

TALE OF TALES

A Shadow in the Dark

by

Nenad Gajić

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A pitch (spoiler alert!)

An ordinary young girl is suddenly blinded and hounded by otherworldly forces, unaware that she is the lone host of an ancient spirit dragon, the greatest hope of the world beset by an even more primal beast.

A blurb for the back of the cover:

BASED ON THE MOTIFS OF FORGOTTEN FAIRYTALES AND EPIC POEMS

The unforgettable journey of an unlikely band of characters brought together by a series of seemingly accidental events; a wandering warrior, a blind girl, a shepherd chieftain, and a lame thief gradually discover that not everything is what it seems. Why is this simple girl being hunted by powers from beyond this world?

In a quest for survival, this adventurous party voyages through a vivid and magical, yet perilous world of fairies, fierce beasts, vampires, and many other mythical beings, while their every step seems to be masterminded by the baffling will of the ancient gods. Are these fugitives simply marionettes, guided by the hidden motives of a young and beguiling witch they meet along their way, or are there dreadful forces from the immeasurable depths of time lurking behind it all?

An epic saga full of mysteries, quests, and fatal twists in a dark-age world of clashing swords and enthralling sorcery, where the fantastical awaits at every turn.

About the Writer



Nenad Gajić (1974) is the author of a bestseller *Slavic Mythology (Slovenska mitologija)*, a comprehensive illustrated encyclopedic-type book which is celebrating its first decade in Serbian with at least one new edition every year, and the trilogy *Tale of Tales (Bajka nad bajkama)*, high fantasy based on the motifs of Slavic and Serbian folk epics (*A Shadow in the Dark*, released in 2013; *The Two Kings*, 2016; *The Third Night*, 2020). All his books were first published by the major Serbian publisher Laguna, which was recognized for International Excellence at the London Book Fair of 2016 (runner-up in the Adult Publisher of the Year category). His books were sold in tens of thousands of copies in over 25 previous releases in Serbia alone.

His restless nature has driven him into all manners of creations and undertakings: a long-time musician (guitarist, singer and songwriter for a rock band with several published albums), he has also tried his hand as a banker, manager, private entrepreneur, manufacturer of computer equipment, television producer, while also authoring card and board games and working as an award-winning programmer... He holds a PhD in Intellectual Capital, but considers the writing his true passion, calling, and a way of life, while science remains his favorite hobby. Also a traveler of the world in search of new knowledge and inspiration, he has pilgrimaged to Mount Athos of antiquity, explored the shifting nooks of today's Europe, and encountered many untold mysteries from Moscow to Jerusalem, and beyond. With a packed suitcase kept beside his bed, he remains ready for new adventures.

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Synopsis (spoiler alert!) of **Tale of Tales: A Shadow in the Dark**

Senka is an ordinary country girl brought up by her father after her mother died in giving birth to her. Then, at the age of twelve, her house is burned down, her father is killed, and she is blinded by her house's guardian-snake, leaving her unable to see the dreadful forces that are after her.

While fleeing, she runs into her first companion, a wandering warrior. He brings her to a nearby village, arriving just as the villagers are preparing to cut off the hand of a lame thief they had caught. Senka desperately convinces her savior to also rescue the thief, who is disabled as she is, from such cruelty. And so the warrior departs the village not alone, but with two unsightly followers.

As they travel, they are chased by a dark horseman, later acknowledged as the Nightlord (a mighty vampire that is able to survive even daylight) with his grotesque army of demonic wolves and a dense cloud of fire-breathing imps that make dusk below them. After fleeing into the forest, the three fugitives become lost and find themselves in the forgotten village of Morlak, inhabited by a tribe of strange men claiming to have never left the woods. Two of them offer to take the fugitives to a shepherd camp, whose sheep keepers know a way through the forest. In the camp, the shepherd chieftain agrees, because of an urgent personal reason, to guide them himself back to civilization.

Before leaving the woods, the column meets a young soon-to-be witch, waiting for them upon their hidden forest path. She knows them all by name and says she has dreamt of them for years. She asks to join them, and they accept, if only to keep her in sight. Soon after, their pursuers close in upon them once again, and attack the party, which takes their last stand on a small forest knoll. The decisive battle reveals many secrets: the men of Morlak are a werewolf tribe, the lame thief is their prophesized leader, the shepherd chieftain is in truth a powerful warrior, and the witch possesses powers strong enough to dispel the flying imps and keep the wolves at bay for a while. With the rest of the werewolves racing to their aid, the party emerges victorious.

In the confusion of battle, Senka escapes, led on by a mysterious voice at her ear. It actually belongs to her guardian-snake, which guides her to the snake king in the heart of the serpents' kingdom. There she receives the gift of primal language, but she is warned that she will die if tells anyone of her new-found talent. This ability to understand animals and all human languages will later save her from the trap in which all the others get captured.

Before this, the members of the party set out on individual quests to obtain and save that which the witch said is meant for them by the will of the old gods. In their adventures and eventual captivity, they come to learn of the ancient beast Ala that has risen again to take hold of the world, its primary vehicle being the world's mightiest kingdom in a frenzy of conquest. The supreme victory has yet to be achieved thanks to the spirit dragon hidden in Senka, which has already multiple times thwarted the beast's vile attempts since her birth. The girl is in awe of the story of this dragon, one that would leave her body to fight Ala in the sky each time she was struck by what she had believed was a peculiar fainting illness. Book one of this epic saga, *A Shadow in the Dark*, ends when the wandering warrior, the mightiest of all warriors, agrees to serve their enemy for good in order to save his companions from death. Heavyhearted, he watches from the high tower as his friends and beloved witch depart, all looking back in unrest, aware that from now on they will be on conflicting sides.

To nameless bards and storytellers whose words have been my guideposts

Opening Notes

There are many mythical beings in this book that are unknown in English and most other languages. It was a great endeavor to make them all conceivable. A good example is dragon, as there are three types: the *fiery dragon* is a huge reptile with wings, a being that carries a fire inside him, as known in English. But, there is also a human form that is his descendant and ascendant, a human with great power, usually called *dragonkin*, some of which can even shapeshift into a dragon-like form and fly. The third form is the *spirit dragon*, the most unusual and most powerful of them all – this invisible essence willingly resides only in a special human, called a *zduhač*, who is unable to control it, and it is the only being that is able to confront *ala*, the ancient beast that brings havoc upon men; when *ala* strikes, the spirit dragon leaves its transient vessel, the body of the *zduhač*, to fight its archenemy in the sky. The reader should not be confused when any of these three forms of dragon (*fiery dragon*, *dragonkin*, or *spirit dragon*) are referred to simply as: dragon. In general, all mythical beings are explained through tales or dialogues before or after they first appear.

On spelling: When a double-sign is used up above the letter in the folklore-spelling of names and titles, like *zduhač* mentioned above, a reader need to imagine “h” after that character and read these two letters as a single hard voice they become. Therefore, Miloš is Milosh, Baš Čelik is pronounced as Bash Chelik, and Žarko reads as Zharko (similar beginning as French *gendarme* or the voice “s” in *measure*). In contrast, a single line above the letter, like in Perunović, means the softer version of the same voice, like the “ch” in *chirping* of birds, or the soft opening sound of *ciao* in Italian, pronounced with tongue touching the front teeth.

On strange namings: The men of Morlak call themselves *Morlaks*, though most outlanders would likely call them *Morlakians*. This chronicle tries its best to respect the locals’ ways.

Part one

A Strange Bunch

The Third Night

The woman beside the stream was visibly worried. Her old, wrinkled face, worn beyond her years, looked weary as she pulled a few pebbles from the bottom of the stream and tossed them into her wooden trough. Despite doing everything in her power, the woman who had recently given birth was not getting any better. Though the red thread tied around the newborn's hand had seemingly helped the baby, the red wool she had tucked behind the ear of the young woman had not helped her recover. And nothing else she had tried had helped the new mother either. Not the garlic hung at the door, nor the stones taken from flowing water, brimming with spirits, which she had each day tossed into the trough after washing the mother's and newborn's clothes. Nor had it helped that, from the time she had given birth, neither the mother nor the child had left the house. Not even that the worried father, at the old woman's insistence, had refused to carry embers from the hearth to rekindle a fire for the nearest neighbour, who had just returned to his lot after being away on trade for several days; no, during those first, perilous days, when various demons lurked before the house, waiting for any opportunity to prey on the mother and newborn, the living fire must not be taken out of the home's heart.

"At least everything seems all right with the child now," she thought. Many of the protective measures she had carried out had been for the sake of the child, and at least these had shown some success. The woman glanced up at the sky for a moment; evening was approaching and she would have to hurry to bring the freshly washed garments of the two unprotected souls back home before darkness set in. She shivered briefly at the very thought of what might happen if the swaddling cloths were to be left outside overnight... No, they had already been through enough misfortune.

"Tonight is the third night," thought the woman as she hastened toward the house. "Everything ought to be resolved tonight, for better or worse." Earlier she had already set out the table inside, with bread, cheese, honey, and even a glass of wine against which she had leaned a silver coin. The offerings were, therefore, ready. As soon as she entered the house, the old woman dressed the child in the father's white shirt and then woke up the mother, who was hovering between dream and reality, still in the grip of the fever that had not left her. Tonight, even this tormented woman, especially this woman, had to stay awake. The future of her newborn child might very well depend on it.

The mother twitched restlessly. She had fallen asleep! Suddenly she opened her eyes in a panic and took in the scene in front of her – beside the cradle, roughly hewn out of a large chunk of wood, stood three women wearing long white flowing dresses. The Fates! Oh Gods! The triad was already here?! How could she have fallen asleep, how could she have let herself, before their arrival?! The three strikingly similar women were poised one next to the other, staring down at the cradle from which the child – or was it just the mother's imagination – returned their gaze with wide-open eyes, completely calmly and quietly. Despite the similarity in the women, the mother had a sense that they were in fact different ages. She wanted to say something to them, to excuse herself, but the guests behaved as if she

wasn't even there. And just then, the one who appeared the oldest spoke.

To lose everything, and remain apart, darkness always round her, darkness in her heart! The oldest woman uttered these words with a note of pure malice in her voice, continuing to gaze down directly at the child.

The mother burst out in muffled sobbing with a cry, "No, no, no..." In that terrible instant she was certain that she, because of her negligence, was solely guilty for such a fate. Her child had not been safeguarded through a third night! After a significant lull, the oldest woman turned away from the child, and the middle one began to speak.

To wander the world, without peace or cheer, shadow ever pursuing, and escape nowhere! The voice of the second woman was like the first - perhaps less malevolent, but equally ruthless. The mother was now openly weeping, her heart pierced by these sudden arrows of despair. "No, nooo!" she screamed, but the three women in white continued to disregard her. Just as she herself failed to notice neither the aged hand of the woman wiping her hot face with a wet cloth, nor the worried faces around her. The young mother's ravings were disturbing to the caring old woman and the man who stood off to the side, unsure of what he should do. In the meantime, in the same place, which now seemed as if it belonged to another world, the second woman also turned away from the child in the cradle.

