

Fire tribe

(Excerpt in English)

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The downpour lasted, icy rain pelting the men lying concealed in the undergrowth. Steam was rising from the warm bodies, coarse powerful hands gripping weapons, squinting eyes hungrily fixed on the caravan in the distance. Amber merchants from the Baltic coast returning east, pleased with their profits, wagons loaded to the brim.

A few hundred paces ahead of the caravan, a heavily armed warrior rode his black stallion, wearing chainmail forged in Frankish lands, tracing keenly the nearby forest edge. Streaming from his wheat-coloured locks and across his blue eyes, the rain was blurring his vision. He hesitated. Raising his arm, he gave signal for the front wagon to halt.

His glance skipped three pairs of horses, stopping at the fifth.

Asterid sat by the driver.

She, too, was gazing into the forest ahead. In her jet-black eyes the warrior found weight behind his uneasy premonition.

Underneath her heart, the princess of the Taurisk line was carrying the warrior's child, and her time was drawing near. Before the moon changes, she wished the caravan should reach the settlements of the Eastern folk, her consort's people. Long black hair spilled from under her felt hood, cascading like a dark waterfall over her round hips. Her eyes tried piercing the verdant wall ahead, a dagger adorned with smaragdine gems, her father's parting gift, fearlessly clutched in her right hand.

The Slav took a deep breath, drawing his sword, filling his lungs.

If his instincts were true, an ambush lay just ahead. He would have to defend the merchants and his woman. Three times already, he had managed to rout Baltic raids on this journey. All were disorganized, poorly armed and famished bandits whose courage wilted under the

savage might of the terrifying swordsman. First blood caused a scattered retreat, a flight from the gleaming blade.

A sudden cry sliced through the melody of the raindrops. The robbers, arms aloft, charged the caravan. The warrior expanded his broad chest with one last deep breath, forcefully spurring his stallion which lunged ahead with a pained neigh. Five attackers chose their targets in silence, the sixth lifting his spear to deflect the horseman.

A split second before the tip met the horse's neck, the warrior smote away the incoming attack, his animal trampling the man underfoot. Without pause, sword in a crescent, the horseman sped for the wagons where three of the drivers had already been cut down.

"Asterid!"

The princess had nimbly leapt off her perch, rolling underneath to the other side, stabbing into the right thigh of the incoming marauder, twisting. The brute screamed, revealing a gap-toothed mouth, swatting at her viciously with his cudgel and smashing the princess to the ground. He stood over her to finish the task as strength was already departing his body, his rage preventing him from feeling life gushing out in throbbing jets from the severed veins. Dizziness, then darkness rushed into him through the rain.

The horseman dismounted, kneeling next to his woman whose shoulder was bleeding heavily into the mud. With a deft cut he removed the fabric to look at the wound. It was deep, to the bone.

"Ognjen"... she whimpered. She needed aid.

The warrior rose to his feet, facing the closest attacker. Brandishing steel the man staggered forward, eyes glazed. The battle for the caravan was lost. Two dead brigands couldn't turn the tide in favour of the last defender. The other three attackers had finished off the merchants, heading for the two men locked in melee.

The blonde swordsman was fighting two-handed now, swinging with blinding ferocity. His foe pulled back, joining his comrades to cautiously surround the warrior, tire him out. The mortal blade stopped whirling as soon as they moved out of reach.

Ognjen whistled shrilly and the stallion responded, racing to his call.

The ground trembled as the beast charged in their midst, finding the side of his master.

Dropping to his knee, Ognjen grabbed Asterid by the waist with his left. Hoisting her up like a feather he raised her onto his steed, keeping the point of his weapon steadily aimed at the brigands.

Nobody spoke. The robbers were noisily catching their breath in the rain, waiting for his next move.

Their goals were already accomplished, spoils waiting for their gluttonous fingers to grab, and there was little to gain from confronting the icy-eyed man with the baleful sword arm, and risk having their bellies spilled. They stood in perimeter as the stranger called out in an unintelligible language, commanding the stallion to a measured retreat, away from the enclosure of threatening weapons.

For a moment there was fragile balance between the assailants and the warrior.

A silent, unspoken pact. They will be leaving each other alone.

Ognjen did not take his eyes from the men till he was far enough to sheathe his sword, climbing into the saddle with Asterid.

