

# La maledizione delle zucche

## The curse of the pumpkins, English translation

### Chapter 1

It was the evening of Halloween, and Fiona's kitchen smelled of pumpkin. Fiona took one last look at the recipe, then took the wooden spoon and stirred again. *It turned out well, thank God!* she thought as she tasted it. Risotto is a Lombard dish, and Fiona wanted to impress her friend with a typical recipe from her home country.

Fiona loved pumpkins. In autumn she bought many of them and cooked them in different ways, as a first course with pasta, rice or as a delicious cream soup, or as a second course, baked in the oven or as balls. Last weekend she had prepared a delicious pumpkin pie which she ate with her parents who had come to visit.

Fiona looked at her watch. It was 7:30 pm. *Emma should be here any moment*, she thought. They had decided to spend a quiet Halloween with a good dinner and a horror movie.

In fact, a few minutes later the doorbell rang and Fiona went to open the door.

«Hi Emma! Come in» Fiona said. Emma and Fiona were neighbors. They lived in the same house in the center of Rome, Fiona on the third floor, Emma on the second. That's why Emma didn't wear no coat and no scarf, even though it was quite cold outside. Fiona's cat, Romeo, who had slept in the bedroom, came to greet her.

«What did you cook?» Emma asked curiously and followed Fiona into the kitchen. Without answering, Fiona proudly pointed to the pot.

«A pumpkin risotto!» Emma said amazed. «Great, I love risotto!»

Fiona smiled contented, stirred one last time and turned off the stove. «I'd say it's ready.»

Emma helped Fiona set the table, then they sat down and ate the risotto along with a good white wine that Fiona had also used to cook.

«Have you ever heard of the Halloween village?» Emma asked after she finished eating.

Fiona looked at her surprised. «No, what is it?»

«I don't know, I saw the flyer this afternoon.»

She took her cell phone and showed her a photo. The flyer advertised the Halloween village and talked about gruesome booths, disgusting food and scary creatures.

Meanwhile, Romeo had jumped on the table and he also looked at the photo. It almost looked like he was reading the flyer as well.

«What do you say if we take a look at it? Sounds interesting» Emma suggested.

«Why not! It's not very far, it will take us 15 minutes by tram» Fiona replied, although she wasn't entirely convinced. She didn't know why but she had a strange feeling.

So Fiona and Emma quickly cleared the table, then Emma went to her apartment to get her coat and her bag. As Fiona got ready to leave, Romeo followed her and meowed loudly. Fiona put some dry food in his bowl and tickled him a bit but he didn't seem interested. He kept staring at Fiona with his big green eyes.

«Don't worry, I'll be back soon» she said, scratching him behind the ears, his favorite spot. Then she left the apartment, went down the stairs and out into the street. Emma was already waiting for her. Fiona turned and looked up. Romeo stared silently at her from the third floor window. For a moment, Fiona thought Romeo had a worried look. *Nonsense*, Fiona thought and shook her head, then followed Emma to the tram stop.

## Chapter 2

Fiona and Emma got on the tram, then left it after about fifteen minutes and walked a bit. Fiona liked Rome in the fall. No suffocating heat like in the summer, and there were even fewer people on the streets. The Colosseum was not far away, and Fiona saw its silhouette rising above the roofs of the buildings. Many shop windows were decorated with Halloween decorations, and pumpkins, skeletons and bats watched the two girls as they walked quickly along the sidewalk. The sun had set long ago and it was already very dark but the streets were well-lit.

They were almost in Piazza San Giovanni in Laterano and Fiona could see some large silhouettes where before there had been only an empty square. At the entrance to the square there was a man dressed as a skeleton who greeted the visitors with an unsettling smile. Fiona and Emma quickly passed him and entered the village.

The square had turned into a small Halloween village with small houses and booths made of dark wood. The paths were lit by many small lanterns in the shape of pumpkins and there was even a bit of fog which gave the place a very spooky atmosphere. Fiona and Emma were really impressed by all these details and by the efforts organizers had made. This Halloween village was really spooky.

The first booth sold sweets that didn't look very appetizing. There were fingers, ears and brains with strange sauces, spiders and insects on big glass plates and eyes that were floating in a big glass.

«Would you like to try one? They are sugared» said the old lady and pointed to a black spider.

A little hesitant Fiona and Emma each tried one. They were slimy and Fiona felt like she was eating a real but sugared spider. With difficulty she swallowed it. The lady started showing her products, probably hoping that Fiona and Emma would buy something. But none of them had any intention of eating another one of those spiders or anything else, so they thanked kindly and left.

There was really everything. A booth sold items to decorate the house, from cobwebs to coffins. The vendor was dressed as a vampire and smiled at Fiona, showing her his long teeth. He was very pale and his eyes were red. Fiona tried not to stare at him too much.