Then the youngest and most beautiful of the three women spoke up; her voice echoed with a certain care and gentleness that was lacking from the similar, yet distantly cold voices of the elder two. As opposed to them, this youngest woman addressed the child directly, and her words resounded like a lullaby; and truly, the child fell asleep without a sound just as the woman voiced her final words.

Young girl, endure, evil takes its toll, through it all you will emerge with naught, yet pure in soul. And though shadow may threaten all that you hold dear, it cannot possess you, nor the beauty that you bear... At the end of your dark journey you still will feel the light; out of shadows, a whole empire, kingdom beyond sight.

Having uttered these final words, the third woman also turned away, and the three departed without a single step.

The young mother was now raving incoherently, losing herself often, again and again, and to the old woman it was becoming clear that perhaps, by the will of those who decide our miserable fates, which we struggle against, this tormented soul might not make it through the night. "No... thank you... my thanks... Senka!* Senka... beauty... evil! Evil threatens!" Then there followed a string of disconnected words which neither the old woman nor the worried husband could make sense of. Unfortunately, these words were also her last. As the final fragments foundered from her tongue, her spirit gave way, leaving the newborn child to the mercy of the cruel fate bestowed upon her, and the father to struggle on alone in the world. She had passed, as it had been fated so, and from fate one cannot escape...

With tears brimming in his eyes, which he managed to control only with great effort, the father

broke the deathly silence that had seized this home: “My love, go in peace. I shall care for our Senka more than for myself.” The aged woman turned to him with surprise, “But the godfather has yet to choose a name...,” and then she fell silent. The man’s look said it all. “The child will be called Senka. That was her mother’s dying wish.”

*In traditional folklore, the female name *Senka* has the same meaning and pronunciation as the word *shadow*, and remains in usage, though infrequently, as a name today.

Senka

Senka was happy. It is not hard to be happy when you know so little. She could not know, as no one else could have, that her name was born out of a strange misunderstanding in the thick of a tragedy, but had firmly gripped her father's story that her name was the last wish of her departed mother, the most important gift that she had left her with. In truth, the girl wished for her mother everyday, but this was only a vague desire for something not truly known, which could never be called suffering. She had a father whom she loved, who never raised his hands against her. Even the stepmother rarely beat her, and only when she truly made a mess of things and her father was not there.

From Senka's point of view, life was far from bad. In her twelve years she had developed a heartfelt love for all that was around her. Apart from her father, she felt a deep love for her sister. Truly her half-sister, but Senka never thought of her in such a way, and she would not even have known what "half-sister" meant had her stepmother not used the word often when speaking to her own daughter about Senka. No, she was the one sister Senka had, and she loved her fully. And she never really cared that most of the household chores and disciplining was reserved for her, while her sister received all the love that her "half-mother" was able to offer (Senka laughed out loud the first time she realized that she thought of her stepmother as a half-mother, the "half" part a term that she had no doubt learned from her). She never worried about this lack of love which her stepmother made sure to show everyday – Senka may not have loved her, but she did not hate her either. She understood that her father needed a wife, as everyone needs someone to warm them in their bed; also, there was much woman's work that needed to be done around the house, and Senka was still too young for most of it. She was completely satisfied with the kindness and affection her father showed to her, the endless care that she could see as love. In her father's presence, even this half-mother was nearly pleasant to her. "I may even be getting more love from my father than my sister does," thought Senka, "so it is fine that I am loved less by my half-mother. After all, as strict as she is with me, my father is just as strict with her! And if my mother were alive, surely she would love me more than my sister." And so, finding all these necessary justifications in herself, Senka managed to live life without bitterness.

A great deal of Senka's seemingly unlimited love was reserved for Vidra. Vidra was her dog, her devoted companion since the day she found her in the woods as a puppy, completely wet from tumbling through the stream. "Little Vidra,* so what are you doing there?" Senka asked through laughter, and from the wagging of the pup's little tail, she knew that she had chosen the right name. Her father laughed when he heard it, confirming that she could keep the little male puppy "with a woman's name," but only if nobody came looking for the pup, and on that day there was no happier girl in the world than Senka. So it was... and now, more than three years later, they were still inseparable, the girl and Vidra.

"Vidra!" shouted Senka, coming back from her thoughts. "Now where is that dog?!" she pondered, "when he was here a moment ago?" Usually, Vidra would stay just to her right when they

went to fetch water. Every now and then, she would try to confuse him, moving a step faster, then a step slower as they approached the stream. The dog would handle such games without a hint of effort, rather gracefully, succeeding always in not falling behind nor getting ahead. Senka even had the impression that Vidra would somehow always manage to run along at an even pace – she could never quite figure out how her dog managed to do so, and she loved him all the more for it.

Now the stream was already in sight: Senka had just passed between the two large trees that marked the end of the forest path (if one could call that narrow trail, occasionally trodden by Vidra and Senka, a path at all) and stepped out onto the small clearing in the forest glen. She was expecting to find Vidra, as she sometimes did, happily splashing about in the creek or slurping up water from the stream side. But that was not the case this time.

She stopped and looked around. The dog was indeed standing nearby, but was not looking at her, nor at the stream, but had already climbed up on the rise in the clearing, as if he was struggling to see something in the distance. Whatever it was, it lay in the direction from which they had come, and Senka immediately sensed the tension of her pet – such a thing did not happen often, so she was able to recognize the complete loss of the dog's attention, the elongated ears which in such moments seemed to be larger than they really were, tilted slightly, and the barely noticeable raising of the dog's hair. For a moment she looked back to the safety of the dark forest, then ran to Vidra, leaving the forest behind her, and peered out, following the direction of the dog's gaze. From somewhere behind them, perhaps only a half-hour away, the time they needed for walking to the stream, a thick smoke was rising above the forest.

*In traditional folklore, the female name *Vidra* has the same meaning and pronunciation as the word *otter*.

Senka Before the Flames

The scurry through the woods, that followed immediately, Senka would remember as only a blur of quick images; several scratches from thorns and branches, a slight tear in the sleeve of her white shirt, her scarf snared by a low stick that dragged it off her head, leaving it hanging from the knotted braid underneath her disheveled hair as she ran on in a panic; her dog racing by her side, his ears constantly pricked up and his head unnaturally raised, as if any moment they would come across something terrible; an awareness of her right hand pulling back the greenish scarf to the top of her scalp, her left arm reaching for a moment to help, and in this moment the feeling that the empty skin for water was weighing on her more than it ever had before when full. The instant when, breathless, but too frightened to notice her breathlessness, she stopped upon the exit from the forest and, in front of her, saw all that her family possessed. The small field her father toiled over everyday, and the path that led through the field to a small low house made up of a single large room where she had spent most of her life, with its floor of well-pressed earth and hearth in the middle. The moment in which the empty waterskin just dropped from her hand. The next moment in which she again began to run, this time directly to the raging fire devouring what just a short hour before she had called home.

The flame had already engulfed the wooden roof, underneath which lay stores of straw to hold the house's warmth during the cold nights. No one was there to put out the fire; no one was in front of the house. Surprisingly clearheaded, Senka remembered the three large straw mattresses; one on which her father and stepmother slept, another which she shared with her sister, and a third one which was generally empty, intended for expected and unexpected guests alike, who could always assume, as was fitting, that they would be welcomed with hospitality. The wooden table, the wood chairs, stacks of firewood, linen curtains in wooden frames that served in place of walls... their home had been an unlit torch which was now ignited. But, how? To Senka it seemed that, along with the wooden walls, the flame was consuming even the stone foundations which had measured her growing up (the day when she had realized that the stones no longer reached even up to her waist she still remembered fondly); maybe the flames were licking at the old straw, mixed with mud, which had been pushed into the cracks between rocks to keep the weather outside? Or maybe that was just the impression made on her by the fire which now pulsed everywhere through the window frames, those familiar frames small enough so that not too much heat would escape when the wooden shutters were closed, yet large enough to let daylight into the house. A house which was no more.

Senka tried to rush through the door, but was stopped by the heat and the sharp tongues of the flame. The interior of the house looked like a fireplace ablaze – from the intense glow one could no longer see what the fire was feeding upon. The brightness of the blaze forced her to squint and flinch, falling back, her nostrils filled with hot smoke and her eyes with tears. Unaware of her actions, she instinctively ran around the house, trying to look through the window holes, to glimpse anything other than the fiery whips she had faced at the door. But the flames were everywhere, and only flames. Senka

realized that she was crying, but she did not know if this was merely because of the fire and smoke. Inside, she felt nothing but horror: when she went for water, all had been at home. Her father, stepmother, and sister. She could still clearly see them when she closed her eyes, as if they were still inside the house, somehow mysteriously frozen in a frame of fire: her father sitting at the table, on a long bench that wobbled slightly, after a laborious morning in the fields, drinking from a small wooden cup filled from a similarly rustic jug scratched by years and hands and falls; her stepmother preparing some meal in the small pot hanging above the fireplace, whose color on the bottom had completely worn away; and her sister... Her sister! Panic seized Senka in its cold hands. A chill shivered through her body despite the heat thrown off by the house enveloped in flames. Where are they?

Through her unconscious sobs and cries as she was helplessly running around the house in broken circles, suddenly it seemed to Senka that she heard a muffled shout: "Help!" It was uttered by an unrecognizable voice partially lost in the noise of the crackling wood splintering in the fire. She bounded back to the doorframe and pressed as close she could to the open door. The door itself was as well on fire, even though it still hung firmly, though now pointlessly, to its hinges, rocking back and forth under the pressure of the billowing smoke as the flames went in and out. But behind the door, Senka could finally see that the fire had not yet engulfed the whole hut: just beyond the house threshold, whose wooden beams were also burning, there was a small piece of beaten earth which the fire had not managed to consume. And on that island in a sea of flames lay a snake.

"The House-guardian!" thought Senka immediately. She knew, of course, the story of the snake that watched over the house, ensuring good fortune to the household; she knew that it lived under the house foundations, and that one should never hurt this creature. She had heard all of this, but had never thought about it much; she had never seen such a snake, and neither had her father, though it was he who had spoken of it, saying that it was not at all a bad thing that they had never seen the snake, since its appearance would be an ill omen. Her father could not even describe the snake to her: was it large or small, colorful or not, dangerous or harmless? How had the snake come to live here, what did it eat?... In a world overflowing with visible wonders, Senka never thought too much of the invisible. However, knowing this story, she was now certain of what lay before her.

Without a moment's hesitation, Senka turned and ran to the edge of the field, where her father usually stacked together small piles of hay with a long-handled wooden pitchfork. Senka grabbed the tool and ran back to the house, lowering the spikes of the fork to the ground in front of the snake, pushing it forward through the flames while simultaneously raising her arms as best she could so that the long handle remained as far as possible from the range of the licking flames. As if by command, the snake immediately crawled onto the pitchfork, quickly wrapped itself around the handle, and with almost unbelievable deftness began slithering upward. Senka lifted the tool and pulled it out of the fire, taking a few steps back from the hungry flame, when she realized with terror that the snake had already managed to reach the top of the handle. Now it had crossed onto her hand! Senka threw down the pitchfork quickly, but too late – the snake had wound itself around her arm! In a flash, she saw the flick of a hornlike tail as it whipped through the air before firmly grasping her wrist, continuing to spiral upwards with the rest of its body, and in the next moment she felt the cold scaly skin of the snake at her throat. Senka shook her head forcefully, but again in vain, for the snake was already wrapped around her

neck. The snake's tail now passed over her eyes, touching them as she blinked!