He rode off without looking back.

The stallion kept a furious pace, ready to gallop until foaming and heart-burst collapse, if his master had not steadied it as Asterid began moaning. Her pain-induced stupor was passing, the wild rocking motion causing her wound to bleed profusely.

"Ognjen!" she feebly cried out.

Pressing his knees together he halted the animal, looking across the valley ahead.

The landscape bore no resemblance at all to his homeland, where the sky hung low over broad plains heavy with greasy black soil, ideal for growing millet and grain. On all sides, grey, impassable walls of rock crawled into these valleys, coniferous trees weaving an impenetrable vastness, the abode of bears and wolves.

He caught wind of smoke, sharply smacking his tongue.

The horse obeyed, descending the beaten track with caution.

A cluster of shacks lay huddled in a side valley, reached by wading a crystal stream flashing with trout.

The locals were watching his every move, men coming out of the buildings carrying weapons and staring menacingly.

"I come in peace," he announced from afar.

They didn't seem to understand, and so he attempted Latin, a tongue he'd befriended during his life in the West.

"In pace!" No avail.

He raised his hand, showing an open palm.

Ognjen rode slowly, vigilant of the farmers' anxious posturing, hands feeling for spear shafts and knives. He dismounted, unclasped his sword belt, placing it on the compact soil and lifted Asterid into his arms.

He leaned forward so the men could see the wound and the blood soaking her arm. They responded with grunts that offered no threat, and so the warrior stepped among them with the ailing princess. They let him approach. Swordless and carrying an injured woman he posed little danger, though the heavy chainmail still made them apprehensive.

He searched for the biggest building, aiming to quickly shield Asterid from the rain.

He felt their eyes on his back and a tentative, curious rather than ill-meaning shuffling of steps behind him.

Now he caught sight of the women, and the children hiding at their calves.

The entrance to the cottage was low, placed in the front wall unlike those in his homeland where the pit-houses were accessed from the side.

He shoved his way inside. Smoke that ought to be spiralling towards the opening in the roof was dragging lazily around the space, making him cough.

He searched for a proper bed and lay Asterid on top.

"Please ..."

For a few moments, the villagers curiously stared at the warrior, then at the woman – mouths agape, until one of them braved forward, approaching Asterid and inspecting her wound. She turned around, the room buzzed with a tangled murmur of words. Other women surrounded the bed, crowding Ognjen aside. New villagers entered and left, then finally a sombre, grey-haired healer. She faced Ognjen, gently touching the side of his forearm.

She quickly examined the shoulder wound, focusing her attention on the pregnant woman.

Evidently, unlike Ognjen, Asterid could understand their tongue.

"The healer says the child is coming," she groaned out in pain.

"Asterid ..."

He squeezed her hand to give her courage. Things moved fast, then. The women scurried around Asterid's bed, shoving the others away.

At last the rain stopped, sharp winds dragging over the valley, sparking up the fire and sucking the smoke from the chamber.

The healer fought for the princess's life with all her medicinal lore. Moment to moment, the fever, loss of blood and the festering tear on her shoulder proved overwhelming.

As dawn approached, Asterid drew on the last shreds of her strength to help a hearty babe into the world before her spirit departed her body.

A gang of dozen men from the neighbouring clan had gathered around the pit. There were no locals among them. The children neither knew nor understood how the elders made their decisions; only once or twice were they taken by Rada to the ancient hill fort where matters of gravest importance were decided. Their clan was the westernmost of all, and least connected to the others. Regardless, chance encounters with people made them understand that their father was causing division in the tribe. He was supported by young, fierce men ready for war, but had disappointed deeply the older tribesmen.

The children's blood curdled as they spotted both girls at the edge of the pit, hands and ankles tied, with seething men ready to cast them into their deaths.

"Cowards! You can't kill me like this! I'll escape from the pit and haunt you in your sleep."

"Plug her mouth!"

Some seemed ashamed of their doing, though orders were clear and they were obliged to follow. Clatter stirred anxiety in their chests, they wanted to finish their bloody ordeal and quickly depart the gloomy site.

"Hey!" shouted Plamen. "Let them go!"

The men froze, as if struck by a spell. They were certain no witnesses were around only to lay eyes on two of the three snot-nosed boys they least wished to see.

