

Translation of a fictional novel by Matija Sever from Croatian into English

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FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

The topic of this thesis is the translation of a fictional novel combining elements of Slavic mythology and history written in the Croatian language by Matija Sever, as well as the issues surrounding the translation of certain phrases and expressions. The paper first introduces fictional novels as a literary category followed by some descriptions and examples of known fictional novels. The following chapter presents different translational procedures used in literary translation, as well as procedures used in this paper. The paper, then, presents the reader with two source text chapters followed by their translation and analysis. Final commentary and a short overview are given in the conclusion of this thesis.

Key words: translation, mythology, history, Croatian, English, Matija Sever, fictional novel

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2. Introduction

Literary translation is a process of transforming written works, such as poems, novels, or plays, from one language into another. It is an art form that requires a deep understanding of both the source and target languages and cultures. A trained literary translator must be able to convey not only the words but also the meaning, tone, and style of the original text. One of the greatest challenges for a literary translator is to preserve the essence of the original work while making it accessible to the target audience. This involves making decisions about which elements of the original text to retain and which to adapt to suit the target language and culture. For example, a translator might choose to use equivalent expressions or cultural references to convey the meaning of a specific phrase in the original text or might decide to alter the text.

Another challenge in literary translation is finding the right words and phrases to accurately convey the meaning of the original text. A translator must have an excellent command of both the source and target languages, including their grammar, vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions. In some cases, the translator may need to create new words or expressions to accurately convey the meaning of the original text. On the other hand, to help the reader understand the context and cultural references of the original text, the translator sometimes has to resort to more cumbersome solutions, such as using footnotes or other explanations. The purpose of the translation also influences the literary translation process.

Before starting the translation process, the translator should research and gain a deep understanding of the cultural elements in the original text, including their historical and cultural context. When translating cultural elements, it is important to retain as much of the original context as possible while considering the target audience and cultural context. A translator should strive for cultural equivalence, aiming to convey the same cultural meaning and impact in the target language as in the source language. In some cases, it may be necessary to adapt cultural elements to make them more relevant or understandable to the target audience. This might involve finding culturally equivalent elements in the target culture or creating new cultural references that convey the same meaning as the original. The translator can also benefit from collaborating with the authors themselves or experts in both the source and target cultures, such as cultural consultants or other translators, to ensure accuracy and cultural relevance in the translation.

It is important to note that the process of translating cultural elements in literary translation can be complex and nuanced, and the appropriate approach will depend on the specific cultural elements and the target audience.

Regarding the source text used for this M.A. thesis, it is a travel novel by a young Croatian writer Matija Sever, about Slavic mythology and how it intertwines with certain events in the Croatian history. It is written in the Croatian standard language and the story follows a young man on his quest to avenge the death of his family. On this quest, he meets some famous historical figures, such as Ljudevit, duke of Slavs in Lower Panonnia, but also gods of the Slavic pantheon and many different creatures from the Slavic mythology.

3. Source Text

I. poglavlje

PROLOG

„Primus pilus, exercitus est paratus?“ upitao je centuriona koji je na to samo kratko kimnuo i prošao rukom kroz neobrijanu bradu. Oči su mu zabrinuto promatrale taj neobično tih i miran nizinski krajolik. Noć je skoro sasvim prošla, a uskoro će se podići i jutarnja magla. Vratio je svoj željezni šljem na glavu i podigao crveni četvrtasti štit koji je do tada bio naslonjen kraj šatora.

Mlad legionar upravo je dotrčao do njega i pokazao rukom prema sjeveru. „Inimicus!“ kazao mu je zadihani vojnik.

Nejasna i prijeteća masa ljudi ocrtavala se u daljini. Brzim hodom požurio je do prvih redova svoje kohorte. Neprijatelj je bio udaljen samo jednu rimsku milju.

„Constans, constans...“, smireno je bodrio strijelce. Još su bili predaleko. Neprijatelj se približio na pola rimske milje i tu se zaustavio. Nijedna od vojski nije prekinula jutarnju tišinu.

Tada se začulo kako okrutan glas sa druge strane viče naredbe na germanskom. I tako je počelo. Neprijatelj se primicao polako, ali sigurno. Približili su se rimskim linijama dovoljno da se mogu vidjeti pojedinačni ratnici. U nekim boljim vremenima, takvog bi neprijatelja bilo sasvim lako podcijeniti. Oni nisu imali rimsku vojnu tehnologiju, baliste i katapulte, niti su bili upućeni u vojne taktike i strategije, dok su im bojni redovi i vojnička disciplina bile nepoznanice kojima se ne valja zamarati. Ipak, bilo ih je daleko više i njihova divlja narav bila je dovoljna da uvuče strah u srca mladih Rimljana i ratnika iz provincija.

„Praeparate sagittas!“ naredio je i oko stotinjak strijelaca spremno napne svoje lukove. Neprijateljski vojnici jurišali su prema prvim linijama njegove kohorte. Podigao je ruku u znak spreman da izgovori naredbu. Njegov stav bio je potpuno miran, a pogled hladan, tek znoj na licu odavao je da dijeli strahove svojih ljudi. Barbari su vikali i mahali oružjem, nekoliko

strijela je poletjelo od njih, sve da bi ih zaustavili široki štitovi. Strpljivo je čekao da se približe na domet strelica.

„Eicete!“ zapovijedi, a strijelci odapnu strijele i pogode pedesetak barbara, u isto vrijeme iz stražnjih je linija poletjelo nekoliko projektila iz masivnih balisti i katapulta. To je dodatno razjarilo barbare pa su ubrzali. Uvidio je da prve linije neće moći izdržati silinu napada i da će prodor neprijatelja biti predubok ako ostanu na mjestu. Sila se silom suzbija.

„Cohors prima! Oppugnate!“ poviče te njegova jedinica od nekoliko stotina ljudi krene na barbare. Trube su zasvirale napad, a skoro istovremeno oglasile su se i one ostatka legije. I u laganom trku postrojbe su održavale strogu kvadratnu formaciju. Neprijatelj se svom silinom zaletio u crvene štitove rušeći tek nekolicinu legionara. Linija se uspjela održati jedno kratko vrijeme, zatim je polako počela pucati na mjestima. U redovima su se razvijale pukotine u koje je prodirao neprijatelj i razbijao formacije. U samo nekoliko minuta razvila se krvava bitka bez ikakvog reda.

Koplja su letjela na sve strane, štitovi pucali razvaljeni od snažnih udaraca, ratnici obiju vojski padali su mrtvi jedan za drugim. Nemirno je gledao krvavu borbu u kojoj su ginuli njegovi drugovi. Najradije bi im se pridružio, ali dužnost mu ne da. Ako on ode, nitko neće ostati da koordinira bojno djelovanje cijele prve kohorte, sve zajedno nekih devet stotina ljudi. Nakon nekoliko trenutaka ipak više ipak nije mogao izdržati pa se okrene najbližem legionaru:

„Equum!“ zapovijedi, a vojnik mu žurno dovede konja.

Zajurio je bojišnicom na bjelcu kojeg mu je vojnik doveo. Sijekao je barbare svojim mačem koji je, iako nešto duži, bio veoma sličan mačevima drugih vojnika. Niz lice mu je curio hladan znoj i stalno je premišljao kako da ovu bitku vrati u profinjeni okršaj, sve da se ne nastavi ovo bjesomučno klanje.

Pogledao je u pozadinu prema redovima svoje vojske koji još nisu ušli u bitku i opazio da tu ima neiskorištenog potencijala. Pogledom traži kurira da prenese naredbu za juriš jedinica u zaleđu, a onda se sjeti da u ovom klanju nitko nije pri slobodi da se odvrati od boja. Zaokrene konja prema prijateljskim linijama i zagalopira kroz okršaj. Izišao je iz žarišta bitke i zaustavio se kod konjaničke centurije.

„Centuria! In proelium!“ zapovijedi, podigne mač i usmjeri ga prema boju. Tridesetak konjanika podiglo je veliku prašinu brzajući prema neprijatelju.

U ovu bitku Carstvo je trebalo poslati barem tri legije, razmišljao je, ova jedna nikako neće biti dovoljna za pobjedu. Čak neće ni bitno usporiti barbarsku navalu. Bitka je krvava i mnogo je ljudi palo, ali još uvijek ima nade. Probijao se kroz redove barbara zajedno s još tridesetak konjanika. Na njegovom licu vidio se očaj pomiješan s bijesom. Njegovi su se ljudi borili hrabro, željeznom voljom i za svakog palog vojnika poginula su tri barbara. Ipak, zlatni su orlovi padali jedan za drugim, crvene zastave S.P.Q.R. više se nisu vijorile, već su po njima gazili prljavi barbari poganog sjevera. Sa svojim ljudima probio se duboko u neprijateljsku vojsku i tim više ga je šokirala činjenica da se neprijatelju još uvijek ne nazire kraja. Ako se barbari ne zaustave upravo ovdje, propadoše i Rim i njegov Ilirik. Centurija konjanika mu je skoro sva izginula, još samo četiri viteza su ostala na konjima zajedno s njim u trenutku kad je naredio povlačenje. Konjanici su stali mahnito tjerati konje da se dohvate sigurnijeg položaja. Dobar komad terena trebalo je prevaliti da se nađu u okruženju prijateljskih linija, taj put se pokazao predugim za svu četvoricu njegovih drugova.

Uspio je doći do pozicije gdje je boj bio u punom jeku, ali barem je bilo savezničkih vojnika koji bi mogli vezivati dio neprijatelja na sebe. Brzao je kroz linije tražeći svog podređenog, njemu ovdje nije bilo ni traga. Jahao je dalje sve dok se nije spoznao uzaludnost tog čina i odlučio se vratiti u borbu. Baš tad je spazio prizor koji mu je sledio srce; njegov drug kleči na travi sa strelicom zabodenom kraj ključne kosti, dva barbara stoje kraj njega i smiju se svojoj žrtvi. Jedan drugome daje koplje, a taj ga zarine u centurionov vrat. Okrenuo je konja prema ubojicama i čvrsto naumio da svom bijesu da prikladnog oduška, a da osveti druga.

„Ivane...“, čuo je šapat koji kao da je dolazio niotkuda. Nije se obazirao na to.

„Ivane...“, čulo se glasnije, ali ni ovog puta se nije obazirao na to, već je podigao mač da sasiječe ubojice svog starog prijatelja.

„Ivane!“ u taj čas mu je konja pogodilo koplje i on izleti prema naprijed leđima udarivši o tvrdo tlo.

* * *

Zvukovi bitke su utihnuli i san ga je napustio. Sjetivši se gdje je, spoznao je u kakvoj je opasnosti. Osjetio je kako se netko naginge nad njim, ali nije se usudio otvoriti oči i time dati do znanja da je budan. Mora biti brz i protivnika uloviti nepripremljenog. Naglom kretnjom lijeve ruke čovjeka je zgrabio za vrat i povukao ga zemlji, dok je desnom trgnuo nož iz pojasa i krenuo prema grlu pridošlice.

„Ivane! To sam ja, Miren!“ poviče poznati mu glas u strahu za život.

Maknuo je nož sa čovjekova grla i protrljao oči. Pred njim je doista bio Miren, brat njegova oca. Podigao se na noge i pogledao oko sebe. Oči su mu zasjale od suza, a lice probljedjelo. Ako i jest samo sanjao tu strašnu davnu bitku, ova strahota se uistinu dogodila.

Od kuće njegova oca Slavena samo su pougljenjeni zidovi ostali, crni od vatre što je progutala ovaj dom dvije noći ranije. On nije bio ovdje da to spriječi, s gore se vratio tek jučer. Što god je imao ovdje, završilo je u pepelu. Suha ljetna trava izgorjela je sve do obližnje rječice s jedne i do šume s druge strane, posve ogolivši tlo natopljeno krvlju domaćina. Najstrašnije od svega bile su dvije niske hrpe kamenja nedaleko od ostataka kuće. Nije ih mogao gledati, niti se mogao pomiriti sa tim što one predstavljaju.

„Što se ovdje dogodilo?“ upita Ivan najsmirenije što je mogao.

