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Katarina's Story

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> D.O.M.
> Catherine Reginae Bosnensi
> Stephani Ducis San (c) ti Sabbae Sorori,
> Et genere Helene et Domo Principis
> Stephani natae, Tomae Regis Bosnae
> Uxori. Quantum vixit annorum LIIII
> Et odbormivit Romae Anno Domini
> Et odbormivit Romae Anno Domini MCCCCLXXVIII
> DIE XXV Octobris
> Monumentum ipsius scriptis positum.

This was inscribed upon my tomb, but what you don't know is how I arrived here in the first place, here in a foreign land, left to die. But wait, I shall tell You, my dear Bosnians, for I have done everything for You.

I was born in 1424, so they say – those who remember it well – in Blagaj near the city of Mostar, and I grew up in a palace along with my brothers and sister, my beloved mother Jelena, and my father Duke Stjepan Vukčić-Kosača. Those were hard times for my land, but the real trials on our path were yet to come. I accompanied my father to important gatherings of the elites of that time, for my father was the most influential amongst the nobility in Humska Land, intimate and eternally loyal to the royal house of Kotromanić. People began to adore me in no time with such sincerity that I felt for them as well; not only for those of noble blood: nay, nay, I spent my maiden days with highly diverse company. It was not difficult for me to talk to those wallowing in the deepest poverty, and I taught, wholeheartedly, my dear fellow citizens to sew Mass vestments, so, perhaps, they will remember me for all time. Once, as I was strolling along the town walls, during the evening, absorbing the dark-blue sky above the familiar landscapes, I overheard a conversation not meant for my ears. Two persons were whispering under the northern tower:

"I swear upon God, this opportunity is unique! Our Katarina is now twenty-two, her time has come, and the Duke thinks that the heir Stjepan Tomaš Kotromanić is the best choice", my mother said excitedly. "Indeed, if he is not the best for her, well,

what am I saying… our father has been fostering good relations with the Bosnian nobility his entire life, and the Turkish army is coming, so there is no time to lose. I'm afraid that…", my brother Vladislav continued under his voice, but I made no effort to hear him. I ran, full strength ahead, down the steps, and in an instant, I was in my room, breathing heavily. Crazy thoughts were swarming through my head: they are planning to marry me to a future king, Stjepan Tomaš Kotromanić, well known to me for years now. I, of course, fancied this thought, for I could not dream of a dearer person. However, one specific thought struck me like lightning! A Queen! I shall become the queen of my people, and even though I knew very well of the lead clouds, mentioned by my beloved ones, hovering over our land, I could not prevent my heart from skipping a beat. The happiest beat.

And that's how it was, on that day of May in 1446, after I accepted Roman Catholicism instead of my Bogomil religion, they married me to the Bosnian Kingdom, and inextricably tied Bosnia to Herzegovina, and finally, me to my husband. I could not remember a happier day; oh, yes, it was overshadowed only by the days my children were born, my beloved children: Sigismund, Katarina, and the third child people fail to remember. We could not flee the hard days rushing in upon us. It would have been the easiest to say that the days of our rule were destined to last, but that would have been far from the truth. Constant intrusions of the Turkish army, joined with unrest amongst our people – the commoners as well as nobility – who fought for pieces of land, made our reality a cruel one, indeed! Lo, my dear Bosnians, if you could have only foreseen the years under foreign rule that awaited you, you would have been neither covetous nor foolhardy. In this smoky curtain of turmoil, the enemies used the opportune moment to kill the king. That year, 1461, they wrapped me, Katarina Kosača, in black – yes, me, my husband's second wife, but the first one whom he proclaimed a queen with the blessing of the Holy See.

His eldest son, Stjepan Tomašević, inherited the crown, and gave me the title of the Queen Mother, which kept me on our court. However, in a forceful intrusion of the powerful Turkish army in the 1463rd year of our Lord, the land of our forefathers surrendered. The sorrowful events ripped my heart to pieces. Our defenders, who did not leave Bosnia, nor put down their swords before an evidently stronger army, but instead, gave honourable resistance for their homeland, suffered greatly. How could I desert them? How could I give away a kingdom, not less worthy than any other, attacked innumerable times and risen, like a phoenix, time after time, with the help of its children, to a foreigner? Would those, who will take it by force, and wound it, to bleed before the eyes of other European kingdoms, thus soaked in blood, press it against their chest and brag about its beauties as if it were their own? That we could not allow, neither I, nor any true son or daughter of Bosnia. And then, I suffered the heaviest of all blows: the news came that the King – resisting until his last breath – was killed, and that my helpless children were taken into slavery. At that moment, only one thought kept me alive: someone mighty must come and revenge my children and our conquered people; someone must come to the rescue; the World cannot forget us, it must not forget us!

My loyal courtiers and I immediately retreated to the town of Kupres. I prayed with every rigid and heavy step I made for the help promised from the West, which obviously was not coming. I found the strength to gather a certain number of soldiers

for the defence, and with every bit of faith left in me, and my belief in God, I ordered that a church be made, the Church of the Holy Trinity, as a humble gift to my people. We walked forward, without looking back, knowing that everything sacred to us was being left behind. After Ston, we came to the Republic of Dubrovnik, which defended itself successfully from the same occupier. I will not say much of my short stay amongst their kind gentry, for the people remember that. However, it is worth mentioning that it is with them that I left my husband's sword for my son Sigismund, if he were to release himself from the heavy hand of Turkish slavery. Even they did not manage to keep me under their wing for long, and so they dispatched me with dignity, and all of my court items – as is fit for the members of royal families – to Rome, my final place of hope.

Even there, my hope did not wane; even when I heard they converted my children to a new religion, to almost certainly abandon their mother and their noble roots, forever. Alas, my dear people, what have you done to deserve this? Bosnians always minded their own business, but were watched with desire, as if only we have honourable people, as if only we have rivers and mountains worthy of envy, as if only we have a completely indescribable spirit permeating our beings. And they were not wrong: we do have all of that, indeed! And we will continue having it; that is for certain, just as is the fact that I am telling this story from my bedside in Rome, the eternal city, where I could not find help for Bosnia. And eternal, Bosnia will be, for there is no army or invader that could annihilate the sense of who we are. That they have conquered us was only an illusion.

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