At another booth, strange drinks were sold. A sign said *Drinks and magic potions for every taste*. Behind the counter was a young black-haired witch. She had a scoop in her hand and filled glasses from a big pot. In the pot was a dark green liquid in which something was floating that vaguely reminded of parts of animals. Fiona began to believe that the flyer was not joking when it spoke of *disgusting* food.

Then they walked in front of a small house. In the shop window there were long dresses for witches, for vampires and various other costumes.

«Let's go inside, maybe I'll find a nice costume for next year» said Emma and entered without waiting for an answer. Fiona followed her. At least a clothing store was a normal thing, unlike the other things she had seen before. In fact, it was only at that moment that Fiona realized that the village was intimidating her and she couldn't wait to get out of here.

The boutique was small but a lot of clothes were sold. There were normal clothes, like skirts and t-shirts and also real costumes. Fiona was not interested in buying a costume. She already had some and didn't need any more since she didn't dress up often. When Emma came out of the dressing room Fiona almost jumped back in shock. The werewolf costume she was wearing was terribly realistic. Fiona had the impression that the fur was real.

«If you come to my house with that Romeo will have a heart attack» Fiona commented.

«Cool, isn't it?» Emma said as she admired herself in the mirror.

She kept going back to the dressing room and trying on different costumes. Fiona started to get bored, and it was pretty hot in there, considering she was wearing a wool cap and a heavy jacket.

«I'm just going out for a walk and get some air, okay? I'll be right back» Fiona said at the door of the changing room.

«All right!» called Emma from inside.

Fiona left and took a deep breath. Now she felt better.

## Chapter 3

She stood there for a few minutes watching the people passing by and the other booths. A little house on the corner caught her attention: it was full of pumpkins. *Finally something I like!* Fiona thought happily and went closer. The sign said *The temple of pumpkins*. In fact, it looked more like a small church than a little house. Outside, there were many pumpkins, all with carved faces. Fiona curiously went inside and was impressed by what she saw. There were many small altars decorated with precious golden objects and many candles. In the middle of each altar was a beautiful pumpkin, each one with a different face and made with great skill. It almost seemed to be a holy place.

But as much as she liked them, Fiona was not interested in having a carved one. What was she really going to do with it? After a few days, she would have to throw it away. But she thought it was a good idea to buy one for dinner. Maybe they sold special and especially tasty pumpkins.

«Can I help you?» said a voice. Out of the shadows came a faun. Fiona remained speechless for a moment. The boy had brown, disheveled hair, pointed ears and a naked upper body (wasn't he cold?) but his legs were hairy and ended in hooves.

«I-I'm looking for a pumpkin» Fiona stuttered embarrassed.

«Then you are in the right place» he commented with a beaming smile. «What kind of pumpkin are you looking for? Big or small? Smiling or scary?» he asked and pointed to the different pumpkins.

The more Fiona looked at these pumpkins the more... *alive* they looked.

«I'm looking for a small one, not carved, one to eat. Do you have anything special?»

His friendly look hardened instantly, his smile fading. Fiona swallowed intimidated. *Did I say something wrong?*

Without saying a word, he went into the back room and returned with an uncarved pumpkin.

«Here, take this one» he said and handed her the pumpkin without a smile. Fiona reached for the pumpkin uncomfortably.

«W-well, I... I've changed my mind, I don't want to buy a pumpkin...» Fiona bubbled and tried to give him the pumpkin back but he didn't want to take it.

«Keep it. Take it home» he said, then turned to leave.

«Wait, where are you going? How much do I owe you?»

«Nothing. On the house» he said, and then he disappeared.

Fiona quickly left with the pumpkin and reached the clothing store where Emma was waiting for her.

«I thought you just wanted to get some fresh air!» she said when she saw her. She seemed angry and relieved at the same time. «I was beginning to worry!»

«I'm sorry» Fiona replied. «I saw that little house over there and thought I'd have a look at it.»

Emma smiled at her. «No problem. I see you bought something.»

«Yes, well...» *bought* was not quite right, but she didn't want to talk about this weird encounter. «And you didn't buy a costume?» she asked instead, to change the subject. Emma had no bag in her hand.

«No, in the end I thought I didn't need one. Besides, they were expensive» she said, shaking her head.

«Well, shall we go home? It's late and I'm a little tired» Fiona said. She didn't feel tired but she didn't want to stay in that place for another minute.

It seemed that Emma wanted to visit a few more booths but she agreed, and they went home.

## Chapter 4

Fiona said goodbye to Emma and walked up the stairs to her apartment. When she opened the door, Romeo ran to her and meowed. He seemed very happy to see her. Fiona was also very happy to finally be home again. She went into the kitchen, put the pumpkin on the table and then went into the bathroom.