„Rekao sam mu da je budala“, podigne se Miren sa poda. „Rekao sam mu to još pred dvadesetak godina, kad je sa ženom prisvojio ovaj dio divljine. Mislio je, selo će se kad-tad naći na putu nekog vojnog pohoda, bilo Avara ili Gota. Stariji brat uvijek zna najbolje. Znaš, postoji razlog zašto ljudi svoje domove podižu u selima, među svojim rodnom. Čovjek može sam obraniti dom od medveda ili vuka, ali od razbojničke čete.“

Toliko je i sam shvatio, da ovdje nije bila nezgoda u pitanju. Netko je odgovoran za taj okrutan čin. Ogorčenje koje je osjećao nije bilo samo zbog toga što su ubijeni dragi mu ljudi, već i zbog toga što nije bio ovdje da to spriječi.

„Zašto ih nisi spalio, kao što je običaj?“ upita ga Ivan.

„Bilo je ovdje dovoljno paljenja. Neka leže u miru.“

U šaci je stiskao brončani šesterokutni privjesak što mu je visio s vrata, jedinu uspomenu koja je preživjela ovaj plamen. Štošta je već naumio, a nije mu padalo na pamet da prizna taj nečovječni bijes koji je buktio u njemu, tu vatru koja je izgarala za osvetom.

„Imaš li kakve ideje tko je ovo mogao učiniti?“ upita Mirena.

„Neka od avarskih četa zaostalih na ovom području od zadnjeg rata. Već tri godine uzalud čekaju da Kaganat napravi proboj na jug, da vrate vlast što su je imali prije Franaka. Slabi su, i zato prisvajaju divlja šumska područja strahujući od slavskih sela. Vjerujem da ih je glad natjerala na ovo razbojstvo.“

„Hoćeš reći da ja nisam bio na brdskim pašnjacima sa stadom, možda bi uzeli koliko im treba i ostavili ih žive?“

„Nisam to rekao. Iako sam siguran da bi im tvoj otac svojevremeno dao dovoljno da prežive, vjerujem da nisu ni pitali. Bio sam ovdje, znaš. Prije dva dana. Ionako sam namjeravao posjetiti brata, a gust dim što se dizao odavde požurio mi je hod. Nažalost, pristigao sam na svršen posao.“

„Još su bili ovdje?“

„Jesu. Istočnjaci, tridesetorica. Previše za mene. Pratio sam ih kroz divljinu više od desetak milja na jug, ali nije bilo nade. Nisu se ni približili nijednom selu, niti su prešli preko ijedne ceste. Ovdašnjim šumama nema kraja. Naposljetku sam odustao i vratio se ovamo da pokopam brata i ženu mu.“

Imali su dovoljno poštovanja prema uspomeni na dom da u ruševine uđu kroz mjesto gdje su nekada stajala vrata, a ne kroz ostatke zidova. Prevtali su grede i tražili po pepelu za bilo čim korisnim što je preživjelo vatru. U uzbuđenju je podigao duguljast predmet; još jedna letva. Baci je od sebe u bijesu i nogom razvali zidnu gredu.

„Ni ja ga nigdje ne vidim“, prizna Miren. „Mora da su ga uzeli. Taj mač je ipak bio jedina prava stvar od vrijednosti u ovoj kući.“

Na hrpu ispred kuće iznesli su sve upotrebljive stvari koje su pronašli unutra. Ivan je okupio svu stoku s kojom je jučer pristigao sa brdskih pašnjaka, dok je Miren hrpu preživjelih stvari zamotao u platno i pripremio se na pokret.

„Kod mene si i uvijek ćeš biti dobrodošao“, reče mu Miren. „Živjet ćeš kao da si mi rođeni sin, a moji sinovi će te bratom zvati.“

„Hvala ti“, sjekiricu je zadjenuo za pojas. „Bojim se da ne mogu.“

Miren je problijedio. Slutio je takvo što kad je vidio kojom revnošću mladić traga za oružjem svoga oca.

„Barem ćeš poći sa mnom da se oprostiš sa ljudima kojima si drag?“

„Naravno.“

Do večeri su ostali kod zgarišta, pregledavajući jesu li što propustili i ima li još što za učiniti. Kad je sunce popustilo, zaputili su se uskom cestom prema selu u kojem je bila Mirenova kuća. U daljini pred njima uzdizala se velebna iva, žalosna vrba uslijed raslinja kraj rječice.

„Nećeš ih moći naći“, Miren ga pokušava odgovoriti. „Previše milja su zašli u divljinu bez da su ostavili tragove. Ti dobro poznaješ šume ovog kraja i Slaven te naučio preživjeti, ali svijet je puno širi no što misliš. Mlad si i snažan, ali ipak si samo jedan čovjek. Ova odluka će te na kraju koštati glave, a to tvoj otac ne bi htio. On bi htio da barem nešto njegovo ostane.“

„Sve što sam imao izgorjelo je. Ne mogu pretrpjeti tu nepravdu, niti mogu umanjiti svoj bijes. Još dugo ću ih goniti.“

Na Mirenov prijedlog stali su da odmore u hladu ive, na pola puta do njegova sela. Odavde nadalje pružao se nizinski krajolik visokih trava i niskog, grmolikog drveća. Sjedili su u tišini, opterećeni teškim mislima.

„Postoje određene stvari“, progovori Miren, „koje ti Slaven nije imao srca priznati, a koje trebaš znati da bi mogao donijeti pravu odluku.“

„Kao što?“

„Pogledaj taj privjesak što ga nosiš oko vrata.“

Ivan ga skine i pobliže promotri. Bio je to metalni šesterokut, ispresijecan linijama i sa krugovima na bridovima i u sredini. Slaven mu je rekao da donosi sreću, a nosi ga od kad zna za sebe.

„Napravljen je od bakra i zlata. Teško metali koje si običan pastir može priuštiti. Uz to, jesi li se ikad pitao zašto nemaš braće i sestara?“

„Rekli su mi da ne mogu imati djecu.“

„Nikada i nisu mogli.“

Miren je zašutio. Čekao je da Ivan probavi izgovoreno, da se pobuni protiv tih riječi ili zatraži objašnjenje. Ipak, Ivan je samo hladno gledao u daljinu.

„Misliš da ga neću osvetiti samo zato jer nije moja krv?“ progovori napokon.

U tom trenutku Miren je znao da više nema što reći, a da bi moglo mladića odgovoriti od njegova nauma. Bio je ožalošćen, ali i veoma ponosan. Još je samo preostalo da mu razjasni što se razjasni da.

"Nismo se ovdje zaustavili bez razloga, pod ovim drvom", pogleda Ivana. "Vjerovao ili ne, baš ovdje smo se nas dvojica prvi put sreli. Skoro dvadeset proljeća prošlo je od tad. Moj brat i ja vraćali smo se iz lova ovim istim putem i, kao i mnogo puta do tad, naumili smo odmoriti na ovome mjestu, ispod široke ive. Samo, netko je već bio ovdje. Četiri naoružana

Avara sjedila su pod ivom. Trojica su spavala, jedan je držao stražu s malom vrećom pokraj sebe. Promatrali smo ih neko vrijeme misleći da su izvidnica neke veće čete.

Vreća kraj stražara počela se micati i proćuo se plač. Odmah smo znali što je posrijedi i nismo oklijevali da ih ustrijelimo. Iz vreće smo izvukli dojenče, dječaka. Jedino što je dijete imalo je ovaj privjesak“, pokaže na stvar oko Ivanova vrata. „Za prvu silu nazvali smo te Ivan, po drvu ive ispod kojeg smo te našli. Zaključili smo da su tvoji roditelji vjerojatno pali kao žrtve napada, a da su otmičari za tebe namijenili sudbinu roba. Ipak, postojala je nada da je netko od tvojih preživio, da još imaš živući rod. Tjednima smo skupljali vijesti, putovali od naselja do naselja, ali ispalo je da baš u ono vrijeme nije bilo nikakvog napada u krugu od stotinjak milja, niti su ta četvorica Avara pripadala nekoj većoj četi. Tvoje porijeklo ostalo je obavijeno velom tajne.

Slaven je, premda to nikad nije priznao, priželjkivao da nikada ne nađemo čijeg si roda potomak. Nakon svih tih godina, napokon je imao nasljednika i mogao je mirne duše podići dom i živjeti život koji je oduvijek htio.“

O suton su pristigli do Mirenova doma na rubu sela. Pričekao je vani da Miren prenese lošu vijest ženi i djeci, nije mogao još jednom slušati o tome što zbilo. Nakon nekog vremena iz kuće je izašla Mirenova žena Vesna. Na licu joj se vidjelo da je dugo plakala. Prišla mu je i zagrlila ga.

„Miren mi je rekao što namjeravaš“, reče mu. „Htjela bih s tobom porazgovarati prije no što kreneš.“

Ivan je šutio i pripremao se da još jednom brani svoju odluku.

„Možda to sam ne vidiš, ali vrlo si im sličan. Mirenu i Slavenu. Zbog toga znam da je uzaludno odgovarati te. Njih dvojicu sam prije nekoliko godina pokušavala odgovoriti od polaska u rat, ali njihova odlučnost bila je jača. Na kraju su obećali tvojoj majci i meni da će jedan drugoga čuvati i da će se živi vratiti. Hvala Perunu, ostali su istiniti svojoj riječi.“

„Siguran sam da su imali dobar razlog, inače ne bi ostavili svoje voljene.“

„Imali su. Htjeli su bolju budućnost za sve nas, za cijelu Panoniju. Pridružili su se Vojnomiru, vazalu franačkom, da zbače avarsku vlast. Njihova je želja bila da Slavi opet žive kao što su živjeli njihovi stari, slobodni na svojoj zemlji, bez vlasti da im vlada“, zastala je na par trenutaka. „Kao što vidiš, rat nikad nije gotov.“

„Zato je i bolje da ja idem za njima, ja koji nemam što izgubiti.“

„Istina“, priznala je. „Čuvaj se tamo. Ti jesi snažan mladić, ali ovo nisu seoski momci koje možeš porazbacati i šakama slomiti. Protiv njihovog oružja morat ćeš upotrijebiti pamet i oprez, a tek onda silu.“

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Odlučio je krenuti na put ranim jutrom. Za pojas je zadjenuo sjekiricu i nož, a na leđa zabacio naprtnjaču s nešto odjeće, platnom i raznim priborom.

„Ne kažem da ću ih goniti do kraja svog života. Možda se željan doma vratim već za mjesec ili dva. Možda ću u nekoj dalekoj zemlji naći sreću, skrasiti se i zasnovati obitelj. Sve je moguće u ovo nesretno vrijeme. Za sada, neka me se boje.“

Poslušao je zadnje savjete koje su mu imali uputiti, kratko se pozdravio sa svima i bez zadržke krenuo za svojom namjerom. Ako sve prođe dobro, već za nekoliko tjedana opet će biti ovdje.

II. poglavlje

MORANA

Nakon dva bezuspješna dana i dvadesetak milja dalje, našao se na širokoj cesti koja je kroz rijetku hrastovu šumu vodila prema slijedećem naselju. Sve se čini da ljudi ovog kraja znaju samo glasine, ništa pouzdano. Primijeti ispred sebe kako kraj ceste na debelom balvanu sjedi ćelav čovjek kratke svijetlosmeđe brade i snažnih crta lica. Bio je veoma mišićav i plećat, a na leđima imao je ratnu sjekiru. Neki drvosječa, zaključio.

„Dobar dan, dobri čovječe“, pozdravi ga. „Ja nisam iz ovog kraja, ako vam ne smeta htio bih se s vama malo pogovoriti.“

„Dapače, momče, dapače. Ja sam Stanislav, a kako tebe nazivljeju?“

„Ivan“, odgovori mladić kratko.

„Pa, Ivane, o čemu bi htio govoriti?“ dobronamjerno upita Stanislav.