"I save you, and this is your thanks?" Senka murmured in tearful voice, frozen in fear. In a sudden instance of dread, she was sure that the snake was going to strangle her. She lifted her arms in an attempt to tear off the intruder wrapped around her neck, but beneath her fingers, instead of the cold and scaly skin of the snake, she felt the even colder touch of unmoving metal. It had the smoothness of silk, a feel she knew well, having had the chance to touch this delicate fiber often, on the threading of her shawl, despite the meager means of her family. Then, through her confusion, it seemed to her that she heard a rasping, sinuous whisper, as if spoken directly into her ear: "To recceive, you musst lose. All are dead. Essscape. If they have not found you, they have sssenssed you. Essscape." It seemed then that the fire dimmed and faded, and around Senka, all fell into darkness.

Senka in Darkness

If the previous events remained only a series of disrupted images for Senka, then the following moments remained an echo of vague noises utterly drowned in a dark sea of unspeakable horror. How could one describe what was happening in the soul of a twelve-year-old girl who was suddenly without her family, without her home, and without sight? For Senka was suddenly blind!

The girl did not immediately realize her loss of sight. For a moment, she thought that she had simply fainted, as happened from time to time; then she thought that it had somehow quickly become night, that everything had just been a nightmare, and that she was safe and sound in the darkness of her own home, wrapped in a swathe of warm blankets, while her sister slept to her right, warming her body. Darkness? The flame in the fireplace must have gone out. For a while, her mind was fleeing from reality. Then she remembered the house in flames, the blazing fire which she still heard, but could no longer see. She reached out with her hands, desperately hoping to find the softness of her own bed, but her hands only grasped the air, and Senka realized that she was standing. Her nostrils filled again with the overpowering smell of things burning, and she coughed against the smoke. She wanted to turn away, but her legs fell out from under her. She collapsed to her knees, leaning with her hands onto the cold ground, the soil somehow fresh despite the sun and the fire, those warm blazes which she could no longer see. There was something so consoling in this ground beneath her fingers; the thin grass was pleasant to the touch, and Senka, for the first time in her life, simply wished to not exist.

She could not say how long she remained there, kneeling, not thinking about anything, when suddenly by her cheek she felt something soft and wet. Vidra! The dog had leaned his snout against her cheek, licking her, as if he wanted to say that he was still there, and that he was sorry for everything. Her dog. The one thing that remained for her in this world... Senka let out a loud sob and wailed, allowing the horror of all that had happened to pour out in a stream of tears. She cried long and hard, quietly and desperately, stroking her dog's head, hugging him around the neck and running her hands down his back and coat, remembering the look of her companion, pulling her dog closer and feeling his soft fur underneath her fingers.

This is how Senka felt the hair of her dog raise, and the unmoving body, which she had been holding for how long she could not say, came to life. She felt the push of the dog's nose at her side and immediately understood: move! Without words, almost silently, Senka lifted and leaned herself against the back of her dog. Her tears were still flowing, but the sense of horror was back. Fear, which had been suppressed by desperation, was beginning to swallow her fully. Senka rose up, holding tightly onto Vidra's back, as she had done many times before. Now, however, for the first time, that back was her crutch, her strength and her vision. The dog moved forward, and Senka followed; unsteadily and carefully, as if she was just learning to walk. And she learned indeed, both of them learned – the dog began moving more quickly than she could manage, and then slowed down when she nearly fell,

adjusting his pace to hers. They had done this before, but it had always been a game. This now was a race for survival, even if Senka was only vaguely aware of it.

One step, and then another. At first, slowly and cautiously, and then a bit faster. Senka trusted Vidra, and her youth allowed her to adapt quickly. The dog felt danger, this she knew. She placed all of her faith in her companion, for there was nothing else left to her, and let the dog's instincts guide them, hopefully towards some sort of safety. Step by step. Senka had no idea how far they had gone or for how long they had been moving; she remained focused only on the next step. She could not see that darkness was approaching since for her everything was now dark. Even so, she became slowly aware of the change that the dog sensed. A strong grip of bitter cold began to reach her. A coldness which she had never felt before – not the sharp chill of a fresh winter day spent running through the snow with Vidra. No, this coldness was terrible, deathly, indescribable. The closest thing she had felt to this was when, as a child, she had touched the face of her dead midwife, the woman who had taken care of her after her mother had died and told her almost all she knew about her mother, much more than her father ever had; but it was her father who fell upon her after that touch and struck her with his hand, in front of everyone present at the funeral. It was one of the rare occasions that he had used such force on her, and Senka realized and remembered that what she had done was taboo, a forbidden and socially unacceptable thing. But now, this time, it was not she who had reached out and touched the cold – this coldness had reached for her, and closed about her. Stunned and bewildered, Senka collapsed once again. She did not know that they had already arrived at the foot of the forest, and could not have known that the thick shadows of the trees were her only protection against a fatal destiny. Fear compelled her to silence, to bend as closely as she could to the ground, reduced to the panicked desire to disappear before an unseen danger. Yet the danger was much more real than she could have imagined.

Strange sounds began to reach Senka. Something like sniffing and creaking together, terrible sounds that leapt out from the sea of incoming noises, like some immense icy wave approaching. These strange noises overwhelmed the sounds of the fire, eclipsed the songs of birds in the distance, of crickets, flies, of the wind, of any other of the natural sounds of the forest. And then, Senka was at once alone in the dark, in complete silence, save for the unnatural noises. She was encircled by the approaching terror. Perhaps for a moment she fell unconscious, or perhaps not; it was difficult to judge in the constant, humming-filled darkness. Under her right hand, she felt the raised hair of Vidra. Like two shipwrecked sailors, they pressed against one another and as close to the earth as possible, holding firm to the solid ground below them, as if that patch of earth on which they lay was the one island in an endlessly dark sea, the only refuge for life in a deadly, frigid storm.

The sounds came even closer, like waves whipping the shore. Then, they seemed to cease. Senka held her breath as long as she could, trying to be so still that she herself could not hear her own breathing, not knowing whether that horror which they had been hearing was close or away. And then the sounds began to move off and fade. Senka and Vidra lay helplessly for a long while after, remaining so until Senka began to feel the dog's hair, little by little, relax. Whatever the danger had been, it had, for now, passed.

After what was likely an hour, Senka again raised herself. She had no idea where to go, nor what to do; she could not think clearly about such things, nor about anything else, so she did the same thing that had already saved her once, even if she was not fully aware of it; she gripped onto her dog's back with one hand, the other grasping about around her, and let Vidra lead them where he would...

Encounter One

“Damn horse! This one will not hold out much longer, tomorrow I will have to stop off at some village and get a new one...”

The hefty horseman had not said this very clearly however, as he was not particularly inclined to conversation. Everything that came out of his mouth sounded more or less like “Haaa!” interspersed with slappings on the horse’s rump in an attempt to get the animal back to a quick trot. And truly, for a while the horse stopped pulling like a worn-out nag, even showing a fraction of its supposed value. All the same, the rider could not help the feeling that he had overpaid for it, like all those before, and again, frowning, he sank into a gloomy silence...

Suddenly, the horse stood as if stuck. The rider was pulled back from his wandering thoughts, instinctively repeating the slapping movement of his hand. His thwack, even though a bit harder than those before, this time did not prompt the horse to move one bit. Instead, the animal reared weakly, raising itself somewhat upright and uttered a paltry neigh. The heavy figure on its back then moved with astonishing speed – without a moment’s thought, the man was off the horse’s back, and in the same instant as his feet hit the ground, he was already holding his formidable weapon at the ready in his right hand.

Slowly and quietly, as much as possible for someone his size, the man made several steps toward the thick bushes that overlay the forest, leaving behind him the grateful animal who had been desperately awaiting an opportunity to catch its breath. As this man came up close to bushes, he grabbed the edge of a branch and swiftly pulled it aside, snorting gruffly through his thick mustache.

The bush gave way under this sudden jerk, and a good part of the plant remained in the hands of the giant man, torn, while the squall of leaves and branches was rebounded by a muted scream and a deep threatening growl. The man stood back for a moment, the mace in his hand ready to strike, when his completely tense frame at once visibly relaxed, and he, lightly dropping his weaponed hand, spoke out clearly for the first time in many days:

“Well, well, look here, o wonder of wonders... what have we found at the forest’s edge?”

A Night in the Forest

“Come on then, lassie, tell me once again... Something came after you, but you don’t know what?”

If Senka were able to see, she wouldn’t have missed, even with her inexperienced eyes, the mocking expression in the eyes of her questioner. The enormous man raised up his waterskin, and gulped from it an amount that only he could call a sip. Then he smoothed out the two long sides of his mustache before addressing Senka again: “Talk, poor lassie, talk! Come on, string me along once again!”

And Senka again repeated her story to this strange man. He would now and again let out a few muffled sounds, which most likely signified wonder, or interest, or perhaps just a simple sign of attentiveness. The squeaking sound of the man’s large waterskin opening reached Senka’s ear more and more often, and from it the stranger swallowed larger and larger gulps. Without giving much thought to it, Senka had at first assumed that he was simply thirsty after a long days’ journey. Shortly after their encounter, when she had said that she was thirsty and would like some water, it surprised her to no small degree that the man replied: “What? Water?!” with a tone of derision in his voice, “Water is bothersome in the boot, let alone in the stomach! I do not have water, I do not... but I have wine! Do you want some?” When Senka rejected the offer without hesitation, the man seemed to think for a moment, and then in his strange euphonious manner of speaking, almost melodious despite the masculine rudeness of his voice, said that there were numerous streams in the region and he certainly planned to make camp along one of them. And with that, the man decisively stood up and in one easy movement lifted Senka onto the back of his horse. Senka had never felt lighter! She had the impression that she was lifted without a trace of effort, and her impression was not false – the strength of the man was incredible and her weight was not enough to cause even the slightest tightening in his muscles. After setting her on the saddle, he hung his large wineskin up on the horn of the saddle, letting it fall against the horse’s right flank, while tying his weapon, whose look alone would surely have frightened Senka could she see it, to hang to the left, mumbling: “That should keep it in balance, not pulling here or there.” He grabbed the horse by the reins, which he skillfully threw forward, turning them into a halter, and led his new party (a horse, a dog, and a blind girl) where he wanted. Just like the horse, the dog and Senka both accepted, without a word, this unknown man as their undisputed leader.