When she returned to the kitchen, Romeo was sitting on the table staring at the pumpkin. Or rather, he hissed at it.

«Romeo, what's wrong?» Fiona asked, looking at him first and then at the pumpkin. Romeo continued to meow and to put up the fur. Fiona tried to calm him, then carefully approached the pumpkin, picked it up and turned it left and right. It looked like a normal pumpkin. But Romeo did not seem convinced. *Maybe it smelled funny?* Fiona sniffed it but she didn't smell anything special. But she did not have the sense of smell of a cat. *Yes, probably it just has a special smell, that's why Romeo is acting so strange,* Fiona thought, although part of her was not so sure.

She took Romeo and carried him into the living room, then brushed her teeth and put on her pyjamas. But she was not tired so she sat down on the sofa and turned on the TV. Since it was the night of Halloween, there were many horror movies on TV. She picked one at random and started watching while Romeo curled up next to her.

In the movie there were some teenagers who had rented a cabin in the woods. *Nothing original,* Fiona thought. At first they were all happy and enjoying themselves. There was the usual pretty blonde who typically dies first. Then the evening came and strange things started to happen. You could hear noises, the door squeaked. The girl screamed and disappeared. The others were in the house and were completely frightened. Then someone knocked on the door. Everyone held their breath. They heard footsteps, a shadow was approaching the window. The shadow broke the glass and entered the house. It was a huge pumpkin, smiling maliciously.

Now Fiona was also in the house and began to run around in panic. She had to run away, away from that horrible pumpkin, away from this place... She ran out of the house and into the forest. She ran and ran, but suddenly she was surrounded by dozens of booths, all selling pumpkins. But the pumpkins were alive and moving towards her. Fiona tried to escape, but there were too many pumpkins, and soon she was surrounded. She turned around hoping to find a way out but saw nothing but pumpkins. The pumpkins came menacingly closer and closer, getting bigger and bigger, and their eyes were like soulless holes from which Fiona could not look away. *You ate us, now we eat you.* chanted the pumpkins and laughed tauntingly. *You ate us, now we eat you.* And Fiona saw their vicious smiles widen and her black mouths grew bigger and bigger. And the pumpkins laughed. A joyless laughter. The darkness enveloped them, soon they would swallow her...

A light made its way through the darkness, and the laughter stopped. Two soothing eyes, a familiar face, that red hair... *Romeo?* asked Fiona astonished. And at that moment she opened her eyes.

She had fallen asleep on the sofa and was sweating. Romeo stared at her with his green eyes. On the floor in front of the couch lay the pumpkin: it was broken into a thousand pieces. After apparently making sure that Fiona was okay, Romeo began to clean his fur.

She remained motionless for at least five minutes, staring at Romeo who was busy with his personal hygiene, and at the remains of the pumpkin on the carpet, too dazed to think clearly. Then she got up, picked up a garbage bag, picked up the pieces of the pumpkin and threw them into the garbage can in the street while the sun rose and illuminated the streets of Rome.

## Chapter 5

Fiona didn't know what to do, so she started to go for a walk. She took a long walk and tried not to think too much about that strange night. Almost unaware of it, she reached the place where she had been the night before with Emma. Maybe she hoped to find some answers or a logical explanation for what happened.

But the Halloween village wasn't there no more. In the middle of the square were the usual obelisk and some people walking around lost in thought. But not even a shadow of booths, pumpkins or fauns. They left in a hurry, Fiona thought, disappointed.

Finally Fiona returned home and went to Emma. She was having breakfast and offered her coffee. Fiona was silent for a while but then she decided to talk about her strange dream.

«Emma, do you remember the pumpkin from yesterday?» Fiona began.

«The pumpkin? You mean the pumpkin risotto? Delicious» said Emma as she chewed a cookie.

«No, no, not the risotto, I mean the pumpkin I got at the Halloween village.»

Emma looked at her as if she didn't know what she was talking about. «What village?»

«The one in the center where we were last night...»

But Emma still didn't understand.

«I came for dinner last night, and then we watched a movie» Emma said, looking at Fiona like she was going crazy.

«Emma, if this is a joke, it's not funny. Yesterday we *wanted* to watch a movie, but then we left because you saw this flyer...» Fiona started to get angry.

«Look, I don't know what you're talking about. Maybe you just had a bad dream.»

*Yeah. A bad dream.* Fiona finished her coffee and left. *But what really happened? Did I really dream everything?*

Fiona never found out but from that day on, every time she saw a pumpkin, she could hear that evil laugh in her head. From that day on, every pumpkin she saw seemed to follow with its eyes. From that day on, Fiona never ate another pumpkin.