„Slijedim grupu razbojnika, znate li možda štogod o njima? U selu iza brda uputili su me u ovom smjeru.“

„Hm, da, ovaj kraj doista onedavno muče razbojnici. Ostaci istočnjaka i odanih im Slava, uzalud čekaju obnovu vlasti Kaganata. Ne tako davno mi smo svi bili pod njihovom vlašću, ali onda smo ih svrgnuli s Francima. Ova sjekira na mojim leđima, to mi je još iz rata ostalo. Neki od njih su pobjegli, neki još uvijek lutaju divljinom i pljačkaju. Ipak, moram priznati da to nije sve što ih ide. U narodu se govori da su se zadnjih godina odali velikom divljaštvu, da navlače na sebe zvjerinje kože i mažu se ratnim bojama. Takve sad zovu psoglavci, i mnogi vjeruju da više ničeg ljudskog nema u njima. Na našu sreću, malo ih je i nerado izlaze iz divljine. Navodno su dobili i novog vođu, mislim da ga zovu Volos, Veles ili tako nešto. Ali ipak oprezno s time, to su većinom samo glasine.“

„Jeste li čuli što ili vidjeli zadnjih tjedan dana? Bilo kakav glas?“

„Želio bih ti, Ivane, pomoći, ali niti sam što čuo niti vidio. A i kako bi? Ovaj kraj ima prostrane šume, a oni se više vole kretati divljinom nego cestama. Ovdje, na cesti, sasvim ih sigurno nećeš naći.“

„Toga sam se i bojao. Znači, u divljinu za njima. Po ovoj cesti više neću nastavljati pa bih molio odgovor na samo još jedno pitanje.“

„Reci, prijatelju.“

„Kamo da skrenem sa ove ceste, lijevo ili desno?“

„Bojim se da nemam nikakvog odgovora koji ti mogu ponuditi, a da ima neke korijene u razumu i mudrosti. U narodu se kaže da kad se čovjek nađe na križanju da nesreća leži u lijevoj stazi. Ako je to tumačenje istinito, što čisto sumnjam, onda bi u tom smjeru našao nesreću. Naravno, ovih dana ne mogu zamisliti da se itko susretne s većom nesrećom nego što je krvožedna banda psoglavaca. Budući da si ti priželjkuješ susret s točno takvom nesrećom, tvoj izbor je očit. To jest, ako uvažavaš narodne gluposti.“

„Tko sam ja da se ne slažem s narodom“, izusti. „Zahvaljujem na uputama“, napravi blagi naklon spram Stanislava i skrene u šumarak s lijeve strane.

Stanislav se podigne sa balvana, protegne prste i polako se počne udaljavati prema svom domu. „Simpatičan mladac“, zaključio i stane pjevušiti niz cestu.

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Skoro mjesec dana prošlo je od susreta sa Stanislavom, baš kao i sa bilo kojim drugim ljudskim bićem. Ljeto je u usponu, a Ivan još uvijek bezuspješno luta divljinom u potrazi za psoglavcima. Zbog tla prekrivenog lišćem dugo mu je trebalo da svoj korak nauči tišini, a ovdje je tišina krajnje potrebna, da ne preplaši divljač ili da ne uzbuni psoglavce.

Prošao je brda i doline, prelazio preko mnogih potoka. Namjerio se i na jednu omanju planinu, ali se na putu do vrha baš svaki put izgubio, bez obzira kojom stazom krenuo. Odustao je zaključivši da su neki usponi ipak za druge ljude. Nakon nekoliko dana sasvim je zaobišao planinu. Sada se nalazi u podnožju te iste planine, na proplanku kroz koji teče bistar, vijugavi potok. Neizdrživa vrućina natjerala ga je da potraži hlad među obližnjim drvećem. Našao je sasvim zgodno mjesto u hladu i zavalio se na mekanu mahovinu. Misli mu okupira mnogo stvari, a ova okolina svojom ljepotom i mirom svakako pogoduje opuštanju. Kroz glavu mu idu misli o razbojnicima, njegovom ocu i porijeklu, o samom putu pred njim. Napokon, već

mjesec dana luta i bilo bi vrijeme da nešto nađe. Nije trebalo dugo gledati ljepotu mjesta na kojem se našao da ga uvjeri da ostane ovdje još barem dan ili dva.

Podigao je na proplanku uz potok skroman šator i krenuo da se prošeće šumom van proplanka. Pola sata je hodao uzbrdo, a onda se odluči odmoriti. Kamen prekriven mahovinom našao se kao naručen pa se Ivan zavalio na nj. Petnaestak koraka do njega rasla je velebna bukva širokih krošnji, sam pogled na nju je smirivao. Gleda Ivan bukvu i široke krošnje joj promatra, tad mu se pogled zastane na neočekivanom prizoru. Protrljao je oči da bude siguran u svoj vid. Visoko na bukvi, naslonjena o deblo bezbrižno je sjedila jedna djevojka. Vila, pomisli isprva, jer drvo je visoko, a najbliže ljudsko naselje desecima milja udaljeno.

Oči su joj zatvorene, ali po dubokim udasima i izrazu lica reklo bi se da je budna. Na njenom nježnom, lijepom licu titrao je lagan smiješak, kao da sluša neku ugodnu melodiju. Imala je dugu i bujnu crnu kosu koja joj je padala niz leđa i tijelo koje je plijenilo pažnju mladića. Nosila je kratku haljinu satkanu od nekog laganog materijala neodređene boje, poput kore drveta ili lišća u sjeni. Nije više mogao disati kako treba, osjećao je trnce kako mu prolaze tijelom. Bio je potpuno i beznadno opčinjen njenom pojavom.

Nije mu se nimalo žurilo da oda svoje prisustvo. Velikim žarom i fascinacijom proučavao je pojavu tajanstvene djevojke, trudeći se da zapamti svaku njenu crtu i liniju. Tko zna hoće li ikad više vidjeti nešto toliko lijepo. Srce mu je brzalo, trudio se disati polaganije, tiše. Djevojka je nagnula glavu u njegovom smjeru, možda je nešto čula. Polako se pridigao i tiho krenuo prema djevojci.

„Pozdrav, lijepa vilo“, odmjerenim tonom ukaže na svoju prisutnost. „Nemam namjere smetati, tek trenutak društva bih molio.“

Djevojka se preplašeno trgne i pogled joj padne na uljeza. Činila mu se poput srne koja se našla oči u oči s lovcem. Potrčala je do kraja grane i kao vjeverica odrazila se prema obližnjoj bukvi. Tanašne grane jedva da je svinula pod svojim nogama i prije nego se mladić snašao, nestala je među krošnjama poput vjetra.

Zbunjeno je buljio u mjesto gdje je još prije trenutak bila. Možda su ga oči prevarile? Da provjeri svoju tezu, pokušao se popeti na to drvo. Ako ništa drugo, u zadnjih mjesec dana barem se izvježbao u penjanju. U ovim beskrajnim šumama samo sa vrha drveta može se sagledati široki prostor i dobiti neki osjećaj smjera. Nije mu uspjelo; deblo je preširoko, a najniža grana daleko izvan njegova dosega.

Vraćao se prema šatoru s osjećajem poraza. Prvo više-manje ljudsko biće u zadnjih mjesec dana, a ni riječi nije progovorila s njim. Nije mu izlazila iz glave. Kasnije je dobio i neki čudan osjećaj nemira u trbuhu. Isprva je mislio da je to od gladi, ali tada je shvatio da nije ni najmanje gladan. Ipak, bio bi red da barem jednom danas prezalogaji.

Ulovio je jednu pastrvu u potoku što je tekao kroz proplanak i stane je pripremati. Zbog nekoncentracije je porezao prst. Ispekao je ribu i nekako se natjerao da je pojede. Legao je pod šator, ali ne može zaspati. Misli o njoj okupirale su mu um daleko više od želje za osvetom. Noć je bila vedra pa je napravio par koraka od šatora i stane gledati u nebo prošarano zvijezdama. Zabolio ga je vrat, ali nije želio prestati gledat zvijezde pa se zavalio u travu. Tako je i usnuo. Ovog puta nije sanjao neku pravadnu bitku, nego nju. Mnogo puta do sad sanjao je da može letjeti, i bio je odlučan da tu prednost iskoristi da je uhvati. Ipak, čak i u uz tu veliku prednost ona mu je u snu s lakoćom izmicala i stalno bivala barem jedan korak ispred njega. Ujutro se ustao i ohladio glavu u potoku. Odluka da ostane ovdje još nekoliko dana sad je bila neusporedivo čvršća.

Drugi dan ponovno je vidio tu ženu u šumi, ali ovaj je put ona njega prva ugledala. Pustila ga je da joj se skoro sasvim približi, znatiželjno ga je gledala nekoliko trenutaka, a kad je on napravio još jedan korak prema njoj, nenadano se dala u bijeg. Pokušao ju je uhvatiti u trku, ali je nakon desetak koraka ona sa tla spretno skočila na drvo. On se također odrazio i uhvativši se za granu povukao gore toliko spretno da je i sam sebe iznenadio. Mladenačkom snagom brzo se uspeo na drvo. Na petnaest hvati visine po grani je pobjegla na obližnje drvo. Pod njim je ta ista grana popustila, ali nekako se uspio odraziti i nezgodno sletjeti na susjedno drvo. Bila je blizu, skoro na dohvat ruke. Nasmijao se i spretno primaknuo bliže zagledavši se u njene duboke, lijepe, tamno plave oči. Bio je nadomak nje, možda tek stopu udaljen. Iz njenog pomalo nestašnog izraza lica zakleo bi se da je sve to veoma zabavlja. Primaknuo se još bliže u nadi da će ukrasti cjelov. Zaokupljen njenom iznimno lijepom i bliskom pojavom smetnuo je s uma da se za granu drži samo jednom rukom. Nezgoda je bila u tome što je grana bila sasušena i nije joj trebalo dugo da pukne pod njegovom težinom. Pao je sa desetak hvati visine i leđima snažno udario u tlo prekriveno suhim lišćem. Udarac mu je izbio zrak iz pluća, iznad sebe je gledao vilu kako zabavljena time spretno odlazi. Ponos mu je patio neizmjereno više nego leđa.

Iduća dva dana više je nigdje nije vidio. Predugo ga je zadržala na ovome mjestu, a i sam je shvaćao da nije toliko dobar lovac. Složio je platno u naprtnjaču i spremio se, vrijeme

je bilo da krene polako. Odlučio je pratiti potok te je milju nizvodno naišao na vodopad koji je morao zaobići jer je voda padala sa tri njegove visine. Ispod vodopada bilo je omanje jezero. Spusti se Ivan do obale jezera, umije se i opere, a zatim pogleda prema vodopadu i zastane omamljen. Ispod vodopada prala je kosu ista ona žena koju je vidio prije dva dana. Sabrao se te polako i tiho krenuo prema njoj. Sad nema kamo pobjeći, ispred nje vodopad, kraj nje s jedne strane jezero, a s druge strane visoka stijena. Približio se ženi, a ona se polako okrene. Na licu joj se očitovala potpuna iznenađenost, znala je da je stjerana u kut.

„Želio bih se ispričati. Nije mi u prirodi da ovako smetam“, napravi korak unatrag. „Stvar je u tome, mjesec dana nisam sreo nikoga ni progovorio sa kime. Da stvar bude gora, nikad u životu nisam sreo toliku lijepu ženu. Oprostit ćeš mi ako sam odviše željan društva. Naravno, ako tako želiš, ja ću se udaljiti.“

Iznenadio ju je svojim riječima. Nekoliko je trenutaka promišljala zagledana u jezero, tad joj na licu zatitra nestašan smiješak.

„Ako hoćeš da se nađemo, budi ovdje poslije zalaska sunca. Ali nemoj ići u vodu.“

„Zahvaljujem“, odahnuo je. „Potrudit ću se da ne idem. Još bih samo jednu stvar volio znati. Kako ti je ime?“

„Morana“, reče ona, skoči naglavce u jezero i otpliva do suprotne obale.

Zadovoljno je gledao prema mjestu gdje je Morana izašla iz vode. Stvari je naslonio na obližnju vrbu i legao. Namjera mu je bila odspavati par sati, ali od svog uzbuđenja san nikako da mu dolazi na oči. Znojio se, što od nervoze, što od nepodnošljive vrućine. Tješilo ga je to što je okružen brdima, ovdje će sunce zaći ranije. Jezero kao da ga je zvalo da se u njemu osvježi, ali nije se usudio prekršiti zadanu riječ. Mora da je imala dobar razlog da mu savjetuje da ne ulazi. A možda je mislila da će biti zabavno gledati mladića kako pati na vrućini kraj ovolike vode?

Sunce je upravo nestalo s horizonta, a nje još uvijek nema. Nije mogao sakriti svoje razočaranje, ali namjerio je ovdje ostati i čekati cijelu noć po potrebi. Crvenilo zapadnog neba i zelenilo šume odražavalo se u mirnom jezeru. Prizor je bio upravo čaroban. Načas mu se činilo da neki čovjek hoda po suprotnoj obali. Bolje promotrivši, zaključio je da ga snene oči varaju. Naslonio je glavu na naprtnjaču i legao okrenut prema vodopadu. Zatvorio je oči i pokušao zaspati, ali san mu nije dolazio.