And so soon they found themselves sitting beside a small fire, just alongside a brook they could hear clearly babbling away, and Senka, no longer thirsty or tired, retold yet again what had happened to her. The man listened, leaning back against a thick tree, and sitting so, drinking and listening, his head would now and again fall forward, until he finally drifted off to sleep. Senka continued to speak awhile about how she and Vidra had lain unmoving for how long no one could say, revisiting that horror once more, until the heavy snoring sigh of the man interrupted her story, assuring her that he was indeed sound asleep. Then she finally fell silent, and the quiet of the night confirmed her doubts. Wrapping

herself up as best as she could, Senka lay down on the ground and fell asleep, tight against her dog once again. Her tormented spirit found, with unexpected ease, at least a moment's peace.

Žarko

“What to do with you, lassie? To lead you onwards would not do, but to leave you here is worse!” These words the strange man spoke more for himself than anything else, the longest string of words Senka had heard him say during the whole morning. She felt desperately like crying, like pleading for herself, for help, to throw herself into his arms... but she remained silent. They were eating the leftovers from the night before, some kind of tasty meat which the rider had carried along with him under his saddle, very likely the last bits of some wild game which the man had himself hunted.

After a few more minutes during which Senka ate in silence, the mustached man announced his decision: “For now you will stay with Žarko, until we find you a home.” This time Senka could not stand to wait and immediately asked: “And who is Žarko?” This triggered an eruption of laughter from the man. This gargantuan laugh, which barely resembled a laugh as one would normally think of it, went on and on, and it seemed like the man was barely able to catch his breath as he replied: “Who is... har-har-har... who is... why, its *me*, you poor thing! I am Žarko, who else would it be?!” And so Senka, just then, finally learned the name of her odd companion, even though she had already (more than once!) recounted the details of her recent calamities for him, as well as the brief story of her life.

And off they headed, the man announcing resolutely that it was time to depart. Senka did not know where to, but she also did not care; in the company of this man she felt more secure than she had ever felt in her short life, not really knowing why. As opposed to the evening before, when he had placed her on the back of his horse as he led, her companion now showed far less gentleness – Senka went on foot behind the horse, holding on to its tail with one hand, and onto Vidra with her other. The stranger kept the horse to a light pace, and this with no trouble whatsoever; any observer would certainly see that the animal was already overburdened by the size and weight of such a rider alone, and the walk was likely what the horse would choose anyhow.

Senka would have been, if she were to think about it, surprised by the speed at which she adapted to life without sight. Her eyes were now Vidra, and her step was perfectly aligned with the rhythm of the hoofs of the horse whose tail she held onto. And she felt safe. She did not stumble, but already stepped firmly, sure that this strange rider was already choosing a way for her. Everything was happening so fast that she did not have time to acknowledge, let alone grieve for, what she had lost, and her young spirit had become almost immediately accustomed to this unexpected adventure that now made up her life. She did not know what tomorrow held, or even what to expect in an hour or two, but that was exactly what she had longed for in the unmeasured days of her carefree, but also monotonous and fairly lonely childhood. She had dreamed of far away places, and now she was on her way to them. She has lost everything, but all that she had lost had already begun to look more and more like a far-off dream, like the sad story of some other person. Having lost her eyesight, security, and the chores of ordinary life, forced by cruel fate to rely on previously neglected senses and on chance encounters with

strangers, Senka was reborn as a new person. She was open to the world around her, for there was nothing left to grab onto in fear of what might come. Deprived of every support, this girl of twelve years was forced to fly like a leaf swept off a tree. And now she flew, aware of every step, every word, every sound, every moment. Senka was alive.

“There, a village near the road. I will fill my wineskin there... and buy a decent horse, because this old nag is at her end.” Senka realized that she was enjoying all of these rare proclamations of her protector, for that is how she had thought of him since the first moment they met. His statements were guideposts, dictating the direction of her current life. And this last one seemed prophetic: as soon as the rider spoke these words, the horse just collapsed underneath him! “There! See, I said so and I did not lie!” commented the man with a dose of droll complacency, and then, without wasting another moment, he took upon himself all the things that the horse had been carrying with difficulty. After he slung his heavy weapon about his belt on the left side, he went onwards, allowing Senka to grab on to the muscle of his right arm. He even merrily whistled something almost like a tune. The village was close, and he was pleased that the remaining walk would not last long.

And so they went forward, leaving the dead horse (or dead-tired, Senka was not sure) behind them. They went along on the only sort of road that Senka had ever known; not the one paved with cobblestones, like those supposedly known to larger places and towns, which her father had once spoken of (this sudden thought of her father elicited a brief wave of sadness), but rather an ordinary path of stamped earth, occasionally rutted and collapsed, just wide enough for the passage of a horse and carriage – in the rare event that two horse carts might meet going in opposite directions, one of them would have to stop and turn off of the path so that the other could pass.

After a short while, the familiar sounds of a settled area began to reach Senka. The road led right through the village, even widening a measure, unlike those “real” roads which her father had spoken of, which would skirt about the edges of towns rather than lead into them. She could not grasp that only by hearing, but this village was not much bigger than the only other settlement she had seen before, and also looked more or less the same. A bit more than a hundred souls, dwelling in twenty or so houses. In the middle of the village stood a small tavern where one could get a drink, a meal, or a place to sleep for the rare traveler passing through, and just across the road was the one and only store in which one could find anything and everything: from foodstuffs and small items, to weapons and tools, and even horses, which were kept in a stable behind the shop. The road became flatter, and Senka no longer needed to lean so heavily on Žarko’s arm. For a moment she thought to completely let go; she wasn’t sure how the villagers would look at the sight of a blind girl holding onto the forearm of a large man instead of a stick, or whether Žarko might feel uncomfortable because of it. But her companion walked on in at an unbroken pace, with that same natural confidence which Senka had already learned to appreciate, so she simply relaxed and continued to curiously listen and take in the world around her.

Encounter Two

They were somewhere near the tavern (which Žarko headed for first) when they heard the mob. Senka realized that something was happening from the sound of rough shouts and the unusual uproar, and immediately felt uneasy, while Žarko stood calmly in the middle of the street. He was interestedly following the goings on, just as his young companion once upon a time would raise a glance at any bird singing in the forest. While they stood so in the open, Senka began to grow more fearful as she began to pick apart some of the shouted words rising above the clamor.

“Žarko, what is happening?”

“They have caught some thief, so they are going to chop off his hand.” Senka’s horror grew even greater at the calm and dispassionate way in which he said this.

“They cannot do that!” she blurted out fervently.

“O, but they can... the law says so,” answered Žarko.

Then the piercing shrieks of the captured man reached Senka, as he pleaded with all of his voice: “Please do not, people.... Please, for god’s sake, do not... Please not my hand; I am already crippled in the leg!”

What exactly happened in Senka’s heart at that moment, what broke within her, is hard to say. But she managed to overcome the stifling fear and the sudden shock at the terrible thing this angry mob was preparing to do in the name of justice. Something in her made a snap decision that stood in complete contrast to her actual abilities, and she screamed out: “Žarko, we cannot let them do it!”

“What are you talking about, you poor thing, do not be a fool!” Žarko hushed her up harshly. But if she could see his gaze, she would have known that he had spoken to her more moderately than he wanted to. This was not a man prone to delicacy.

“Please, Žarko! Please, please, please! You are so big and powerful, a true hero! You must not let this poor man suffer in front of you! He stole, did a bad thing, but they want to cut off his hand! They want to take away his hand, Žarko, and maybe he just stole a mere hen so that he could eat! You heard that he is crippled, maybe he cannot work for his own food! Like me, Žarko – what would I do if I had not met you? How would I find something to eat? Žarko, you cannot let them do it! Please, Žarko, I plead before the God of the heavens, please, please, please!” Senka was on the verge of hysteria, tears running out of her blind eyes. There was no explanation for her behavior; she simply felt that her new world, whose foundation had just been built, would collapse into dust if she would allow this barbarity to happen in front of her protector’s eyes. For she had already blindly built a vision of her crude companion against the gods – as ill-tempered but righteous, as mighty yet merciful. And she could not allow herself

to see him as cold-hearted; he could not be someone who would indifferently watch the mob abuse the weak.

Though he would never have admitted it to a living soul, not even to himself, Žarko was moved by the girl's pleas. This powerless, young soul begging so stridently on behalf of an unknown and even unseen person in spite of all the tragedies she alone had already faced, struck a chord in Žarko's heart. She had even reached out to the sleeping God of the heavens, not for herself, but for the fate of a stranger! He himself would never think to meddle in such a situation – the thief had stolen and had been caught, and the law commanded that he be punished. Žarko did not write the laws, and he also did not bother to think about whether they were just or not. He repeatedly violated them himself, killing those shielded by the law even though they deserved death, yet his head had always remained on his shoulders. The times in which they lived were shaped by people like him, a thing he felt unconsciously, though such thoughts were too subtle to ever be expressed in words. The law of might instead of the might of law was often the reality, the unwritten truth above the official laws of towns: for the laws to be enforced properly, a righteous force had to be behind them, and where such force was lacking, strength alone prevailed.

Žarko carefully scrutinized the bedlam in front of him. Twenty or so villagers, perhaps more, two holding the thief tightly by the hands, dragging him forward to the place where they intended to carry out his punishment, with others going out of their way to beat him, kick him, and spit on him. Some other men of the village were surely still out in the fields plowing or pasturing their cattle, while the remainder of the settlement was likely made up of women, children, and the elderly. He saw their heads peeking out from some of the houses, through windows, and all of them stared, following the furor unfolding; the capture of the thief had overshadowed even their arrival in the village, which would ordinarily have been a real spectacle for such a place. Only some of the men from the procession carried arms, if just some rough pitchforks or worn out hoes, and they used them to poke the thief crudely in the back; they were, obviously, peasants, and not warriors. Žarko had not actually regarded the thief at all – he was not interested in him in the least, even though he was close to deciding to help him and so change the course of his pathetic fate.

“You speak well, dear little sister... your words are pure, but what you spout is madness! Nevertheless, Žarko will do what you wish, as it is too heavy a day for bloodshed.” And just like that, a momentous decision has been reached. For, such was he a giant among men – what others would think over for days and days, he decided in seconds, according to the whims of his mood. And once he decided, Žarko acted with all of his might. He nudged Senka towards the tavern door, across the street's pavement stones, rushing her out of the way while putting the empty wineskin into her hand, at the same time pulling out his mace with his other hand: “Come on, little sister... do not stand here, go get me my wine; say to them: ‘Žarko ordered it.’ Who knows what will happen after, and I need to fill up.” While still speaking these words, he had already moved towards the mob. A few huge steps and he was already close enough, so he halted in the middle of the dusty street, exclaiming:

“Hey, villagers, hear me out!” Žarko's booming voice rose above the noises and in a moment there was silence, the people all turning their heads towards him as if under command. Then the mighty

man continued: "Tell me, who among you knows to read and write? Who of you has read the books of old?"

