to their unusual neighbors—the tombstones and graves—while the rest of the townspeople could never quite get used to them.

The wind carried a familiar, sweet aroma, hinting that Nasturtia Murkovich had baked her grandson Mark's favorite pie made with wolfberries. Viktor wouldn't have minded a slice of that unique pastry. Mark himself would probably be glad to see him; it had been a while since Viktor last visited them. However, after a brief hesitation, Viktor decided against visiting Mark Murkovich. Mark was engrossed in something important, and Viktor didn't want to disturb him. So, with a final mournful note from his harmonica, Viktor tucked it into his shirt pocket and pulled out a chocolate bar, "Choco-Joker," from the same pocket. Mark had recently gifted him a whole box of these treats.

As Viktor unwrapped the bar and took a bite, he inhaled the lingering spicy aroma of the pie once more. Resolving to visit the Murkoviches the next day, he leaned back against the angel statue and gazed up at the window of their house on the second floor, where Mark's room was. That was where Mark was sitting on his bed, which had an intricately designed headboard shaped like a spiderweb with long-legged spider motifs. The elaborate spiderweb design and the long-legged spiders on the bed might unsettle many, but Mark was anything but ordinary. Bats, scorpions, snakes, and other "creepy" creatures, along with skulls and tombstones, had been a familiar sight for him from an early age, thanks to his grandmother's potions and his grandfather's experiments.

"Crazy, Karloff," Mark said to the raven perched on the headboard. "They should have just told us exactly when we can find out the results."

"Caw," the raven responded understandingly, shifting slightly on its perch.

Mark refreshed the app once more, but there were still no updates. His large, light gray eyes remained fixed intently on the screen, and even the gem-like earrings in his pierced ears seemed to sparkle with anxious anticipation.

The room was cluttered with wrappers from "Choco-Joker" bars, and the boxes of treats were haphazardly stacked on every surface. Mark, like many his age, had a tendency toward untidiness, which was nothing new. Though now that he was in middle school, it was less pronounced. But today, his messiness had reached new heights, and for very good reason!

Mark's long-standing dream of visiting Strangesylvania was tantalizingly close—almost within reach. However, it was still too early to rejoice; as often happens, plans could fall apart at the last moment. All he could do was be patient and wait.

The "Choco-Joker" chocolate bar company had launched an unprecedented promotion called the "Choco-Joker Surprise." The grand prize was a trip to Strangesylvania—an ancient village renowned for its mystical places and inhabitants with supposed paranormal abilities. While few people truly believed in these abilities, the Strangesylvanians were unconcerned. For tourists, the village offered a multitude of themed attractions and souvenir shops, including various fortune-tellers, mediums, clairvoyants, and herbalists.

The rules of the promotion were exceedingly simple: purchase a bar, enter a special code from the wrapper into the official app, and then have a chance to win.

Since childhood, Mark had dreamed of going to Strangesylvania. Upon learning about the promotion, he was determined to seize this chance given by fate. He spent all his modest savings and bought, if not all, then certainly a substantial portion of the 'Choco-Jokers' available in Carpathville.

Now, with every code entered and countless wrappers scattered around the room, he awaited the announcement of the winners.

Mark inhaled the pleasant aroma wafting up from downstairs—Grandma had baked his favorite pie with wolfberries. On any other day, Nasturtia Murkovich would have surely brought him a slice right to his room. But today was a Special Day, and all of Mark's few relatives and close friends knew better than to disturb him until the promotion results were announced.

Truth be told, Mark was growing tired of the chocolate bars. He wasn't much of a sweet tooth and felt quite indifferent towards them. He'd rather have a glass of icy tomato juice, and a warm homemade pie with a hint of tartness would be perfect right now... But he couldn't tear himself away from the app for even a moment. His hopes and stakes were too high.

Mark stroked the small patch of beard under his lower lip and gazed out the window.

Young men can have stubble and even mustaches, but Mark's beard was unusual for his age. In fact, he was the only one in school with a beard. He had initially tried to shave it off, but when it mysteriously grew back the next day, he simply stopped bothering. The black triangle of beard and thick sideburns made him stand out even more, along with his hooked nose, large ears, and lean physique.

Yet, despite his unique appearance, Mark wore a black leather choker with metal studs, a wristband, and an old medallion. The choker and wristband, though stylish and practical, had been part of his look for only a few years. The medallion, however, had been with him for as long as he could remember. Grandma claimed it was his talisman, and Mark had always believed in its protective power.