Pogled mu se našao na korijenima obližnje vrbe koji su sezali u vodu. Gledao je u tom smjeru dovoljno dugo da umori pogled i na nekoliko trenutaka zaspi. Kad je opet otvorio oči na korijenju je bilo nešto čega prije nije bilo. Na tom istom mjestu sad je sjedila prelijepa, gola žena koja je češljala svoju dugu crveno zelenkastu kosu. Ivan se istog trenutka ponadao, ali uslijedilo je veliko razočaranje jer je odmah uvidio da to nije Morana. Žena mu dobaci zavodnički pogled. Ivan se malo pridigne da pobliže promotri pridošlicu. Još jedna vila, zaključí.

„Trebala si naći dio obale gdje te neće smetati napasni mladići“, reče Ivan pomalo razočarano.

„Kako bi me tako pristao, snažan i zgodan mladić ikada mogao smetati? Dođi bliže, da porazgovaramo. Nećeš valjda djevojci uskratiti društvo?“ reče žena opasno ugodnim glasom.

Polako se primaknuo bliže i sjeo na travu okrenut prema jezeru. Djevojka ga počne mamiti pogledima, a odmjerenim kretnjama kao da hoće istaknuti punu ljepotu svoga tijela.

„Reci mi, mladiću, što radiš tako daleko od kuće?“

„Čekam jednu djevojku...“

„O, tako znači. Mora da je mnogo voliš, kad si voljan sastat se s njom na ovakvom mjestu. Godinama nisam srela mladića koji se usudi noć provesti sam, desecima milja u divljini. Ne bojiš se noći?“

Pogled joj je bio prodoran, kao da mu hoće zaviriti u dušu. Naravno da se boji noći. Kad god smogne priliku, spava visoko u krošnjama. Bilo bi sasvim nezgodno da na njega usnuloga nabasa medvjed, divlja svinja ili čopor vukova, a o ostalom se nije usudio ni razmišljati. Polako je bez riječi odmahnuo glavom.

„S druge strane“, okrenula je glavu prema vodopadu, „nema ni mnogo djevojaka koje svoje sastanke ugovaraju na takvim mjestima. Još malo pa će noć. Reci mi, kada se ti to točno trebaš naći s tom svojom djevojkom?“ upita ona razigrano.

„O zalazak sunca“, odgovori poraženo.

„Ali... zalazak sunca je već prošao, nije li? Kakva je to ipak djevojka koja ostavlja takvog valjanog momka da čeka?“ reče ona s neodobravanjem.

„Čekat ću ja cijelu noć ako zatreba, vrijedilo bi... samo da dođe.“

„Načekat ćeš se“, ton joj postane ozbiljan. „Noć je duga, a bojim se da ti ona ni jutrom neće doći. Čak i ako dođe, zašto sa mnom ne prikratiš vrijeme do tad? Učinila je grešku ostavivši te ovdje, kao da ima još mnogo takvih.“

Pažljivo je promišljao o svemu što je čuo. Njene riječi godile su mu i laskale, ali budile su u njemu neku veliku sumnju. Znao je da njegova sugovornica nije ljudskog roda, ali nije bio sasvim načisto trebalo bi li ga to brinuti.

„Već je kasno, a tvoja djevojka ne dolazi.“

„Doći će“, reče Ivan nesigurno.

„Možda i hoće, ali za vrijeme dok ne dođe možeš sa mnom plivati jezerom. Dan je bio vruć, a imaš moju riječ da je voda upravo savršena za odmoriti tijelo i opustiti se.“

Sjetio se upozorenja koje mu dala, ne ulaziti u vodu. Ova žena bila je nenormalno privlačna, i svakog drugog dana to bi bilo dovoljno da bez razmišljanja pristane, ali ne danas. Danas misli na drugu.

„Ne, bila je prilično jasna oko ulaženja u vodu.“

„A ja, zar ti nisam nimalo privlačna? Pridruži mi se ovdje“, isplivala je malo dalje od obale. „Nema nikoga miljama uokolo. Sve će ti biti dopušteno.“

Čežnja mu je bila skoro neizdrživa i sasvim malo je nedostajalo da istog trenutka skoči u jezero. Trudio se da misli na Moranu, koje nije bilo. Nešto malo razuma što mu je ostalo bilo je dovoljno da se zapita zašto ova žena jednostavno ne izađe iz jezera, ako je već toliko željna njega. Nekoliko koraka od obale više se nije vidjelo dno i to ga je iz nekog razloga strašno brinulo.

„Ne“, reče mladić i pridigne se na noge. Pokupio je svoje stvari i odmaknuo se od jezera. „Ugodnu noć“, pozdravi je.

Njeno nekad lijepo i blago lice sad je odražavalo nezamislivu ljutnju i bijes, okrenula se od njega i na njegovo veliko iznenađenje pretvorila u ogromnu ribu. Skočila je iz vode prema sredini jezera i nestala u dubini. Odahnua je s olakšanjem, na suhom će valjda biti siguran. Stotinjak koraka od jezera smjestio se i pokušao zaspati, da ga više ne pohodi biće iz jezera.

Većinu noći probudio je u nadi da će Morana ipak doći. Kad se probudio sunce je već bilo sasvim visoko. Otišao je do jezera da se umije; ženi koja je jučer razgovarala s njim nije bilo ni traga. Nekoliko sati ostao je u blizini jezera i čekao. Ništa se nije dogodilo. Sjetio se

kojom je brzinom i spretnošću vila bježala od njega. Da je htjela, odavno bi već bila ovdje. Naprtio je svoje stvari na leđa i krenuo južno.

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Zadnja dva dana pretežito se držao uzbrdice, što dalje od šumske rječice čiji tok je pratio. Sviđalo mu se ovdje. Šuma je na ovoj visini bila prorijeđena, s ponešto crnogorice i mnogo svjetla. Uski puteljak kojim je hodao vrludao je među bijelim vapnenačkim stijenama. Palog lišća skoro da nije bilo, zamijenila ga je rijetka, kratka trava. Zbog nje se mogao kretati skoro potpuno bešumno, dok u trenutcima odmora po prvi put u mjesec dana nije poželio da je u svom krevetu.

Spuštajući se nizbrdo naišao je prepreku; velebni hrast srušio se preko puta. Prepun grana i obrastao u bršljan, bilo ga je nemoguće preskočiti. Prošao je kraj panja prekrivenog mahovinom, odmakao par koraka pa odjednom zastao. Možda ga ranojutarnji umor i mašta varaju, ali bolje biti siguran. Napravi par koraka unatrag, polako se okrene i zagleda u podnožje panja. Bio je u pravu; pod panjem je doista ležao čovjek. Ne običan čovjek, u svakom slučaju, i nimalo ga nije čudilo što ga je isprva previdio. Izgledom se potpuno uklapao u svoj ležaj; obrazi su mu bili blago plavi, brada duga i boje mahovine, na čelu dva mala roščića poput jelenjih. Nosio je lagani prsluk sašiven od krzna raznih životinja i hlače boje palog lišća. S ove udaljenosti nije bio siguran je li čovjek mrtav ili samo spava.

Polako mu je prišao i čučnuo do njega. Disao je. Možda i nije pristojno probuditi usnulu osobu, ali u ovom trenutku mu zbilja trebaju bilo kakve smjernice. Uhvatio ga je za rame i lagano protresao.

„Dobro jutro, mladiću“ pozdrave ga žute, nestašne oči. „Kako mogu biti na usluzi?“

„Ime mi je Ivan. Tražim skupinu razbojnika da vršim pravdu nad njima, jeste li ih možda vidjeli ili čuli štogod o njima?“

„Da, moram priznati da jesam“, čovjek ustane. „Prije dva tjedna prolazili su ovom mojom šumom, htjeli su na jug, ali igrom slučaja izašli su na istočnoj granici šume. Mnogo nezgodno, ali hoće to tako biti.“

„Znate li kamo su krenuli iz šume?“ upita Ivan oprezno.

„Bojim se da ne znam“, odgovori zamišljeno. „Ja baš i ne izlazim iz svoje šume tako često.“

„Možete li me barem odvesti do mjesta gdje su izašli?“ bio je uporan Ivan.

Čovjek nasmiješeno kimne glavom u znak potvrde: „To mogu.“

Okrene se prema jugoistoku i napravi gestu rukom da ga neka prati.

Osim njegova izgleda, bilo je još nešto sasvim čudno kod tog stranca, taj njegov nestašan pogled. Nije ostavljao dojam da mu se može vjerovati, ali se ipak nije doimao ni najmanje zlobnim. Opet, zašto mu ne bi vjerovao? Nakon mjesec dana lutanja, teško da ga može navesti na pogrešniji put od onog koji bi i sam izabrao.

„Čuo sam da te razbojнике vodi takozvani Veles, je li to točno?“ upita Ivan.

„Točno je. Sve što oni rade, on zapovijeda. Za što su krivi oni, kriv je i on u još većoj mjeri. Ne rade psoglavci toliko zla po vlastitom nahođenju.“

„Onda ću i njega držat odgovornim i progonit ga jednakim žarom“, odlučio Ivan.

„Tako i treba“, složi se stranac.

Neko vrijeme hodali su u tišini, ali Ivanova je znatiželja bila presnažna.

„Oprostite na komentaru, ali ne izgledate kao običan čovjek“, izvali iznenada.

„To je zato što nisam“, prizna mu stranac. „Stariji sam od ljudskog roda. Kad je još svijet bio mlađi, a šume šire, bio sam čuvar svega što u njima obitava. U ove krajeve vratio sam se tek prije nekoliko ljudskih vijekova, negdje u isto vrijeme kad su i prvi Slavi pristizali. Još i prije toga oni su mi nadjenuli ime Lešak, kako me sada ljudi znaju.“

„Onda sigurno znate nešto više o tim razbojnicima što ih zovu psoglavcima“, s nadom će Ivan.

„Volio bih da znam. Čudni su to ljudi, istočnjaci iz dalekih, prostranih krajeva gdje nema šuma. Znam o njima samo ono što vidim, a za sada sam vidio samo nekoliko manjih četa kad su prolazile mojim šumama. Zapravo, ti si jedini, koliko toliko uobičajen, čovjek s kojim sam razgovarao u zadnjih stotinjak godina. Ipak, mislim da ne bi škodilo da te ohrabrim time da u slavskim šumama imaš još nenadanih saveznika. Koliko god to čudno zvučalo, nisi jedini koji voli tumarati divljinom. Definitivno si najmlađi, to ti moram priznati.“

Idućih dana vodio ga je lijepom, prohodnom stazom na jugoistok. Mnogo su razgovarali, većinom o biljnom i životinjskom svijetu ovih šuma. Lešak je posjedovao uistinu nevjerovatno znanje, a njegovi savjeti o lovu i jestivim biljkama Ivanu su bili neprocjenjivi. Još jedna zanimljivost bila je ovdje na djelu; srne, zečevi i ostala divljač nije bježala kad ga je

ugledala. Slično je bilo i s Ivanom, ni on si nije mogao pomoći a da se u njegovom društvu ne osjeća sigurnije.

„Budući da ste tako dobro upoznati s ovim šumama, ima još nešto što bi vas htio pitati.“

„Pitaj, Ivane. Tko pita, taj ne skita. Ti, sve se čini, slabo zapitkuješ“, reče Lešak veoma zabavljen time.

„Prije nekoliko dana sreo sam jednu djevojku. Prelijepa, crnokosa, kreće se spretno poput vjeverice i neuhvatljiva je kao sjena. Znete li možda štogod o njoj?“

„Zvuči kao da si upoznao Moranu.“

„Da! Tako je rekla da se zove! Molim vas, recite mi sve što znate o njoj.“

„Naravno da hoću, ali prvo ti meni ispričaj kako si je upoznao.“

„Ugledao sam je prije nekoliko dana šetajući šumom, ali tek par dana kasnije udostojila se predstaviti. Dogovorili smo sastanak kraj jezera poslije zalaska sunca. Ja sam je čekao, ali ona nije došla. Doduše, imao sam sasvim zanimljiv susret s povećom ribom.“

Lešak se glasno nasmije.

„U tom slučaju, moraš joj oprostiti što se nije pojavila. Vjerojatno je mislila da si mrtav. Kad smo već kod toga, zašto nisi mrtav?“ upita ga znatiželjno.