In the mob there was confusion as some of the men looked around at each other questioningly. Silence reigned. Then one voice shouted falteringly that there was no one literate in the village, before abruptly falling silent. Žarko stood there, upright, gazing at the crowd. Frowning grumpily as he was, this big man was a terrible sight to behold. His spectacular figure stood at least a head higher than anyone's in the village, and in broadness he was twice the man of the largest peasant. On his head the wolf cap, its upper jaw extending over his brows; on his chest the wolf pelt, a furry vest he wore inverted. In his hand the heavy mace, behind his back the battle spear, and in his belt the saber. The two huge sides of his mustache relaxed somewhat, as he continued looking at the peasants, saying nothing... Little by little the villagers grew uneasy, and nervous mutterings and muffled whisperings could be heard among the mob. Only then did Žarko speak again:

"With no one who reads or writes, how then can you know the law?" Silence. Nobody ventured a word, though nervousness seemed to be growing in the crowd, as if it could sense impending trouble in the air. Žarko again stood silently, regarding them for a time, and then spoke:

"Well, here is Žarko, standing alone in front of you all! And I tell you: I know both, to read and write. The one who thinks he knows the old books better, has to chop off Žarko's hand first, and only then the thief's!" After saying this, the giant of a man suggestively moved that heavy mace in his right hand, letting it swing gently back and forth. The mumbling in the mob stopped fully, and silence hung, as if echoing in their ears. And it lasted. It lingered in the air like the people's fear – it was one thing to catch a hobbled thief, but quite another to confront a fierce warrior. No one risked a word, let alone rose up against Žarko. Žarko left them hanging for a while, staring at them grimly, one by one. And whoever he glared at, the other man's gaze would drop. Then he raised his voice once again:

"Look here, look here... no one knows the book of law better than the warrior Žarko? If that is how it is, I will take that thief as a slave. I will pay you fairly for the damage he has done; and I say: this is by the law. If someone has an objection to this, come forth now, complain to Žarko!" And, saying this, he scowled even more menacingly, which would have been thought unbelievable just a minute before.

Again one could hear whisperings from the crowd, more strongly even, but now no longer so agitated. The mob had calmed when faced with danger, the man from whom the thief had stolen shouted his consent from the safety of the crowd, while others used this opportunity to already begin slipping away. And so it was resolved; the two men holding the thief by the arms led him up to Žarko, somewhat hesitantly, their heads bowed and their eyes on the ground. They released him and then quickly turned back about. The village street emptied, even the man to whom damages were to be paid went away, saying there was no need, that he would not want to take money from such a warrior. Then Žarko, watching the last few people scattering, addressed the thief: "With me, if you value your head." Then he turned, not looking at him again, and headed straight for the tavern. Senka had not, of course, filled the wine – like everyone else, she had been caught up in the excitement of the events, and had not moved from the entrance, all the time holding the empty wineskin in her hand.

And while the whole village still lingered in a daze under the powerful impressions of what had just occurred, Žarko had already devoted himself to other things. He sent a scared barmaid to fill up his wineskin and fetch the innkeeper; when the man came out, visibly frightened, Žarko asked him to estimate how much was owed to the man from whom the thief had stolen, as he did not want to have a debt to any man. He told Senka and his new drudge to wait in the tavern while he went across to buy a horse, enough bread, and one whole, uncooked lamb, skinned and well-salted, then threw all of that onto the horse and came back. He reentered the tavern and told the thief, for the first time looking him straight in the eye, grimly: "Now I will eat and drink with my sister until the time for heading out. And you, my servant, will wait in front... Watch the horse! When I come out, if you are not here, or my horse is not here, know there is no place nor hole under the heavens where you can crawl in to hide from me!"

Vuk

“Eh, my Žarko... who have you gathered around you? First a blind girl, now a cripple! Without a doubt, this is one impressive lot...” The big man went on, occasionally muttering to himself under his breath, allowing the horse that was carrying both him and food to wander off relatively far in front of his companions. Senka shivered at the thought of how upset Žarko would be if he also knew of her illness, which seemed to return at the worst moments, but she quickly dispelled such thoughts – she did not want, not even in the slightest, to be an even greater burden to her protector.

When the saved man figured that Žarko could no longer hear him, he spoke for the first time, addressing Senka, who was walking unsteadily alongside him. “Thank you,” he said, “as I assume that you have played a large role in my unexpected salvation. I am sure that a warrior such as Žarko would not even look back once at a fellow such as me – it is you that I have to thank for still having two of these.” With that, he extended both his hands and folded them about Senka’s – her free hand, the other was holding constantly onto Vidra’s back – saying: “My name is Vuk, and I am eternally in your debt.”

Senka opened up unusually easily to this strange man. Thief! Her father had spoken about such persons with disgust, yet something in the tone of his voice assured Senka that every word this man uttered was true. He was not looking for explanations, but Senka offered them anyway. He had not asked, but Senka told him the whole story of the strange events that had fundamentally changed the course of her life, and which had led her to hang on the back of the rough warrior who was now her guide and guardian. After listening to her story all the way up to her first encounter with Žarko, the man who limped audibly next to her left side suddenly sighed strangely, and Senka left off her tale in mid-sentence. Taking this as an invitation, the silent Vuk spoke.

“And up till now you have not yet asked yourself who he is? Who is this man who saved you, and then me?”

Senka was confused by the question. “Well, he is Žarko. Or at least that is what he said his name is...”

Vuk spoke on in a completely serious voice, so Senka remained unconscious of his smile: “And truly, that is how he is called. I know, because I have heard stories about him in all the villages and cities through which I have passed, from the shores of Ohrid to the foothills of Mount Miroč. That is Žarko. Everyone knows of him. The greatest warrior-hero, the bravest, the strongest, and, though fiery and dangerous, always just. And yet all the stories of him seem to pass around him. Did you notice how in that village he did not know anybody, even though everybody seemed to have known him? Perhaps... well, I would not be surprised if they had seen him before, for that kind of fear in an entire mob cannot be caused by just one man, even one as large and strong as he, no matter who he says he is and how imposing he appears...”

Vuk fell silent. They continued far behind the big man on the horse for several minutes, and Senka realized that the limping man was thinking over whether to continue speaking further. Though now quite curious, the girl remained quiet, letting him reach his decision. Finally, Vuk abruptly continued on with his story, just as suddenly as he had fallen silent.

“In a small town, in a tavern, quite some time ago, after a great deal of wine and even more beer, I heard a strange story. Now, like any other story, it may be true, and it may be not. I found it hard to believe it that day, but now I am not so sure...” Vuk paused as if to take a breath, then continued: “The story speaks of a great warrior-hero, the son of a god, who was named Žarko. It is said that this hero was the son of Perun the Thunderer himself, while his mother was a mortal woman. And so they say there was nothing other for that child but to become the greatest of all warriors...” A short silence arose and lingered for some moments, and Senka felt that Vuk was cautiously observing her reactions to his story, perhaps weighing whether his words seemed too unbelievable. At last though, as if having pushed through some troublesome barrier, he broke the suspenseful silence and the rest of his narration proceeded without a single pause.

“Yet, only when that child had indeed grown into a warrior like no other, did this story become truly interesting. If I was lied to, then I am lying to you now as well, but it is said that it was the time when the gods were clashing over the division of our world. More precisely, over who will be given charge of the lands through which we are now passing. And as you might imagine, agreements are not reached easily among the gods, those gods you know well and those you may not know of at all. Conflict seemed inevitable, and who knows what would come of it, had not the gods, in their final attempt to resolve the division of the world, sought the opinion of someone outside of their circle. And, well, who could offer such an opinion better than the greatest warrior of our world, the son of the god of justice and lightning, and thus comparable to those beyond compare. The most powerful among the gods assented to this resolution – even though he could have taken what he wanted by force – for the sake of avoiding conflict, believing that his own earthly son would surely rule in his father’s favor. And so messengers were sent out for him, powerful horsemen who could trample over all in their path, but who bowed before such a warrior. They told him that the gods were quarreling, and that he had been called on to say who should rule over the lands. The gods believed, at least as the narrator told, that: *‘Žarko will decide this justly, for Žarko fears no one.’* And not only did he not fear, but his mother had advised him before her passing: *‘Žarko, my son, my one and only, do not speak wrongly, neither for your father’s behoof, nor in the behoof of uncles, but speak with the true righteousness of the god of justice! Truth is stronger than any sword, it will be your sharpest weapon.’* And so the hero went to pronounce judgement on those who judge...”

“Of course, for the story to be interesting, the righteous division of the world that would be proclaimed would in the end please the god of justice the least! For who can judge the bringer of justice itself?” Vuk here laughed a bit to himself and continued on in a quiet voice, all the time taking care that the horseman in front of them could not make out what they were speaking of. “You see, Žarko proceeded to scold the gods well, each god in his turn, sparing not even his own father. He told them that they had become lost in their conflicts, that they scrambled for lands that were not theirs. He told them that this was the kingdom of Dajbog, made for him by Svarog, the creator, out of the darkness of

his first dream, for his first son only. He told them, he told the descendant gods: *'From the father it dawned upon the son, the first son of God almighty!'* When Perun the Thunderer, the mightiest god of this world, heard this verdict, one which he never could have expected, he grew red with rage. He jumped at his son, striking him with thunderbolts, and he, even the great warrior-hero that he was, ran: he ran away as fast as his legs could carry him. For he did not think it right to fight against his own parent, a fight he would also be sure to lose. And it was then that he would have died, as the story goes, had not his angel interfered: like a cloud of light, the angel descended in front of the enraged god only to be struck by a thunderbolt that would surely have killed the god's son. This guardian had sacrificed his immortal life for the life of Žarko, and so was he left without his angel, unlike you, me, and all other people of this world, and therefore there is no one left to take him to that other world when his time comes... And so our hero escaped, yet the consequences of this judgement he voiced unto the gods, he carries with him to this day. Perun cursed him while Dajbog blessed him, and both of these legacies have made him what he is today."

Vuk now dropped his voice almost to a whisper, more and more careful that a stray word not accidentally reaches Žarko's ears. "I think that I memorized word for word all that I heard that night in the tavern. It is said that Perun proclaimed the following: *'Žarko, my son – may God strike you dead! You shall know no grave nor kin, bereaved of throne and origin! You will wander without end! May your soul never ascend before to the conqueror you bend!'* Perun cursed him, but with this came also Dajbog's blessing: *'My brave Žarko, God still smiles upon you! You are lit by heaven's light, you will strike forever right! There shall be no greater hero! Your name shall be ever spoken while there shine the Sun and Moon!'* And much of what was proclaimed has come to be, though some of it may yet..."

And here again Vuk sank into silence, broken by the occasional sound of his limping feet pulling across their path. Senka remained alone for a while in the grasp of the story, taking time to gather her impressions. "And you think that..." she finally uttered. "I do not think anything!" Vuk interrupted. "It is just a tavern story."

After another pause, however, he could not refrain from speaking his mind. "And yet, here we are, followers of perhaps the greatest of heroes, whose name is known by all. A warrior who wanders from village to village, from town to town, and knows nobody anywhere, though everyone knows him. A hero whose accomplishments are so much greater than could be accomplished in a single human life. A warrior who men look upon in fear, and women with adoration. But who, in spite of everything, remains alone, just like you and I..." And Vuk drew in a long breath, during which it seemed that he was preparing the great conclusion of his story: "I do not think nor claim anything... yet, there you have it, if anywhere in this world exists one man who can die only by the will of the creator, God of all gods, I would be willing to bet my freshly-spared hand that he is riding on the horse ahead of us."