In a split instant the air whistled, the stone missile from Vuk's sling smashing into the temple of the man closest to the rope-bound Ajda. The tribesman expelled air like a torn bellow, dropping into the pit unconscious. His body made shocking noises tumbling between the rocks until all was quiet.

A few seconds later the next missile was already in flight, whizzing, busting a rib of the second man closest to Ajda.

The rest needed no further encouragement. Weapons drawn they charged Vuk and Plamen, berserk. The boys didn't dally, darting into a run for their lives.

The tribesmen were faster, in a few moments they began closing distance. The raspy breathing of the enraged pursuers instilled the children with vigour, they managed to stay just ahead. Only one thing mattered now – resolve. Theirs to run like the wind, and that of the men chasing them to keep going. The boys knew their strength was no match for the grown tribesmen.

The men hadn't noticed the third boy. While Vuk launched his stones, Vlad had crawled into the thicket, digging deep into the brambles, keeping perfectly still. The noise of heavy steps rushing past scared him at first, he was expecting a tight grip on his neck any moment, lifting him kicking out of the bush. Nothing happened, though. The chase passed him by.

He dragged himself back in the open, racing for the pit.

"Ajda! Mila!"

The sisters rolled in his direction, spotting him.

"Vlad, cut the rope!"

"How?"

"At his waist!"

Vlad reached for the body on the ground, feeling through the fabric, finding the scabbard with the blade. He snatched it and quickly started cutting the bonds.

Threshing sounded from where the men chasing his brothers had gone. The tribesmen, humiliated, were coming back with nothing to show for. The unexpected sight of the third boy cutting his sisters loose at the pit sent them into a new frenzy.

Vlad forced his fear to slither down his fingers like a fish, steadily removing the rope from the wrists, then the ankles of the older sister, then leaping over to Mila's feet, setting them free.

"Run!" Ajda cried out.

For the second time that day, the children ran as fast as their legs might carry, Mila still tied up at the wrists. This race was brief, though. Their pursuers, hot and winded from having chased the fleet footed Vuk and Plamen, soon gave up, huffing. The children vanished into the thicket.

It was hard to decide what to do next. Rada wanted to go to her sister Sobena in the Dnieper Oзера, but they might not be able to reach it before winter. In late Harvestmonth, by mid Leafmuck at the latest it will have stormed over from the north, demanding reliable shelter. Survival would be far easier with her sister's clan then. A roof over their head, assurance of food and warmth where lumber was abundant, with shaded forests reaching nearly to the great Dnieper's banks.

Staying in the barrens was perilous. They would first have to dig out a pit-house. Digging was the easy part but the outer walls must be made of wood, something they'd have to search far and wide for. They carried no axes, and the children's swords likely wouldn't cut solid trunk. They'd have to drag trees with the horse, and if anything should happen to the animal the abode would be unfinished, the group left at the mercy of stark winter. They had no skins to stretch across the side of the part above ground, and reeds might not be enough to keep the pit-house warm. They had no furs nor equipment, cauldron, tools, anything. Only a small pot for cooking millet.

Rada was equally uneasy at the thought of a long, uncertain journey where one might encounter soldiers, robbers or wild beasts on every step. Her experience with Eimhear's army was a dire warning. She could not hope to oppose such force.

The decision had to be made there and then.

Like an ominous black mass, a thick layer of clouds was rolling from the west, bursting with rain. The approaching storm foretold a lasting change of weather. Rada looked over the boys in their meagre clothing, unsuited for the coming season. In a few hours, they would all be soaking wet.

In the meanwhile, Mila was picking cranberries. Her swift fingers plucked whole bunches of ripe red fruit, tossing them in the pouch. Her thoughts were fleeting from the prospect of dinner to the horse whose mane she intended to brush in the evening, removing ticks and scrubbing the skin, to the moment when she'd be snuggling up to Rada and telling her, almost in whispers, the stories of the Baba Yaga, her little house on chicken legs turning with the passing sun. Mila was a mirror image of her mother. Faced with such a lovely creature, Rada's heart lost its battle with the oath that she would love all her grandchildren equally. Ajda was the daughter of a foreign princess, the boys were proud and rough around the edges, always testing the limits of her patience, and it was clear that Mila was the queen of her affection.