„Savjetovala me da ne ulazim u vodu.“

„Je li? Lijepo od nje. I ti si slijedio taj savjet?“ nevjerica se osjećala u njegovom glasu.

„Bio je dobar savjet.“

„Uistinu“, složi se Lešak. „Morana je šumska vila. Tvome oku ona se čini mlada, dok je u zbilji višestruko starija od tebe. Tri sestre ima kojima je najstarija. Njene sestre vole se povremeno veseliti sa momcima iz obližnjih sela, dok ona zazire od priprostih mladića slabih duhom. Vjerujem da je i tebe zamjenila za jednog od takvih. Ona bi htjela nekoga tko bi njeno srce zavrijedio vrlinom i junaštvom.“

Biće iz jezera s kojim si imao susret zove se Vodanoj. Kao i svaka riba, ne može ti ništa sve dok ostaneš na suhome. Ipak, ima svoje načine za nagovoriti te da svojevrijedno uđeš u vodu. Nakon toga povuče te na dno, za svoju večeru ili užitak. Vjerujem da je moja draga kći mislila da će biti veoma zabavno staviti te u tu opasnu situaciju, dati ti izrazito dobar savjet koji te može spasiti, a onda gledati kako stradaš jer se nisi htio ravnati po tom savjetu“, tu se Lešak

malo zamisli, pa se nasmije. „Da, to bi bilo zabavno, zar ne? Većina ljudi ne voli kad im se dijele korisni savjeti. Budi zadovoljan svojom oprežnošću, ne sjećam se zadnjeg mladića koji je odšetao s te obale. Vjerujem da je cijela ova zgodna bila neka vrsta provjere karaktera koju ti je smjestila, provjera za koju nije vjerovala da ćeš proći.“

Od cijelog tog govora, jedna riječ mu je posebno odzvanjala u glavi. Kćeri? Osjećao se pomalo posramljeno, ali nije si mogao pomoći a da se ne zapita bi li on smrtnik ikad mogao biti s vilom. Kroz lišće se pred njima ukazala velika čistina i uskoro su izašli iz šume.

„Izgleda da ovdje više nemam što tražiti. Bojim se da nisam junak. Odlazim.“

„Nisi junak... Dobro, ako nisi junak kako ćemo onda zvati ljude koji sami samcati love razbojнике po divljini?“

Ivan se iskreno nasmijao tome te mu pružio ruku u znak pozdrava. Veoma mu se sviđao ovaj čudan čovjek, volio bi ga opet susresti. Okrenuo se prema istoku, ravnici obasjanoj večernjim suncem. Opet ga prožme isti onaj osjećaj kao kad je prvi put krajičkom oka spazio usnulog Leška.

„Zašto nemaš sjenu?“ upita ga pogledavši u tlo.

„Glupog li pitanja“, odvrati Lešak. „Ni ti nemaš rogove, pa te ne gnjavim oko toga.“

4. Translation of Source Text

Chapter 1

PROLOGUE

‘Primus pilus, exercitus est paratus?’ he asked the centurion, who only nodded briefly and ran his hand through his unshaven beard. His eyes anxiously observed a strangely tranquil and peaceful lowland landscape. The night is almost completely over, and soon the morning mist will lift. He put his iron helmet back on his head and raised the red square shield that had been leaning against the tent.

A young legionnaire just ran up to him and pointed his hand to the north. ‘Inimicus!’ the panting soldier told him.

A vague and threatening mass of people appeared in the distance. With a swift gait, he hurried to the front lines of his cohort. The enemy was only one Roman mile away.

‘Constans, constans...’ he calmly encouraged the archers. They were still too far. The enemy came closer and stopped about half a Roman mile from them. Neither army broke the morning silence.

Then, a cruel voice was heard from the other side, shouting commands in Germanic. So it began. Slowly, but surely, the enemy approached. They got close to the Roman lines enough to discern individual warriors. In better times, such an enemy would have been quite easy to underestimate. They did not have Roman military technology, ballistae, and catapults, nor were they familiar with military tactics and strategies, while battle formations and military discipline were unknown to them and not worth bothering with. However, there were far more of them, and their savage nature was enough to strike fear into the hearts of young Romans and provincial warriors.

‘Preparete sagittas!’ he ordered and about a hundred archers ready their bows. Enemy soldiers charged toward the front lines of his cohort. He raised his hand in the air, ready to give the order. His posture was completely calm, and his gaze cold. Only the sweat on his face

showed he shared the fears of his men. The barbarians shouted and waved their weapons, a few arrows flew from them, all to be stopped by the broad shields. He waited patiently for them to come within range of the arrows.

‘Eicete!’ he ordered, and the archers fired their arrows, hitting some fifty barbarians. Several projectiles flew from the massive ballistae and catapults. This enraged the barbarians even more, so they sped up. He realised that the front lines could not withstand the force of the attack and that the enemy’s advance would be too deep if they remained in place. Force countered force.

‘Cohors prima! Oppugnate!’ he shouted and his unit of several hundred men attacked the barbarians. The trumpets sounded the charge, and almost simultaneously, the rest of the legion responded. Even in a light run, the unit maintained a tight square formation. The enemy’s force has crashed into the red shields with all their might, knocking down only a few legionnaires. The line held out for a short while, then slowly cracked. More holes appeared, and the enemy was breaking in and breaking up the formations. A bloody battle ensued in just a few minutes, with no apparent order.

Spears were flying in all directions, shields shattering from the powerful blows, and warriors of both armies were falling dead one after the other. He watched the bloody battle with unease as his comrades were dying. He would love nothing more to join them, but his sense of duty didn’t let him. If he leaves his post, there will be no one to coordinate the combat actions of the entire first cohort. All together, some nine hundred men. After a few moments, however, he could not stand it any longer, so he turned to the nearest legionnaire:

‘Equum!’ he ordered, and the soldier quickly brought him his horse.

He rushed across the battlefield on the white horse the soldier brought him. He cut the barbarians with his sword, which, although slightly longer, was very similar to the swords of other soldiers. A cold sweat was dripping down his face and he kept thinking of ways to turn this battle from a rampant slaughter into a civilized skirmish.

He looked back towards the lines of his army that had not yet entered the battle and noticed that there was untapped potential. He looked for the courier to give the order to charge the units in the rear, and then he remembered that in this slaughter no one is at liberty to turn away from the fight. He turned his horse towards the friendly lines and galloped through the fray. He came out of the heat of battle and stopped at the cavalry century.

‘Centuria! In proelium!’ he orders, raises his sword, and points it toward the fight. About thirty horsemen raised a great dust as they rushed towards the enemy.

The Empire should have sent at least three legions into this battle, he thought, this one will by no means be enough for victory. It won’t even slow down the barbarian onslaught. The battle is bloody and many men have fallen, but there is still hope. He was breaking through the barbarian ranks together with about 30 horsemen. His face showed a mixture of despair and rage. His men fought bravely, with an iron will, and for every fallen soldier, three barbarians died. Yet, the golden eagles fell one by one, the red SPQR flags no longer waving, but trampled by the filthy barbarians of the heathen north. With his army, he broke into the enemy, and he was even more shocked by the fact that there was still no end to them. Rome and his Illyricum will fall if the barbarians don’t stop here and now. His cavalry had vanished, leaving only four knights on horseback with him when he ordered the retreat. The cavalymen started frantically forcing the horses to a safer position. They had to cover a good bit of ground to find themselves surrounded by friendly lines; a journey too long for all four of his comrades.

He managed to get to a position where the battle was in full swing, but at least there were allied soldiers who could divert part of the enemy’s attention to themselves. He rushed through the lines looking for his subordinate, but there was no sign of him there. It was then he saw a scene that broke his heart; his comrade kneeling on the ground with an arrow stuck in his collarbone with two barbarians standing beside him and laughing at their victim. One gave the other a spear, and the latter plunged it into the centurion’s neck. He turned his horse towards the murderers and firmly decided to vent his anger, to avenge his comrade.

‘Ivan...’, he heard a whisper that seemed to come out of nowhere. He didn’t pay any attention to it.

‘Ivan...’, he heard it louder, but again he didn’t pay attention to it. Instead, he raised his sword to cut the murderers of his old friend.

‘Ivan!’, at that moment his horse was hit by a spear and he flew forward, hitting the hard ground with his back.

* * *

The sounds of battle had ceased, and sleep left him. Remembering where he was, he realized the danger he was in. He felt someone leaning over him, but he didn’t dare open his eyes to let anyone know he was awake. He has to be quick and catch his opponent off guard.

With a sudden movement of his left hand, he grabbed the man by the neck and dragged him to the ground, while his right hand snatched the knife from his belt and went for the stranger's throat.

'Ivan! It's me, Miren!' shouted a familiar voice in fear for his life.

He removed the knife from the man's throat and rubbed his eyes. In front of him was indeed Miren, his father's brother. He stood and looked around. His eyes lit up with tears, and his face turned pale. If he only dreamed of that terrible battle of long ago, this horror really happened.

His father Slaven's house, was reduced to charred walls, blackened by the fire that had devoured it two nights before. He wasn't here to prevent it, as he only got back from the mountain yesterday. Whatever he possessed here ended up in ashes. The dry summer grass burnt to a nearby stream on one side and to the forest on the other, completely exposed the earth soaked with the host's blood. The two low mounds of stones next to the place where the house used to stand were the most terrifying sight. He could not look at them, nor could he reconcile himself to what they represented.

'What happened here?' asked Ivan as calmly as he could.

'I told him he was a fool.' Miren got up. 'I told him that 20 years ago, when together with his wife, he took over this part of the wilderness. He thought the village would eventually find itself in the path of some military campaign, either by Avars or Goths. The older brother always knows best. You know, there is a reason people build their homes in villages, among their kin. A man can defend his home from a bear or a wolf alone, but from a band of robbers...'

He understood that much himself, that this was not an accident. Someone is responsible for this cruelty. The resentment he felt was not just because his loved ones were killed, but also because he wasn't here to stop it.

'Why didn't you burn them, as is the custom?' Ivan asked him.

'There was enough burning here. May they rest in peace.'

He clutched the bronze hexagonal pendant that hung from his neck, the only memento that survived the flames. A lot of things crossed his mind, but it hadn't occurred to him to acknowledge that inhuman rage that burned inside him, that fire that burned for revenge.

'Do you have any idea who might have done this?' He asked Miren.

‘One of the Avar troops that stayed in this area since the last war. For three years, they have been waiting for the Khaganate to break into the south and regain the control they had before the Franks. They’re weak, and so they’re taking over the wild forest areas in fear of the Slavic villages. I believe hunger forced them to do this.’

‘You mean, if I hadn’t been out on the mountain pastures with the herd, maybe they’d take what they needed and left them alive?’

‘That’s not what I said. Although I’m sure your father would have willingly given them enough to survive, if only they had asked. I was here, you know. Two days ago. I was going to visit my brother anyway, and the thick smoke rising from here just hastened my walk. Alas, I arrived too late.’

‘They were still here?’

‘They were. Easterners, thirty of them. Too many for just myself. I followed them through the wilderness over a dozen miles to the south, but without hope. They didn’t go near any villages, nor did they cross any road. There’s no end to the forests here. I finally gave up and came back here to bury my brother and his wife.’

They had enough respect for the memory of the home to enter the ruins through the place where the door once stood, rather than through the remnants of the walls. They turned the beams over and searched the ashes for anything useful that had survived the fire. In excitement, he picked up a long object, another plank. He throws it away in a fit of rage and kicks the beam of the wall.

‘I don’t see it anywhere either’, Miren admits. ‘They must have taken it. That sword was, after all, the only thing of real value in this house.’

They put all the usable things they found inside on a pile in front of the house. Ivan gathered all the livestock he had brought yesterday from the mountain pastures, while Miren wrapped the remaining belongings in a cloth and prepared for the journey ahead.

‘You are and always will be welcome with me,’ said Miren to him. ‘You will live as if you were my son, and my sons will call you their brother.’

‘Thank you’, he said, tucking the small axe into his belt. ‘I’m afraid I can’t.’

Miren turned pale. He had suspected as much when he saw the young man’s eagerness to search for his father’s weapon.

‘Will you at least come with me to say goodbye to the people who care about you?’

‘Of course.’

They stayed at the ruins until evening, checking if they had missed anything and if there was still anything to do. When the sun began to set, they headed down the narrow road towards the village where Miren lived. In the distance before them stood in the thicket by the creek a magnificent ivy-covered weeping willow.