Infernal Pack

The small ensemble which had headed out from the village and upon their journey in the late afternoon, as the sun began to drop, travelled on for as long as Žarko could make out the path in front of them. After a peaceful night, another calm day of travelling followed, with a long afternoon break. Senka had the impression that Žarko had no particular goal in mind, but neither she, and even less so Vuk, dared to inquire about this. They left all decisions to the hulking man on the horse, and were pleased to stay back and disturb him as little as possible, as he had been in a sullen mood ever since they had left the village.

Another evening was approaching, which Senka could sense from the pleasant shift in the air and the tiredness in her legs. The third evening of her new life! And an evening during which she would finally become aware that, through no will of her own, she had set into motion strange forces which, from then on, would shape not only her fate, but also the fates of her companions... While the sun was slipping slowly into the horizon, a harbinger was approaching. It started simply – Žarko had suddenly stopped his new horse, cursing at him for being disturbed.

“What is with this nag now? As if it is scared of something...” he grunted, more to himself than to Senka or Vuk. Then he turned around and looked. It is difficult to say what followed: did Žarko, because of what he had seen, first cast out a voice that signified the danger, or did Senka unconsciously lean towards the ground, crouching with a muffled scream, because of what she suddenly felt and immediately recognized. Even the ever-quiet Vuk let out a long and prolonged “uhoooo...” And at that moment, they all began to hear what were at first barely audible sounds, but which quickly became a sea of noise that steadily approached. Together with these strange noises, as if to intensify their unpleasantness, a bone-chilling cold began to prickle them, biting at their goosebumped skin; still only in hints, like small waves rolling over the shore, yet nevertheless telling of the deep dark sea behind. And again it seemed well for Senka that she was not able to see what Žarko and Vuk were staring upon: the darkness approaching.

Vuk felt a fear greater than any he had known before, beyond even that which he had experienced the last day in the village when they were about to cut off his hand. Yet despite his entire body telling him to flee, he stared, as if bewitched, at the coming gloom. At first glance, it looked like a dark cloud rolling across the ground or a black apparition crawling over the earth. Whether because of the increasing closeness of the horror or their spellbound gaping at it, it seemed that the dark mass started forming parts of lesser or greater darkness, small figures who were growing in size. And very quickly in this multitude of shapes it was possible to clearly discern the dark horseman at the forefront – robed all in black, riding on a coal-black horse that was galloping towards them, standing out as the sharp spearhead pulling the whole wave and spurring it forward. To the left and right of him, forming the shape of an arrow whose striking point was the rider, dark animals sprinted. “Wolves,” gasped the

hobbled thief. But these were not the type of wolves from which his name had been drawn. There was nothing natural in these dismal shapes that approached them with blinding speed. All of them were entirely black, but for their fiery eyes, which seemed to shine out a piercing red, or so it seemed against the dark surge around them; and they were much larger than any ordinary wolf was meant to be, as could be seen by the size of those running closest to the horse. Above this hellish pack and the rider at the forefront, flurried what made the scene almost beyond ghastly – a cloud of dark, endlessly bustling bodies and wings, a swarm of creatures that, through their almost infinite number, produced the great din which had first reached the ears of our forlorn threesome. “Dusk imps,” stammered a horrified Vuk. And he was right – these were ghoulish things he occasionally heard mentioned in frightful stories, little human-like things with wings like bats. Yet they could never be mistaken for real bats: the small fire they sporadically spit from their mouths made it look as if, advancing toward them, was a night sky pulsing with a swarm of disturbed stars that occasionally burned and flashed quickly, revealing for a moment the terrifying form behind each one. From the stories that Vuk heard, but until now never believed in, he knew that such creatures could only be met in the dead of night; yet in spite of this, they were flying toward them while the sun was still hovering just at the horizon, furiously flapping their wings in an unnaturally tight grouping, as if to blot out any speck of light from reaching the ground. “Some witchcraft for sure...” murmured Žarko. His thoughts, however, were different; although he also carefully observed the grim ensemble approaching, perhaps frightened just as Senka and Vuk were, he looked at it all through the eyes of an experienced warrior; he was concerned not with what it was, but already with how to deal with it.

“I do not know if this is something I can combat, but you must run away – now! Hide and wait for me, for I mean to return!” He exclaimed this with a clear and firm voice, before forcing his struggling horse straight at the horror that was approaching.

It was not necessary for him to order them more than once to run. “This way!” shouted Vuk, and Senka pulled Vidra in the direction of his voice, then let her dog lead her, trusting once again in the animal’s instincts. “Easy, Vidra!” she had to exclaim several times, as the dog’s nerves drove him forward in haste and Senka followed him with difficulty, stumbling and falling to the ground frequently. “Just a bit further, into the woods!” she heard Vuk shouting from far ahead. Then, quite unexpectedly, in the middle of this rush, she heard a clear whisper, as if someone’s mouth were pressed right onto her ear; she twitched, fearfully jumping away, but the voice continued to hiss: “Essscape... hide... Essscape... hide!” And Senka continued running, holding tightly to Vidra.

“Ssstop... here... Ssstop... here!” the voice changed its command. Senka obeyed without thinking, throwing herself to the ground. She was already quite winded, though they had not been running for long. The dog dropped down at her side; they were hidden in the dark of the thick woods, well beyond the vulnerable edge of the forest. From searching eyes, they were shielded not only by the tree branches above, but also by dense forest shrubs growing all around; were Senka able to see, she would have wondered how on earth had they managed to get through such a wall of bushes, and that without a single scratch. But she could not, just as she could not see Vuk. And Vuk was also a sight to behold: a cripple, who until now had barely been managing to pull his lame leg along the way, suddenly had taken off as if transformed into a hurried, frightened animal. He moved through the forest

on all fours, now using his hands to rush more skillfully than his legs had served him earlier. He was bouncing around swiftly like a dog with a broken leg. Occasionally he would look back, trying to catch a glance of Senka. When he no longer saw her, he shouted her name out again, and, upon hearing a muffled response telling him that she was also hidden, stopped for a moment; then he scrambled immediately up to the top branches of a tree in a flash, displaying astonishing agility. Through the crowning branches of the trees he could follow what was happening back on the path they had been walking. Senka, despite all of Vuk's earlier stories, had never asked herself how such a crippled man could have travelled so widely across the world, nor how someone barely mobile could ever have managed to be a thief; and she had just missed a clear answer to her unspoken questions.

In the meantime, Žarko had drawn so close to the black cloud that his horse simply dug his hoofs in the ground, refusing to go a single step further, despite Žarko's attempt to spur it on with loud curses and slaps at its flanks. As the horse reared and stomped under the pressure of its determined rider, the advancing black cloud at once came to a halt – without any audible command, or perhaps one that was lost in the tremendous tumult of wingbeats and cries coming from the grotesque imps above. But a command had clearly been given: as one, simultaneously, the wolfish pack and the horseman at its helm paused, while a smothering of imps stopped to float in place, continuing to shade them. Then, after a slight pause, perhaps in hesitation, the rider separated himself from the dark mass and advanced forward. One horde of the imps also separated from their swarm, fluttering above the dark horsemen like a miniature cloud; he was completely enshrouded in their shadows, making him seem even larger than he truly was, while at the same time obscuring clear sight of him despite the light of dusk still lingering. Žarko was hit by the full strength of that unearthly dread and cold which Senka had spoken of, and for a passing moment he too felt the desire to turn around and flee in the other direction. But even if he were to do so, he was unsure of what response he would get from his steed; the animal's snout was now covered in foam which gushed from its mouth, and was an immovable object, dug so deep into the dirt that it seemed rooted there. So there was no better choice for him – despite the horrible chill – but to wait there for the approaching darkness; besides, he had an urge to see what this strange black rider looked like up close. If nothing else, the wolves had been mustered some way behind, and perhaps he could manage to battle and overthrow the horseman alone, before they could rush to his aid. As for the winged things flying everywhere above, Žarko would rather not give them a thought. Instead, with a slow motion he pulled forth his big mace from its straps, taking it in his right hand, shifting the jagged head over his shoulder softly and effortlessly, showing disdain along with menace, whilst all the while maintaining a rigid grip on the bridle ropes of the horse with his left hand, in case the animal were to go wild again.

The horsemen and the winged cloud above halted just a few horselengths away from Žarko; he thought he could reach him with a few quick, deliberate jumps, if only his horse would obey him. Now the two riders surveyed one another, cautiously and inquisitively. Žarko knew full well the kind of impression he made on people when he scowled; he imagined that those people felt quite similar to how he was feeling at this moment. The horseman confronting him was downright frightful. Through the murkiness that accompanied him and the shadows that concealed him, he saw a heavy black piece of armor that covered his chest, and underneath that armor, a sheath of thick chain-link ringmail draped

across his body like a shirt, dropping to his thighs; in his cloaked belt was a saber of enormous proportions, even by Žarko's measure, yet the horseman did not even rest his hand on its hilt, let alone have it pulled out. He was attired entirely in black, so uniformly dark that it was hard to discern any gaps between the armor, his sheath, and his legs. Yet, Žarko was able to observe that the rider wore full black gauntlets extending down his arm to his fingertips, and long black boots up to his knees – the only thing unblackened was his livid white face, bordered by his raven black hair draping down to his shoulders. This whole appearance elicited a strange impression – one that was sinister, yet at the same time lordly and almost beautiful. But whatever aberrant sort of beauty this was, it was tainted by the glow of his blood-stained eyes and red-blotched cheeks, and the deception in his performance seemed obvious and purposeful, as if staged in a play just for Žarko's eyes to see. But in examining him more closely, Žarko began to pick out details that seriously marred the original impression given off by the black rider: his black hair hung down in dirty whips, and his clothes at the folds were ragged, old, and worn. "This hair was not braided by handmaidens, these garments not washed by any servants," thought Žarko. And this thought gave him a fragment of sudden pleasure, inducing even a momentary smile. As if in answer to this smile, the rider in black tugged hard at the reins of his horse, which whinnied out a terrible screech. This momentarily undid Žarko's whiskered smile, prompting him to speak quickly and loudly.

"Hail to you, unknown knight! What mission has brought you here, if god knowest?"

Then the horseman responded; to Žarko's great relief, since he was uncertain as to whether this spectre would speak at all. The voice was dry and crude, as if he spoke with effort; at the same time threatening and scratchy like a muffled growl, yet somehow entirely articulate, so that Žarko could clearly make out every spoken word:

"Know this, man, who recognizes me not: a king-warrior I once was, but for long now, much more than that! And I know not what god you serve, but it surely is not mine... No, who are *you*, you crazed nomad rambler? Rare are men who dare to stand in my path, you should bow before me!"

Now Žarko felt emboldened, for this was his ground; he had been through such exchanges countless times. "Hear, warrior, in front of you stands Žarko: my path goes wherever I go, and I bow to no one! I am neither here for you, nor do I step down before thee."