Holding the warm, yellow medallion in his hand and closing his eyes, he imagined himself traveling to Strangesylvania. While Mark wouldn't describe himself as particularly lucky, he relied on the talisman to bring him happiness and luck. Belief in miracles was strong within him.

At that moment, a semi-transparent figure of a man in an old-fashioned outfit emerged from the wall. The ghost, with a round face, tufts of gray hair, and large bushy mustaches, surveyed the room and gazed downward.

The raven, Karloff, sensing the presence of an unexpected guest, turned around and regarded the ghost calmly. The man gave a questioning nod, as if inquiring about the situation. Karloff slowly shook his head, and the ghost silently faded back into the wall.

Mark opened his eyes just as a noise came from the open window. A moment later, a young man climbed onto the windowsill.

"Hey there," the young man said as he settled comfortably on the ledge. "How's it going?"

With thick chestnut hair and a sturdy build, the young man climbed so effortlessly that it was clear he had done it many times before.

"Great! Glad you came," Mark sighed with relief. "You'll help me distract myself from these endless thoughts. Want a 'Choco-Joker'?"

"Not a chance. I still have two boxes left," Darin grinned.

This was Darin, Mark's best friend. They lived next door and had been inseparable for as long as Mark could remember.

Despite their close friendship, Grandma Nasturtia and Darin's father, the local judge, didn't get along. The reason for their animosity was murky and likely forgotten by both parties. Their feud was long-standing, and whenever they crossed paths, they exchanged spiteful comments that only they understood.

Darin was well aware of the Murkovich house's peculiarities but kept it to himself. After all, the townspeople had already concocted a myriad of legends about house number thirteen on Sorrowful Street and its residents.

"These chocolate bars are kind of strange," Darin said, nudging one of the colorful wrappers scattered on the floor with his sneaker. "I've never heard of them before you mentioned them."

"Just ordinary candy," Mark shrugged. "Quite tasty... And with a rich, long history that's been passed down through generations. That's what the booklet says. I guess they just wanted to remind everyone with this promotion."

"Uh-huh, lucky you."

Mark got up from the bed and handed his smartphone to Darin.

"When the results come out, let me know," he requested. "Feels like the longest evening of the year."

"Yeah, I can imagine," Darin replied, taking the phone. "Did the old folks decide not to disturb you for now?"

"Looks like it. They're probably brainstorming ways to cheer me up... if I need it."

Darin began tapping on the smartphone screen as Mark resettled himself on the bed, tucking his legs beneath him and gently stroking Karloff's jet-black feathers.

"So, why can't you let go of this Strangesylvania obsession?" Darin asked. "Why does it matter so much to you?"

"I don't know," Mark admitted with a shrug. "But I feel drawn to it. Specifically to that place, not any other. It's somewhat inexplicable."

Mark couldn't quite understand why the village in the distant, misty mountains held such a powerful allure. He remembered being fascinated by it since childhood, devouring every piece of information he could find in encyclopedias and travel guides. He searched for programs about Strangesylvania and followed numerous social media pages that shared intriguing facts and photos about the village. Despite the scarcity of information, he pieced together what he could, bit by bit.

At one point, his desire to visit Strangesylvania felt so intense that it was as if he had already been there—though, of course, it was merely a feeling...

Suddenly, Darin straightened up and perched neatly on the windowsill. Mark noticed immediately, and even Karloff, who had been lost in thought, looked attentively toward the window.

"What's up?" Mark asked impatiently.

"A bat just appeared... with a scroll. I'll open it now." Darin continued tapping on the smartphone screen. "Here... here are the results," he said after a moment, his expression a mix of confusion and intrigue. "Just... try to react calmly, okay?"

"Well, what is it? Did I lose?"

Mark's anxiety was palpable; he felt a wave of heat followed by a sudden chill, his body trembling slightly as he teetered between hope and despair.

"Please, don't drag it out," he pleaded, his voice quivering.

"Cawwwrrr," Karloff cawed from his perch, offering a semblance of reassurance.

Darin, eyes wide with astonishment, unfolded the screen and announced, "Mark... You won."

Mark's breath caught in his throat as he stared in disbelief. Had fortune truly smiled upon him?

On the screen of the app, a flurry of confetti burst forth, cascading from the top. At the center of the screen, a black bat fluttered, gripping an unfurled scroll in its claws. The scroll, aged and yellowed, displayed the clear, bold letters:

The winner is:

**Mark Murkovich,
Carpathville.**