‘You won’t be able to find them,’ Miren tried to dissuade him. ‘They have gone too many miles into the wilderness without leaving a trace. You know these forests well, and Slaven taught you how to survive, but the world is broader than you think. You are young and there is strength in you, but you are just one man. This decision will ultimately cost you your life, and your father wouldn’t want that. He would like at least something of his to remain.’

‘Everything I had burned down. I cannot stand that injustice, nor can I suppress my rage. I will chase them for a long time.’

On Miren’s suggestion, they stopped to rest in the willow’s shade, halfway to his village. From here onwards stretched a lowland landscape of tall grasses and low, bush-like trees. They sat in silence, burdened with heavy thoughts.

‘There are certain things’, Miren spoke, ‘that Slaven didn’t have the heart to admit to you, but you need to know them in order to make the right decision.’

‘Like what?’

‘Take a look at your pendant hanging from your neck.’

Ivan takes it off and takes a closer look. It was a metal hexagon, intersected with lines and with circles on the edges and in the center. Slaven told him it brings good luck, and has worn it for as long as he can remember.

‘It is made out of copper and gold. Hardly metals an ordinary shepherd could afford. Besides, have you ever wondered why you don’t have any brothers or sisters?’

‘They told me they couldn’t have children.’

‘They never could.’

Miren fell silent. He waited for Ivan to digest what had been said, to protest or ask for an explanation. However, Ivan just stared coldly into the distance.

‘You think I won’t avenge him just because he’s not my blood?’ he finally spoke.

In that moment Miren knew there was nothing more he could say that would dissuade the young man from his intent. He was saddened, but also very proud. All that remained, was to clarify the rest.

‘We didn’t stop here for no reason, under this tree’, he looks at Ivan. ‘Believe it or not, it was right here that the two of us first met. Nearly twenty springs have passed since then. My brother and I were returning from a hunt along this same path, and as we had done many times before, we decided to rest at this spot under the wide willow. However, someone had already been there. Four armed Avars were sitting under the willow. We observed them for a while, thinking they might be scouts for a larger group.

The bag next to the guard moved, and we heard crying. We immediately understood what was happening and didn’t hesitate to shoot them. We pulled out a baby boy from the bag. The only thing the child had was this pendant,’ pointing to the item around Ivan’s neck. ‘For the time being, we named you Ivan, after the ivy covering the willow tree under which we found you. We reasoned your parents likely fell victim to the attack, and that the captors had planned for you to live as a slave. Still, there was hope that some of your kin had survived, that you still had living relatives. For weeks, we gathered news, travelled from village to village, but it turned out that at that time there had been no attacks within a hundred miles, nor did those four Avars belong to any larger group. Your origin remained shrouded in mystery.

Slaven, although he never admitted it, secretly wished that we would never find out whose descendant you were. After all those years, he finally had an heir and could peacefully build a home and live the life he had always wanted.’

At dusk, they arrived at Miren’s home on the outskirts of the village. He waited outside while Miren broke the bad news to his wife and children; he couldn’t bear to hear it again. After some time, Vesna, Miren’s wife, came out of the house. Her face showed signs of prolonged crying. She approached him and embraced him.

‘Miren told me what you intend to do,’ she said. ‘I would like to talk to you before you leave.’

Ivan kept quiet, preparing himself to defend his decision once more.

‘Perhaps you don’t see it yourself, but you are very much like them. Like Miren and Slaven. That’s why I know it’s futile to dissuade you. A few years ago, I tried to persuade both of them not to go to war, but their determination was stronger. In the end, they promised your mother and me they would watch over each other and return alive. Thanks to Perun, thy remained true to their word.’

‘I’m certain they had a good reason, otherwise they wouldn’t leave their loved ones.’

‘They did. They wanted a better future for all of us, for all of Pannonia. They joined Vojnomir, a vassal of the Franks, to overthrow the Avars. Their desire was for the Slavs to live again as their ancestors did, free on their own land, without a ruler to govern them,” she paused for a moment. ‘As you can see, the war is never over.’

‘That’s why it’s better for me to go after them, someone who has nothing to lose.’

‘It’s true,’ she admitted. ‘Take care out there. You’re a strong young man, but these aren’t village boys you can scatter and overpower with your fists. Against their weapons, you’ll need to use your wits and caution first, and leave force as your last resort.’

* * *

He decided to set out early in the morning. He strapped on a small axe and a knife to his belt, and slung a backpack over his shoulder containing some clothes, canvas, and various tools.

‘I’m not saying I’ll chase them for the rest of my life. Maybe I’ll return home longing for it in just a month or two. Perhaps I’ll find happiness in some distant land, settle down, and start a family. Anything is possible in these troubled times. For now, let them fear me.’

He listened to the last pieces of advice they had to offer, bid a brief farewell to everyone, and without hesitation, set off on his mission. If all goes well, he could be back in just a few weeks.

Chapter II

MORANA

After two unsuccessful days and some twenty miles further, he found himself on a wide road that led through a sparse oak forest towards the next settlement. It seems the people of this region only know rumours, nothing reliable. He noticed in front of him, by the side of the road, a bald man with a short, light brown beard and strong facial features sitting on a thick log. He was very muscular and broad-shouldered, with a war axe on his back. A woodcutter, he concluded.

‘Good day, good sir,’ he greeted him. ‘I’m not from around here, and if you don’t mind, I’d like to have a little chat with you.’

‘Of course, lad, of course. I am Stanislav, and what do they call you?’

‘Ivan’, the young man replied briefly.

‘Well, Ivan, what would you like to talk about?’ Stanislav asked kindly.

‘I am following a group of bandits. Do you know anything about them? In the village beyond the hill, they directed me this way.’

‘Hmm, yes, this area has indeed been troubled by bandits lately. Remnants of the Easterners and their loyal Slavs, they are futilely awaiting the restoration of the Khaganate’s rule. Not so long ago, we all were under their rule, but then we overthrew them together with the Franks. This axe on my back, it’s something I kept from the war. Some of them fled, some still roam the wilderness and plunder. However, I must admit that’s not all that drives them. Among the people, it’s said that in recent years they’ve turned to great savagery, wearing animal skins and painting themselves with war colours. Such ones are now called Psoglavs¹ and many believe there is nothing human left in them. Luckily for us, there are few of them, and they rarely venture out of the wilderness. Apparently, they’ve got a new leader, I think they call him Volos, Veles, or something like that. Approach that with caution; it’s mostly just rumours.’

¹ Dog-headed men or Dog-heads, in Slavic mythology they are described as men with heads of wolves with one or three eyes

‘Have you heard or seen anything in the past week? Any news?’

‘I would like to help you, Ivan, but I haven't heard or seen anything. How could I? This area has vast forests, and they prefer to move through the wilderness rather than on roads. You certainly won't find them here, on the road.’

‘That's what I feared. So, I'll have to track them into the wilderness. I won't continue down this road, so I'd like an answer to just one more question.’

‘Go ahead, friend.’

‘Which way should I turn from this road, left or right?’

‘I fear I have no answer to offer you that has any roots in reason and wisdom. Among the people, it is said that when a man finds himself at a crossroads, misfortune lies in the left path. If that interpretation holds true, which I highly doubt, then you would find misfortune in that direction. Of course, these days, I cannot imagine anyone encountering greater misfortune than facing a bloodthirsty gang of psoglavci. Since you seem to desire such an encounter, your choice is simple. That is, if you value folk superstitions.’

‘Who am I to disagree with the people,’ he muttered. ‘Thank you for the directions.’ He made a slight bow towards Stanislav and turned into the grove on the left.

Stanislav rose from the boulder, stretched his fingers, and began to slowly walk back towards his home. ‘Nice lad,’ he concluded, and started humming as he walked down the road.

* * *

Nearly a month had passed since Ivan's encounter with Stanislav, much like any other human being. Summer was on the rise, and Ivan continued his unsuccessful wanderings through the wilderness in search of the psoglavci. The forest floor, covered with leaves, had made it challenging for him to learn to step quietly, yet silence was crucial here — not to startle the wildlife or alert the Psoglavs.

He crossed hills and valleys, crossed many streams. He even came across a small mountain, but every time he tried to reach the summit, he got lost no matter which path he took. He gave up, concluding that some climbs were meant for other people. After several days, he completely bypassed the mountain. Now, he found himself at the base of that same mountain, on a clearing through which a clear, meandering stream flowed. The unbearable heat forced him to seek shade among nearby trees. He found a convenient spot in the shade and reclined

on soft moss. His mind was occupied with many thoughts, and the beauty and tranquillity of this surroundings certainly encouraged relaxation. Thoughts of bandits, his father and ancestry, and the path ahead ran through his head. After all, he had been wandering for a month now, and it was time to find something. It didn't take long for the beauty of the place he found himself in to convince him to stay here for at least another day or two.

He pitched a modest tent on the clearing by the stream and set off for a walk through the forest away from the clearing. He walked uphill for half an hour before deciding to rest. A moss-covered stone seemed perfect, so Ivan settled down on it. Some fifteen steps away from him stood a majestic beech tree with wide-spreading branches, its mere sight calming him. Ivan gazed at the beech tree, observing its broad canopy, when his gaze paused on an unexpected sight. He rubbed his eyes to be sure of what he was seeing. High up in the beech tree, leaning against the trunk, sat a girl nonchalantly. A fairy, he thought at first, because the tree was high and the nearest human settlement was miles away.

Her eyes were closed, but judging by her deep breaths and the expression on her face, she seemed awake. A gentle smile played on her delicate, beautiful face, as if she were listening to a pleasant melody. She had long, lush black hair cascading down her back, and a figure that captivated the young man's attention. She wore a short dress woven from a light fabric of indeterminate colour, resembling the bark of a tree or the shade of leaves. He found it difficult to breathe properly; he felt tingles running through his body. He was completely and hopelessly captivated by her presence.

He was in no rush to reveal his presence. With great ardour and fascination, he studied the appearance of the mysterious girl, striving to memorize every feature and contour of her. Who knows if he would ever see something so beautiful again. His heart raced; he tried to breathe slower, quieter. The girl tilted her head in his direction, perhaps hearing something. He slowly rose and quietly approached her.

‘Greetings, lovely fairy,’ he spoke in a measured tone, indicating his presence. ‘I don't intend to disturb, just seeking a moment of company.’

The girl startled and looked at the intruder with fear. She seemed like a deer caught eye-to-eye with a hunter. She darted to the end of the branch and leapt like a squirrel towards a nearby beech tree. The slender branches barely bent under her feet, and before the young man could react, she vanished among the treetops like the wind.

Confused, he stared at the spot where she had been just moments ago. Had his eyes deceived him? To test his theory, he tried to climb the tree. If nothing else, he had been practicing climbing over the past month. In these vast forests, only from the top of a tree could one survey a wide area and get a sense of direction. However, he was unsuccessful; the trunk was too wide, and the lowest branch was far out of his reach.

He returned to his tent with a sense of defeat. The first more or less human being he encountered in the past month, and she hadn't uttered a word to him. She remained on his mind. Later, he began to feel a strange sense of unease in his stomach. At first, he thought it was hunger, but then he realized he wasn't hungry at all. Still, it was about time he had a snack today, at least once.

He caught a trout in the stream flowing through the clearing and began to prepare it. Out of carelessness, he sliced his finger. He cooked the fish and somehow managed to force himself to eat it. He lay under the tent but couldn't fall asleep. Thoughts of her occupied his mind far more than thoughts of revenge. The night was clear, so he took a few steps away from the tent and gazed at the star-studded sky. His neck started to ache, but he didn't want to stop looking at the stars, so he reclined in the grass. That's how he drifted off. This time, he didn't dream of some ancient battle, but of her. Many times before, he had dreamed of being able to fly, and he was determined to use that advantage to catch her. Yet, even with that great advantage in his dream, she effortlessly eluded him, always staying at least one step ahead. In the morning, he got up and cooled his head in the stream. The decision to stay here for a few more days was now significantly firmer.