The rider now seemed to smile himself: "So you are that Perunović Žarko..." his scowl a parody of joy, horrific like the grinning of some rabid beast.

Žarko spoke again:

"And you seem to know me, stranger. But... I know not why you mention Perun, when I serve not him, nor any other god: honor to all of them, but Žarko serves no one!"

The terrible smirk on the face of the horsemen grew wider: "I know you well, you mad Žarko, at least from some stories. Who has not heard of Žarko the hero? But heed this, hero: it would be wise for you to get out of my way. I will not bother to scuffle with you, since I have nothing with you."

"You argue well, king-warrior, but you make do poorly! Tell me with whom you have something,

and let us see where that leads.” With these words, the smile vanished from the rider’s face, yet Žarko almost enjoyed the scowl that replaced it, even if it was equally horrific when the black figure spoke again.

“Listen, Žarko: do not play the fool! I do no explaining, save to whom I serve now. And even then, only when I choose to, because I, too, bow or kneel to no one! But fine, if you wish to know, I will tell you this: I have an unresolved matter with that lass who fled me. Let me have her, so we may part on good terms.”

At these words, the man with the mace frowned, unintendedly and openly. “Listen, stranger... as it happens, that little one is my sister in fate, made so by the will of the God of the heavens. As much as I might wish to, leave her to you I cannot, for that would be a great sin. And I would not let her go even if I had not become brother to her fate. Therefore, it is better that you just turn your great horse around, so that we can part peacefully!”

Then, there was silence. The horsemen glared at Žarko, inquisitively, while Žarko gazed back at the rider defiantly. And then the black-tressed man laughed with his whole voice, a laugh as sharp as a knife’s blade, raw and cruel. And short. After ridding himself of this hollow pretense of mirth as suddenly as it had begun, the rider spoke:

“Very well, Žarko, if that is how you want it to be, I will allow it. Why clash here where there is no victory? My sabre might not be meant for your head... But think again, and think quickly, for in the dead of night my pack will set out in hunt. We will hunt for what is ours, and kill everything in the way. Kill, wound, or simply trample, it matters not. Take care, Žarko, that your path does not lead you across mine again!”

And after saying this, the horseman spurred and raised his horse, turned, and began to ride off, away from Žarko, followed by the high screams and wing flaps of the creatures above his invisible crown, not looking back even a single time. It was clear that he was not fearful of Žarko, yet that made it even less clear as to why he would at all accept to withdraw. But while a biting chill still lingered, whether from the unnatural cold or the unmistakable threat which the stranger’s final words held, Žarko finally allowed his limbs and body to relax somewhat. For the time being, they had pulled through. Yet it was now high time to ride off, and, reviving and turning his horse with a sudden twitch of reins, the large man spurred it into a full gallop, riding back to the spot where he had left his companions. Night was approaching. Long, perilous night.

Night Hunt

“You say, lass, that you have no idea why they are after you?”

The question was asked in a clearly doubting tone – and even someone as young as Senka, unsophisticated in conversation, could make out the clear disbelief expressed in this short sentence. They were now scrambling through the woods, as quickly as was possible. After coming together once again, Žarko told them that they must stray off the path. The forest would offer some semblance of shelter from the watchful eyes of their followers, even those above. This time the burly man was displaying a bit more sympathy, or rather the situation simply demanded it: either way, Senka and Vuk were now seated on the horse, while Žarko led it by the halter at a hasty step, quickly and decisively choosing a way through the forest dark. But if he had by any chance seen the rapidity with which the crippled man had moved just shortly before, on all fours, as he and the girl ran away, or the agility with which he had climbed up the tree and came down when he heard the gathering shouts, it would have made it immediately apparent as to how this supposed thief might have succeeded in such a vocation, and then they would probably have switched places on the horse. As they hastened, the dim light of the full moon would occasionally break through the branches above, signifying that the dangerous night had long ago already begun – thus far, however, there had been no sign of their pursuants. Yet the question of their whereabouts was far from the only one on Žarko’s mind – his surly curiosity was far from abated. Beyond the still lingering question of why she was being followed was the essential mystery of *what* exactly it was that was after them...

“I do not know, Žarko. Truly, I do not.” Senka was still frightened, along with bewildered by the tone of the question, so she was answering on the verge of tears.

“Really, sister? You have not, mistakenly or purposefully, concealed something?”

Žarko’s questioning was now becoming too forceful for the girl. He never was a lover of mysteries, and here he was running from one, a completely terrifying one at that, and still unknowing of the reason. This was surely making him anything but pleasant to his companions. Senka again answered that she did not know who or what was following them, nor why. She was no longer able to withhold tears from slipping down her blind eyes – she felt as if was losing the barely gained trust of her protector. From the tremble in her voice, Žarko made out that she had started crying, and softened his voice somewhat.

“Sis, come now... do not cry. But I must know from what are we running away – our heads depend on it. If I know what we are up against, then perhaps I can beat it. This is why I am asking: are you sure you have told me everything?”

For who knows which time, Senka again responded that she knew not a thing about their

assailants. And Žarko fell back into a deep, unsettled silence, seemingly focused only on choosing their path, for he was no longer sure what to think or how to behave. As opposed to Vuk, he remained doubtful. While Vuk had fully accepted Senka's life story, like many other stories which he had listened to patiently and attentively over his years and journeys, Žarko saw it all as the fantasized tale of a poor orphaned girl: the sudden fire, the striking cold, the manner in which she had become blind... sure, he had been entertained by her minutely decorated story, even pressing her to tell it again and again and not finding any inconsistencies, but not for a moment had he believed any of it. Without much thought, he had come to the conclusion that the little girl had simply beautified her tragic story into a fantastic truth. Which was not so important, since for him in essence she remained exactly what she was: a blind orphan who asked for help. And he helped her. But now he was no longer certain... then, suddenly, he stopped the horse.

"The necklace. Let me see it, little sis."

For a moment, Senka did not understand, but then he was already standing beside her, trying to remove the necklace from her neck – the metal necklace which Senka called "the wrapped snake," and this was indeed its shape. He was not able to take it off, however, and the young girl let out a breath of relief, long held while he had fumbled with the smooth metal and then agitatedly turned away from her. That was the moment when Senka decided to say nothing of the snake's voice reappearing – she did not know why Žarko would regard the wrapped snake as the source of their troubles, but she knew well that she wanted to expel any kind of reason for her protector to forcefully remove the "necklace" that hung around her neck. Slightly astonished, she now suddenly realized she somehow trusted the snake that made her blind; disturbed, she envisioned telling them everything, fearing that some magic was influencing her will, but just then she felt a pleasant warming sensation around her neck, and the hint of a doubt which she had felt for a moment slipped from her mind.

They continued moving through the forest at a brisk pace, Žarko still in front leading the horse forward. Soon, from the noisy burbling of running water, Senka recognized they had reached a wide stream – one that sounded very much alike to the one she had listened to so often back home. Their leader, without hesitation, stepped down into the creek, pulling the horse along with him. Since the sound of the rushing water never left them, Senka realized that they were now actually marching onward in the stream itself. As if reading her mind, Vuk, who was sitting just behind her on the horse, leaned over and whispered into her ear: "We are following the brook downstream – this way the wolves will have a harder time picking up our tracks and scent. A very wise move, in my estimation, for we can perhaps fool them in such a way. Our fair leader is not only mighty, but also clever."

Time took on a different flow in their constant state of expectation. Senka could not say for how long they had been trekking through the water: minutes or hours, but she was alert constantly, all the while hoping not to hear the sound of those horrible wingbeats and cries from behind her. After some time, she finally managed to single out a gentle splashing sound, quieter than the muffled steps of the horse's legs as it made its way through the water – Vidra had as well followed their example and was trotting in the stream just behind them. This made her suddenly realize that she was thirsty.

"Žarko, could we stop for a moment? So I can get down and drink some water?"

“No!” Vuk cried out. This was so sudden and unexpected that it startled Senka, while Žarko stopped and looked back at him. Vuk then explained more calmly: “The stories I have heard about the dusk imps, those ghastly little flying creatures, say they can poison an entire lake, so that anyone who drinks from it would fall dead from just one drop! This creek is flowing and so disperses the poison onwards, but we have no way of knowing whether the poison is front of us or behind us, or whether we are walking through it at this very moment, if it is in the water at all. No, it is not safe to drink this water. It is not safe to drink any water we come across until we are certain that they are no longer following us; for now, we can rely only on the water we carry with us.”

Žarko looked at him oddly: “What nonsense are you talking? Why carry when there is water at every step? And I have only wine. Perfectly good wine, mind you, and there is enough for all.” At this offer, Senka mumbled that she was not so thirsty after all, and so they moved on down the stream, the hum of the water now tinged sinister.

Their march continued quietly, the party warily listening out for whether, above the mild murmur of the stream, that more disturbing buzz from above would be heard. And finally there it was – as if they knew it was bound to happen sooner or later. Žarko pulled at his horse to make a few brisk steps before they stopped under the cover of a large tree, still in the creek, with thick branches draping over them. There they stood in complete silence, as the perverse buzzing and shrieking came closer and closer. There was no need to say anything, as they all understood what loomed above them. The dreadful scouts were likely flying over the forest in every direction, looking for the girl. Senka held her breath, as if these flying things above could hear even her breathing. There they stood, motionless and waiting, as if petrified, even when the sounds of that infernal swarm had seemingly moved farther away. Only when the distant sounds were utterly drowned in the gentle humming of the stream did Žarko pull at his horse silently, nodding for them to continue. They remained speechless, still pensive and anxious. Judging by this recent arrival of the spying scouts, it must have been close to midnight, as the dead of night had been marked as the beginning of the hunt. Soon they would likely know whether they had succeeded in covering their tracks, though actual safety and survival were still many long hours of night away.

Morlak

Only now did Senka begin to fathom what the “dead of night” truly meant. Midnight had arrived, and they all felt it. As if everything in the forest had fallen asleep or died: the breeze trailed off, the occasional night cries of birds ceased, even the owls stopped hooting, and even the stream’s steady whisper seemed to hush, so that their wading through water suddenly sounded loud and heavy, as the silence wrapped around them like a shroud. And then, abruptly, the still of the witching hour was broken by a distant howl, a long, drawn out moan from the throat of a lone animal, stretching out and out and out until, finally, another wailing voice returned its call... and then another, and another, again and again until these outcries of numerous throats had seemingly encircled the forest, pouring out into the night air. It seemed as if this choir of howls was coming from every direction. Luckily, still from a distance.

Žarko halted on the spot once again. Vuk thought that even the decisive warrior no longer knew where to lead them next. They appeared to be surrounded; in her head, Senka imagined a noose of demon wolves slowly tightening around them. Had they indeed fooled the wolves by covering their trail? Or had they simply fooled themselves beyond any chance of escape? Then the leader of the small fugitive party tugged again at the reins of his horse, leading them out of the stream.