On the second day, he saw that girl in the forest again, but this time she spotted him first. She allowed him to come close to her, watching him curiously for a few moments. When he took another step towards her, she suddenly fled. He tried to catch up with her, but after a dozen steps, she agilely jumped onto a tree from the ground. He followed suit, grabbing onto a branch and pulling himself up so deftly that he surprised himself. With youthful strength, he quickly climbed the tree. Fifteen feet up the branch, she escaped to a nearby tree. The branch under him gave way, but somehow he managed to leap and awkwardly land on the adjacent tree. She was close, almost within reach. He chuckled and adeptly moved closer, gazing into her deep, beautiful, dark blue eyes. He was inches away from her, perhaps just a foot. From the mischievous expression on her face, he could swear she found it all very amusing. He moved even closer in hopes of stealing a kiss. Captivated by her exceptionally beautiful and close

presence, he forgot he was holding onto the branch with only one hand. The mishap occurred because the branch was dried out, and it didn't take long for it to snap under his weight. He fell from about ten feet high and landed forcefully on the ground covered with dry leaves, hitting his back hard. The impact knocked the wind out of him, and as he looked up, he saw the fairy amusedly darting away. His pride suffered more than his back.

Over the next two days, he didn't see her anywhere. She had kept him in this place for too long, and he himself realized he wasn't such a good hunter after all. He packed up his canvas into his backpack and prepared himself; it was time to move on slowly. He decided to follow the stream, and a mile downstream, he came across a waterfall that he had to bypass because the water fell from three of his heights. Below the waterfall was a small lake. Ivan descended to the shore of the lake, washed and washed, and then looked towards the waterfall and stops in his tracks. Under the waterfall, washing her hair, was the same woman he had seen two days ago. He collected himself and approached her slowly and quietly. Nowhere to run, with the waterfall in front of her, the lake beside her on one side, and a high cliff on the other. He approached the woman, and she slowly turned around. Complete surprise was evident on her face; she knew she was cornered.

'I would like to apologize. It's not in my nature to intrude like this,' he took a step back. 'The thing is, I haven't met or spoken to anyone for a month. To make matters worse, I've never in my life met such a beautiful woman. You'll forgive me if I'm too eager for company. Of course, if you prefer, I will leave.'

His words surprised her. She pondered for a few moments, gazing at the lake, then a mischievous smile flickered across her face.

'If you want to meet, be here after sunset. But don't go into the water,' she said.

'Thank you,' he sighed with relief. 'I'll make sure not to. There's just one more thing I'd like to know. What's your name?'

'Morana,' she said, then dived headfirst into the lake and swam to the opposite shore.

He watched contentedly towards the spot where Morana emerged from the water. He leaned his belongings against a nearby willow tree and lay down. His intention was to nap for a few hours, but sleep eluded him because of his excitement. He sweated, partly from nerves and partly from the unbearable heat. He found solace in being surrounded by hills; the sun would set earlier here. The lake seemed to beckon him to refresh himself in its waters, but he

didn't dare break his given word. She must have had a good reason to advise him against entering. Or perhaps she thought it would be amusing to watch a young man suffer in the heat beside so much water?

The sun had just disappeared below the horizon, and she was still not here. He couldn't hide his disappointment, but he intended to stay here and wait all night if necessary. The redness of the western sky and the greenery of the forest were reflected in the calm lake. The scene was truly magical. For a moment, he thought someone was walking along the opposite shore. Looking more closely, he concluded that his sleepy eyes were deceiving him. He rested his head on his backpack and lay down facing the waterfall. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but sleep would not come.

His gaze fell upon the roots of a nearby willow that reached into the water. He stared in that direction long enough to tire his eyes and doze off for a few moments. When he opened his eyes again, there was something on the roots that hadn't been there before. In that very spot now sat a beautiful, naked woman, combing her long reddish-green hair. Ivan immediately felt a surge of hope, but it was followed by great disappointment as he quickly realized that it was not Morana. The woman cast him a seductive glance. Ivan sat up slightly to inspect the newcomer. Another fairy, he concluded.

'You should have found a part of the shore where pesky young men wouldn't bother you,' Ivan said, somewhat disappointed.

'How could such a handsome, strong young man ever bother me? Come closer, so we can talk. Surely, you wouldn't deny a girl some company?' the woman said in a dangerously pleasant voice.

He crept closer and sat on the grass facing the lake. The girl lured him with her glances, and with measured movements, she seemed to emphasise the full beauty of her body.

'Tell me, young man, what are you doing so far from home?'

'I'm waiting for a girl...'

'Oh, I see. You must love her very much to be willing to meet her in a place like this. I haven't met a young man in years who dares to spend the night alone, miles deep in the wilderness. Aren't you afraid of the night?'

Her gaze was piercing, as if she wanted to peer into his soul. Of course he was afraid of the night. Whenever he had the chance, he slept high in the treetops. It would be quite unfortunate if a bear, wild boar, or pack of wolves stumbled upon him while he was asleep, and he didn't dare think about the other dangers. Slowly, he shook his head without a word.

‘On the other hand,’ she turned her head towards the waterfall, ‘there aren't many girls who arrange their meetings in such places either. It's almost night. Tell me, when exactly are you supposed to meet this girl of yours?’ she asked playfully.

‘At sunset,’ he replied, defeated.

‘But... sunset has already passed, hasn't it? What kind of girl leaves such a fine young man waiting?’ she said disapprovingly.

‘I'll wait all night if necessary, it would be worth it... just for her to come.’

‘You'll be waiting a long time,’ her tone became serious. ‘The night is long, and I'm afraid she won't come even by morning. Even if she does come, why not pass the time with me until then? She made a mistake leaving you here, as if there are many like you.’

He carefully considered everything he had heard. Her words were pleasing and flattering, but they stirred a great doubt within him. He knew that his interlocutor was not of human kind, but he wasn't entirely sure if that should worry him.

‘It's already late, and your girl isn't coming.’

‘She will come,’ Ivan said uncertainly.

‘Maybe she will, but while you wait, you could swim in the lake with me. The day has been hot, and I assure you the water is perfect for relaxing and unwinding.’

He remembered the warning she had given him: not to enter the water. This woman was unnaturally attractive, and on any other day, that would have been enough for him to agree without hesitation, but not today. Today, he was thinking of another.

‘No, she was quite clear about not entering the water.’

‘And me, am I not attractive to you at all? Come join me here,’ she swam a little further from the shore. ‘There's no one for miles around. Everything will be allowed.’

The yearning within him was almost unbearable, and he was very close to jumping into the lake right then. He tried to think of Morana, who was not there. The bit of reason left in

him was enough to wonder why this woman simply didn't step out of the lake if she was so eager for him. Several steps from the shore, the bottom was no longer visible, and this worried him greatly.

'No,' the young man said, standing up. He gathered his belongings and moved away from the lake. 'Good night,' he bid her farewell.

Her once beautiful and gentle face now reflected unimaginable anger and rage. She turned away from him, and to his great surprise, transformed into a massive fish. She leaped out of the water towards the centre of the lake and disappeared into its depths. He sighed with relief, hoping to be safe on dry land. He settled a hundred steps from the lake and tried to sleep, hoping that the creature from the lake would no longer bother him.

He spent most of the night hoping Morana would still come. When he woke up, the sun was already high in the sky. He went to the lake to wash up, but there was no sign of the woman who had spoken with him yesterday. He stayed near the lake for several hours, waiting. Nothing happened. He remembered how quickly and skilfully the fairy had evaded him. If she had wanted to, she could have been here long ago. He packed his belongings on his back and headed south.

* * *

For the past two days, he had mostly stayed uphill, keeping away from the forest stream whose course he followed. He liked it here. The forest at this altitude was sparse, with some evergreens and plenty of light. The narrow path he walked meandered among white limestone rocks. There were hardly any fallen leaves; sparse, short grass replaced them. Because of it, he could move almost completely silently, while during moments of rest, for the first time in a month, he wished he was in his bed.

Descending downhill, he encountered an obstacle: a majestic oak had fallen across the path. Laden with branches and overgrown with ivy, it was impossible to leap over. He passed by the moss-covered stump, took a few steps forward, then paused. Perhaps early-morning fatigue and imagination were playing tricks on him, but it was better to be sure. He took a few steps back, slowly turned, and peered at the base of the stump. He was right; indeed, there lay a man. Not an ordinary man, by any means, which explained why he had initially overlooked him. He seemed completely integrated into his bed; his cheeks were faintly blue, his beard long and moss-coloured, with two small antlers resembling those of a deer on his forehead. He wore

a lightweight vest sewn from the fur of various animals and leaf-coloured trousers. From this distance, he couldn't be certain if the man was dead or merely asleep.

He approached him slowly and squatted beside him. The man was breathing. It may not be polite to wake a sleeping person, but at this moment, he truly needed any guidance he could get. He gently grasped his shoulder and gave him a slight shake.

‘Good morning, young man,’ greeted him his mischievous yellow eyes. ‘How can I be of service?’

‘My name is Ivan. I'm searching for a band of robbers to bring justice upon them. Have you seen or heard anything about them?’

‘Yes, I must admit I have,’ the man stood up. ‘Two weeks ago, they passed through my forest. They intended to head south, but by chance, they ended up at the eastern edge of the forest. Quite inconvenient, but that's how it goes.’

‘Do you know where they went after leaving the forest?’ Ivan asked cautiously.

‘I'm afraid I don't know,’ he replied thoughtfully. ‘I don't venture out of my forest very often.’

‘Can you at least take me to the place where they exited?’ Ivan persisted.

The man nodded with a smile. ‘I can do that.’

He turned southeast and gestured for Ivan to follow him.

Aside from his appearance, there was something else quite peculiar about the stranger — a mischievous glint in his eyes. It didn't give the impression that he could be trusted, yet he didn't seem malicious either. Then again, why shouldn't he trust him? After a month of wandering, it was hard to imagine he could lead him astray more than he could stray himself.

‘I've heard that someone called Veles leads these robbers. Is that true?’ Ivan asked.

‘That's correct. Everything they do, he commands. Whatever guilt they bear, he bears it in even greater measure. They don't commit such wicked deeds entirely of their own volition,’ the man replied.

‘Then I will hold him accountable and pursue him with equal fervour,’ Ivan decided.

‘Exactly as it should be,’ the stranger agreed.

They walked in silence for a while, but Ivan's curiosity became overwhelming.

‘Forgive my comment, but you don't look like an ordinary man,’ he blurted out suddenly.

‘That's because I'm not,’ the stranger admitted. ‘I am older than humanity. When the world was younger and the forests wider, I was the guardian of all that dwelled within them. I returned to these lands only a few human lifetimes ago, around the same time the first Slavs arrived. Even before then, they gave me the name Leshak, as people now know me.’

‘Then you surely know more about these robbers they call Psoglavci,’ Ivan said hopefully.

‘I would like to know more. They are strange people, Easterners from distant, vast lands where there are no forests. I only know what I see about them, and so far I've only seen a few small bands passing through my forests. Actually, you're the only somewhat ordinary person I've spoken to in the last hundred years. Still, I think it wouldn't hurt to encourage you by saying that in Slavic forests, you have unexpected allies. As strange as it may sound, you're not the only one who enjoys wandering the wilderness. You're definitely the youngest, I must admit.’

In the following days, he led him along a beautiful, passable path to the southeast. They talked a lot, mostly about the plant and animal life of these forests. Leshak possessed truly incredible knowledge, and his advice on hunting and edible plants was invaluable to Ivan. Another interesting aspect was at play here; deer, rabbits, and other wildlife didn't flee when they saw him. It was similar with Ivan; he couldn't help but feel safer in his company.

‘Since you're so familiar with these forests, there's something else I'd like to ask you,’ Ivan began.

‘Ask away, Ivan. Those who ask don't wander. You seem to ask very little,’ Leshak replied, quite amused.

‘A few days ago, I met a girl. Beautiful, with black hair, moves as agile as a squirrel, and elusive as a shadow. Do you know anything about her?’ Ivan inquired.

‘It sounds like you've met Morana,’ Leshak remarked.

‘Yes! That's what she said her name was! Please, tell me everything you know about her,’ Ivan requested eagerly.

‘Of course I will, but first, you tell me how you met her,’ Leshak countered.

‘I spotted her a few days ago while walking through the forest, but she only deigned to introduce herself a couple of days later. We arranged to meet by the lake after sunset. I waited for her, but she didn't show up. Although I had a rather interesting encounter with a large fish,’ Ivan explained.

Leshak burst into laughter. ‘In that case, you must forgive her for not showing up. She probably thought you were dead. Speaking of which, why aren't you dead?’ he asked curiously.

‘She advised me not to enter the water,’ Ivan replied.

‘Did she now? That was kind of her. And you followed that advice?’ There was disbelief in his voice.

‘It was good advice,’ Ivan affirmed.

‘Indeed,’ agreed Leshak. ‘Morana is a forest fairy. To your eyes, she may seem young, but in truth, she is much older than you. She has three sisters, of whom she is the eldest. Her sisters occasionally enjoy the company of young men from nearby villages, while she shies away from simple-minded youths. I believe she mistook you for one of them. She desires someone who would earn her heart with virtue and valour.’

‘The creature from the lake you encountered is called Vodyanoy. Like any fish, it can't harm you as long as you stay on dry land. However, it has its ways to persuade you to willingly enter the water. Once you do, it pulls you down to the depths for its dinner or pleasure. I believe my dear daughter thought it would be quite entertaining to put you in that perilous situation, give you extremely good advice that could save you, and then watch you suffer because you didn't heed that advice,’ Leshak reflected for a moment, then chuckled. ‘Yes, that would be amusing, wouldn't it? Most people don't like receiving useful advice. Be content with your caution; I don't recall the last young man who walked away from that shore. I believe this whole incident was a kind of character test she devised for you, a test she didn't think you would pass.’

One word from the entire speech lingered in his mind, echoing persistently. Daughter? He felt somewhat embarrassed, yet he couldn't help but wonder if he, a mortal, could ever be with a fairy. Through the leaves, a large clearing appeared ahead of them, and soon they emerged from the forest.

‘It seems I have nothing more to find here. I'm afraid I'm not a hero. I'm leaving,’ Ivan said.

‘You're not a hero... Well, if you're not a hero, then what should we call people who single-handedly hunt bandits in the wilderness?’

Ivan laughed sincerely at that and extended his hand in farewell. He really liked this peculiar man and hoped to meet him again. He turned towards the east, the plains bathed in the evening sun. Once again, he felt the same feeling as when he first caught sight of Leshak asleep out of the corner of his eye.

‘Why don't you have a shadow?’ he asked, looking down at the ground.

‘What a stupid question,’ Leshak replied. ‘And you don't have horns, but I don't bother you about that.’

5. Analysis and commentary

In this chapter, I will provide the analysis of the translated text and add some comments about certain problematic expressions I had to deal with during the translation process.

As previously mentioned, the source text combines Slavic mythology with historical events and facts. In order to translate such a text as accurately as possible, a translator with such texts, should do extensive research of both fields. The mythological part of the novel was difficult to translate, mainly because of the vast number of creatures and beings worshiped by different Slavic groups, such as East, West and South Slavic groups. For example, the evil spirit living in the water, which lures unsuspecting victims and proceeds to drown them is by the Russians (East Slavs) known as *Vodyanik* or *Děduška Vodyanoy* which translates to “Water-Grandfather”. Bohemians, who belong to the West Slavic group, know this creature as *Vodnik*, and the Slovenians, who are a part of the South Slavic ethnic group, call their water spirit, *Vodeni Mož* (“Water-Man”)².

The novel begins with a description of a battle between two armies: the Romans and an unknown Germanic tribe. For a translator, military jargon and terms might sometimes cause problems, due to it being prone to changes and additions. Historical military terms, i.e. Roman military terms, are easier to translate, as we have researched most of the Roman military tactics and terms. In the first chapter, during the battle sequence, the author mentions the Romans used many different siege devices, such as ballistae and catapults. After extensive research, I found out that catapults and ballistae were utilizing similar weapons. Although ballistae fall under the category of a catapult, a catapult more often designates a larger device that is used to throw stones from a single long arm. Ballistae were used mainly to throw spears or bolts. The term I struggled with more, were the weapons which were thrown out of these devices. As the novel does not specify the difference between these weapons, I left the term *projektili* as is – projectiles.

One of the main problems with this specific source text is the connection between myth and fact. Since the story follows Ivan on his quest through today’s Croatian territory, I decided to use the names of gods and creatures used by the Southern Slavic group and translate them into

² Máchal, Jan Hanuš. *Slavic myths & legends*: Chapter IX.

English as accurately as possible. To completely understand the problem with names in the novel, we must begin with the title of the novel itself. The novel is called *Jarilike*, which could better be explain as *Stories of Jarilo (Yarilo)*. Yarilo is the Slavic god of vegetation, springtime and fertility. He is the son of the supreme Slavic god of thunder, Perun who ruled on a unnamed mountain and Mokosh, the only goddess in the Slavic pantheon. Yarilo was born on New Years eve, but was soon after taken to the underworld by Veles', god of the underworld, underlings, where he grew up and actually gotten the name Yarilo. According to the myth, the river Dunaj was the border between Veles' and Perun's realm. Following the eastern Slavic folklore, the river Dunaj is also the meeting place of Juraj (Yarilo) and his sister/lover Mara (Morana).

If we follow this myth of Yarilo and try to place it geographically, we would get the landscape surrounding the city of Ivanec in the northern part of Croatia. The city of Ivanec lies between the mountain Ivanščica, where prof. Vitomir Belaj, a Croatian ethnologist who studied the mythological background of Slavic customs, believes Perun resided, to the south, and the river Bednja to the north³. According to the local people called the former oxbows of the river Bednja, *dunaji*, strengthening the myth's placement to this area. Furthermore, across the river Bednja lies the town Jerovec, whose name was in the 18th century recorded as Jarovci, which could directly be connected to Yarilo's name. Ivanec on the other hand, would correspond Yarilo's name, after his wedding to Morana, when he took on the name Ivan, after the willow tree, or Proto-Indo-European *iva*, under which they were wed. According to prof. Belaj, after the Slavic people took on Christianity, and practiced dual faiths for a time, Yarilo was often represented by St. George (sv. Juraj) or St. John (sv. Ivan) in the Christian faith.

The author chose a different approach to Yarilo's or Ivan's origin. In the novel it is stated that Yarilo has never actually gotten to the underworld, because on the way there he was saved by two farmers: "*Za prvu silu nazvali smo te Ivan, po drvu ive ispod kojeg smo te našli*". I translated this sentence as: "For the time being, we named you Ivan, after the ivy covering the willow tree under which we found you." The source text does not mention the willow tree being covered by ivy, so I decided to adapt the original text in order to make it more understandable for the target audience. As previously mentioned, names play an important role in the novel, as they are connected to the contemporary names of places and towns. That is the reason why I decided to leave the protagonists and human names untranslated, but names of deities and creatures, such as Leshak (Lešak) or Vodyanoy (Vodanoj) I decided to transcribe accordingly

³ Belaj, Vitomir & Belaj, Juraj: Ivanečki se „Trokut“ produbljuje i širi: In: *Ivanečka škrinjica* 3: 17

into English, keeping it as close to the original as possible, in order to keep the Slavic heritage in the foreground.

I also had some trouble translating the name of the bandit group who kidnapped Ivan as a baby – *psoglavci*. In the Slavic mythology, *psoglavac* is a demonic creature, often described as having a human body with horse legs, a dog's head with iron teeth and a single eye on the forehead⁴. The literal translation would be doghead. The novel never mentions this description. In the novel, these mythical creatures are represented as wildlings who lost their leader, and did everything from robbing to killing people just to survive, before the Slavic god of the underworld Veles took them under his wing. Since the novel does not describe them as mythical creatures, but only as normal people who lost their humanity, I decided to translate the term as Psoglavs – categorizing them as a tribal group. In order to distinguish them from the actual mythical creatures, I decided to insert a footnote explaining the literal translation of the word for better understanding.

As I mentioned before, the novel follows a young man on his adventures. On these adventures, he meets various historical and fictional figures of different social status, i.e. Ljudevit the duke of Lower Pannonia or Tugomir, a Byzantine governor of the island Krk. For the translator, an obvious problem arises here – how to discern the social status of different characters. The chapters I decided to translate in this thesis paper do not contain such characters, so I can only mention possible solutions. One solution might be applying words and expression of lower knowledge levels of the English language for characters of a lower social status, while dukes and governors, could speak with a B2 or C1 level of understanding. The other solution might be to apply different dialects or regional accents., which in this novel could work better. For example, Ljudevit, the Duke of Slavs in Lower Pannonia might be using Received Pronunciation, while Tugomir, coming from a more southern part of the region than Ljudevit, might be talking with an accent from the West Country. The protagonist, Ivan, being from the northern part, could have a Scottish accent. The downside of this solution is that mixing too many accents and dialects could potentially ruin the story, and the reader could lose focus trying to connect all the different dialects, resulting in the reader potentially giving up.

One of the biggest problems in translating literary works, including this novel, is to transfer the author's style. Every author has their own style of writing, and a good translator should keep

⁴ Šešo, Luka: *Dog-headed Creatures as the Other: The Role of Monsters in the Construction of the Croatian Identity* <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/376887>

that in mind. The famous Russian translator I.A. Kashkin who translated *The Canterbury Tales* stated that “the author’s style is a system of artistic means expressing his worldview”.⁵ In literary translation, there is one translator for a target language, for example Dan Brown’s trilogy (*The Da Vinci Code, Angels & Demons, Inferno*) was translated into Croatian by Suzana Sesvečan. That way, the audience receives a better translation, as the translator is already familiar with the author’s style. Professor Avnarovna (2022), from the Uzbekistan State University of World Languages claims there are several principles on how to avoid inadequate transfer of an author’s style in translation. One would be an analysis of the source text, where the translator should analyse linguistic (syntax, genre, or word choice) and extralinguistic (author’s biography and the period when the work was written) aspects. Under linguistic aspects would also fall the use of neutral or emotionally coloured words. The first few chapters I decided to translate for this master’s thesis do not contain many coloured word, but as the story progresses, and the protagonist encounters different perils and situations, the author is uses various words to describe his (the protagonists) mental and emotional state. Regarding the extralinguistic aspects of the author’s style, professor Avnarovna claims that the author’s lifestyle, history and environment helps to discern the conditions under which their works have been created⁶. For example, it is well known that Ernest Hemingway’s works were highly influenced by his time spent in journalism and both World Wars⁷. In contrast, the author of *Jarilike*, Matija Sever grew up in the previously mentioned city of Ivanec, surrounded by a plethora of history and myths. He wrote his debut novel in 2015. while studying political sciences, which can also be noticed in the neutral tone of the novel. Even though this is his first literary work and there is not much information to be found about the author, to me as the translator, I think it was fairly easy to transfer his style of writing, as I know him personally, since we grew up in the same city and are friends. In my opinion, if a translator of literary works knows the author whose work they are translating personally, it helps them, because if they come across a term, expression or situation they do not understand, they can without hesitation ask the author directly for an advice. That way, they can work together in order to

⁵ Avnarovna, Ziyaeva Sevara & Baxadurovna, Maulenberganova Biybiayim. *Preservation of author’s style as the main problem of literary translation*. Conferencea, 294. Retrieved from <https://conferencea.org/index.php/conferences/article/view/396>

⁶ Avnarovna, Ziyaeva Sevara & Baxadurovna, Maulenberganova Biybiayim. *Preservation of author’s style as the main problem of literary translation*. Conferencea, 294. Retrieved from <https://conferencea.org/index.php/conferences/article/view/396>

⁷ Rasso, Erika. *Writing Styles of Famous Authors* <https://www.craftyourcontent.com/famous-authors-writing-styles/>

create a better translation for a wider audience. The other principle is to investigate polysemous words. That way, the chance of misunderstanding and mistranslating the author's thoughts is lessened.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis, I examined the challenges I faced while translating a previously untranslated literary work, by a little-known author. During the translation, I noticed that most of the problems I have faced, were of lexical nature.

As it is with every type of source text, not only literary texts, it is important for the translator to be knowledgeable in each field he is translating. In the novel I chose to translate for this thesis, the author chose two fields, factual and fictional, in which the translator needs to be proficient, each requiring extensive research. The factual, historic part of the novel, requires research of historical events in order to set the story in a specific timeline. The other part of the novel, the fictional, mythological part, requires the translator to research different viewpoints to a belief system of various ethnic groups, in order to keep the story interesting and not mix up names and relations between characters, that might be important later in the story.

But apart from being proficient in various fields, translators of literary works should be creative. Translators need to have a high level of creativity, in order to accurately identify and transfer words and expressions which exist in the SL, but are difficult to explain in the TL. Most of the times they also need to use and combine different translational strategies for one paragraph or sentence, so that the translation seems fluent and natural. What often complicates the translator's job are the authors themselves. As every author has their own writing style, the translator needs to be capable of transferring that style into another language.

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