Senka, of course, could not see where they were going; nor did Vuk at first grasp what was happening, until he observed something completely unexpected – there, in the middle of the forest, just a stone’s throw from the edge of the creek, stood some small wooden shack! Žarko stepped out of the water and slowly led his horse towards this cabin, while trying to stay in the deeper shade of the tallest trees. The forest here seemed unnaturally bathed in the strong light of the full moon. As they approached the cottage, Vuk saw the outlines of another behind it, and then another, and yet another! Incredible – what was this, a village in the middle of the forest?! When they got closer, they could see that the huts were grouped about the edge of a small forest clearing, just beside which flowed the small stream they had just left. The moonlight now illuminated these cabins clearly. All of them but one were small, humble cottages, thrown together without a great amount of craft or skill, or perhaps just worn down by age, while at the center of the perfect circle that they formed stood a larger and more significant structure, close in size to the burned down house that Senka had once called home. Small forest trees were growing right next to the small huts, their branches protruding from the circle’s outer edges and covering the huts in part. Only around the largest one in the middle, built just as low as all the others, was a small open area, just wide enough for few people to pass. From this circle, miraculously set apart from and yet in the thick of the woods, nothing could be heard to disturb the forest peace. There were no stables, no signs of livestock, poultry or horses, nor anything else characteristic of village life. There was nothing by which one might say that anyone lived there at all – the settlement might have been long deserted.

“What in the devil is this ghost town...” mumbled Žarko into his chest, quietly, eyeing the scene

in front of him. They stood on the edge of the clearing, looking through a small gap between two of the cabins, and, as far as they could see to the left and right of themselves, there was not a single path leading through the woods to this abandoned place. It was as if some demon had snatched up a handful of huts from somewhere and planted them right here in the middle of the forest. Vuk shuddered from a sudden, unexpected chill and felt a desire to turn back to the stream from which they had just come and move away from this place as soon as possible, but Žarko, for reasons unclear, stepped bravely forward. He cautiously led the horse through the narrow space, advancing towards the wooden hut at the center. Strange was this unlikely procession made up of a burly man leading a horse with a blind girl and lame thief, trailed by a silently walking dog. And thus the small party wandered into Morlak.

Nothing happened as they stepped slowly forward. There were no threatening signs that might signal an ambush as they went out onto the small open space in front of the central building. So soon they found themselves just before the entrance to the larger hut – only later would Vuk realize this was always the case, no matter which direction one entered the round village from – and Žarko led them straight towards this entrance. He seemed almost entranced, offering no explanations or indications of his actions, though perhaps he only wished to not break the odd, absolute silence of the place. Step by step, he approached the entrance, lit up by the light of the moon. They were just a few short steps away from the door, when the village awoke!

It happened so incredibly quickly, and yet at the same time completely naturally, that it seemed as if there was nothing unusual about it. The door in front of them opened without a sound, and at the door stood a figure lit up from the back by firelight coming from within. And where, just a moment before, was a musty darkness lit only by moonlight and enshrouded in a deep silence, there was now the vibrant blaze of numerous hearths and the pleasantly muffled murmur of a living settlement. Vuk could not unriddle how it had happened – the hearths could not have all at once together suddenly begun glowing, yet he was sure that there had not been even a single fire lit while they had moved along the small passage between the huts. Now, however, a little light was gleaming out from every single hut, glimmering beneath the doors or through the few small window panes.

The figure before them stood motionlessly, its face remaining in the darkness, but the light from behind clearly outlined a large figure – an imposing man, bearded, and almost as great in stature as Žarko. And he just stood there, staring fixedly at them. Vuk noticed uneasily that the doors of all the other huts he could see had opened, and before each one there was now someone standing. All these doors were facing the center of the circle and the larger dwelling in front of them. They were surrounded and lost, while all the eyes of the village were focused on the strangers. Then, slowly, the villagers began approaching. There was nothing threatening in their movement; the horse and the dog could sense this, and they showed not the slightest sign of uneasiness. And so the fugitives were suddenly surrounded by people who were looking at them curiously. The only one who did not approach was the man at the door of the largest building, as they were already within his reach; then, as if he had been waiting for the others to gather round, he spoke out. He had a deep masculine voice, rough but at the same time inexpressibly pleasant: “I welcome you, travellers, to Morlak! Rare is the opportunity to host passers-by in our little village. Dismount and come inside, for it is time to feast!”

As could be expected, Žarko was the first to snap back into senses, while Senka and Vuk were still completely confused: “Dear host, thank you, and may goodness come your way! We would gladly eat and drink, but now is not the moment; trouble is upon us, we are being hounded...”

“Lay down your worries, hero” the large man at the door interrupted Žarko. “Here time flows rather differently. So come on in, dear guests, feel comfortable, and let us celebrate. There is time.” And with these words, the man turned around and vanished back through the doorway from which he had appeared.

Feast

They were sitting in the central cabin, which Vuk viewed as some kind of unusual tavern. Everybody was seated on low, rough-hewn tree trunks, surrounding a large, round, wooden table, the only one in the whole large-roomed hut: Žarko, Senka and Vuk, along with another ten or so men. There were apparently no women in the village, or at least at the table. And the men were all hardened and strong, as if all coming from the same mold. They were dressed humbly, in fur vests similar to Žarko's own, which revealed their sturdy muscles and broad chests. Except for some rough pants, also made from animal skins, which barely reached below their knees, they wore nothing else. No one carried any kind of weapon, and every single one of them was barefoot.

On the table in front of them were water, wine, and beer in simple pitchers made from pieces of hollowed out wood, lacking any kind of handle. From these pitchers they poured the drinks into similarly crafted small wooden cups, and the man whom Žarko referred to as host (though, at least to Vuk, the man seemed more an innkeeper) often rose to fetch new pitchers, changing out the empty ones. Most frequently fetched was wine, which Žarko immediately dove into. He right off rejected the cups as "too small" and instead grabbed one of the pitchers to drink from it. "A long time it has been since I drank a wine like this," frequently commented the cheered giant, upon whose cheeks now shone a visible blush, while his eyes had taken on a bit of a bloodshot look. In front of them, at the center of the table, on a gigantic wooden platter, piles of roasted and dried meat were laid – the guests followed the example of their hosts, taking pieces with their hands; there were no plates and no forks, and the one and only knife was stabbed into a large shoulder of roasted meat in the middle of the oval platter, in case it was needed. There was no bread, no cheese, no salt – nothing but meat on the table. But the meat, despite being unsalted, was truly delicious, and all ate heartily. Vuk gave Senka a little piece of everything to taste, and it seemed that in those heaps and slabs were all sorts of known and unknown meats. They were soon stuffed without having tasted everything. At one point, Senka asked if a piece of meat could also be taken to Vidra, so even her dog, who had stayed outside with the horse, thus shared in the royal meal.

The host did not allow any serious matters to be spoken of until the guests had eaten and drunk their fill. Till then, the only topic of discussion had been the quality of their drinks, made from "water from the heart of the earth," pulled up from a well located at the corner of the inn itself, along with endless rants on the best ways to dry or roast particular cuts of meat. Only when he felt that the guests had indeed been truly satiated, the host finally went into the topic of conversation which they all had eagerly awaited: "We rarely get a chance to listen to stories, which we love dearly. Thus, we would be gladdened to hear yours. You spoke of something troubling that was following you..."

And so, little by little, the usually very reserved Žarko recalled everything of importance which had happened to them over the last several days: the wine had obviously done its work and loosened his

tongue. The men listened to him captivated, drinking in every word, exclaiming wonderment, approval, or excitement, which somehow always encouraged Žarko to speak on further. His story of encountering Senka started rather restrained, but as his narrative reached the rescuing of Vuk, he was already speaking in great detail, and by the time he got to describing the hellish wolves on their trail, he was almost exaggerating – he was so convincing that goosebumps broke out on the skin of Vuk, as if he himself had not been there to see that infernal pack. But the crippled thief remained as quiet as Senka, except now and again when a question was asked directly to him. Unlike Žarko, whose cheeks had grown more and more flushed as he had relaxed in drinking pitcher after pitcher, the thief and the girl were both still caught up in worries about their pursuers, as if they expected to hear the demonic howling in front of the door at any moment. But their hosts had obviously spoken rightly, comfortable in possessing a knowledge of which the guests could not be aware, as nothing disturbed the pleasant atmosphere of their feast. Or at least nothing but a subdued suspicion, probably fostered by concern, for Vuk had the constant feeling that these barefoot men were weighing him discreetly with their eyes, turning their heads aside whenever he would look to meet their prying gaze; he wondered if Senka had the same feeling, but did not want to spoil the pleasant atmosphere with unnecessary whispers, and so he never asked.

After hours of monologue, Žarko finally brought his tale to a close with his recount of the moment when he had seen the first cabin from within the stream they had been walking through. A hush then settled over the room. “And” the host was first to speak up, “what do you intend to do now?” “Well” answered Žarko, “I mean to wait here until morning, and to ask one of you, good people that you are, to lead us through these woods and out to the other side. Far from any path, and the closer to a town the better – if possible, one that is fortified. I believe that behind a walled town we might find a measure of security.” After the warrior finished laying out this simple plan, a moment of silence held the air, while the villagers looked at one another, before all together bursting into a thunderous laugh. Žarko did not find this reaction pleasant – his eyes grew immediately more bloodshot, while his voice took on somewhat of a grim, threatening tone: “I do not know what is funny, people. Are you laughing at Žarko?”

“Excuse us, warrior-Žarko, we mean not to offend you,” replied the tavern’s host calmly. “It is just that you do not know how things are in this place. As I told you earlier, time flows differently here – and that was not a lie. You would wait until morning, but that is not possible. For when you leave Morlak, in the forest you will find it to be the exact same time as when you entered. You are welcome here to rest and recover for as long as you like, even though I believe that you have found your freshness already, but morning is something that you cannot wait for.” The man spoke all of this in a mild tone, almost as if explaining to a child some basic principles that are understood, and in which there is nothing strange to be found. “Also, you want one of us to take you out of the woods. And that also cannot be – none of us have ever left the borders of this forest, we do not know the way out of it. And to have found yourself here, this means you are lost in the woods, too – if you were to follow the stream backwards, you would never find the place where you entered it, as the water would have erased your tracks, and the forest would have already changed, so really you can only get out of it by chance, if you are to ever get out of here alive.”

The bearded man finished, looking Žarko straight in the eye with no hint of deceit or mockery –

or fear. The rising rage in Žarko retreated at the man's unusual words, and he could only mumble calmly: "So what then do we do, my host?" In the end it seems, they were indeed guests of a strange people, men who had welcomed them well and provided them comfort, and it would do no good nor be fitting to stir up trouble now: the practical side of Žarko's wine-slushed mind understood that they already had quite enough enemies. The host then spoke up again, still not turning aside his gaze: "The way out of the forest we know not, that is how things are. But we do know that in the middle of the woods rises a large mountain, where shepherds herd their sheep. They risk passage through our forest, for they say among themselves that on the slopes of that mountain is the finest pasture that can be found. They do know a way through the forest, and we Morlaks know the way to them. And would gladly guide you there."

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