



Poludnica

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Mythology

It was a sweltering day, typical of the days just after the Midsummer. The sun was at its highest and most potent. Some, the Sun lovers, would run out in the streets, run to nearby streams and rivers to refresh from its warmth as they soak it in, some who loved the Sun but despised the heat, were sitting in the shades, sleeping on their benches, in the grass, making no sound other than occasional snores and claps of the skin as they would hit the insects. The third group, the one that was not given the option to choose between their likes and dislikes, were out on the fields, working. The bodies of dozens of villagers, moved, rhythmically, symphonically, creating the melody of scythes and deep breaths taken. They were tired but there was so little time and space to think about it. The next stroke, the next move, was everything that was on their minds. Afternoon was lunchtime. Everyone left their scythes and other tools in the fields and gathered in a single spot, sitting around a large piece of cloth, as the elderly and children from the village brought them food and placed it in front of them. As soon as it reached the surface of the sheets, the tired hands reached out for it, parting the bread in pieces, dipping it in stews and melted cheese as the curious birds started flying around the area, eyeing the bread crumbs that fell on the sheet and ground. After the lunch, there was usually a short chatter, some singing of the field songs before they would head back to work. Some solitary types, at that moment, would walk away from the crowd, to take a walk or have a smoke. Young Dorin was of those types. He would rest his tired back against the tree, take out rolled tobacco from his pocket and smoke while looking at the chatter and clamor around him.

Was he too tired that day, or too pensive, he himself, later, could not remember, but he fell asleep, right there in the fields, exposing his dark hair and pale, slightly sunburned skin to the sun. A gentle touch of the wind

woke him up, then the wind became stronger, and in the horizon, he saw, a woman, with a hair of gold and a wreath of flowers in it, dressed in white, walk towards him. “What is Anfisa doing here? And why is she dressed like that? — he thought, sure of the fact that it was his fiancé that walked towards him. The wind was getting stronger and stronger, its sound through the fields, growing more powerful, and he, stood there, frozen, unable to move. The woman was getting closer and with each step, her, at first, fair and calming presence, became the one of horror and fear. He noticed around her eyes, bloody, red, skin; the bags under her eyes were just as red. Her eyes were expressionless and fixed, her white dress, with a lace belt around the waist, torn, and in her hand she carried a large, long scythe. It was glistening under the sun. He tried to move, but he could not, and she was getting closer and closer. He looked around to see if anyone took a notice of her, if anyone could come to help, but nobody was close and nobody seemed to look for him. The woman came right in front of him and moved the scythe; her presence was even more frightening up close. Then, at the moment, he remembered a spell – his grandmother told him had the power to draw away demons and spirits.

“Oh you Spirit who roams,
Nothing for you in this world is,
Saved through harm you can't be.

Oh you Spirit who roams,
Cease to be.” — he spoke as fast as he could and as many times as he could, keeping his eyes closed. The wind was still blowing and then, he heard a woman's laugh. He slowly opened his eyes — it was she who was smiling, the woman who waved with a scythe above his head.

“You think your charms have power over me? “ — her eyes, still expressionless, moved towards him. Then she laughed again. “Silly boy.” She grabbed the scythe again.

“Wait! “ — he said

“What is the difference if you die now or later? Is life so dear to you that you want another second of it? I shall give you a second then“ — her mouth spread in a cold smile, and she waved her scythe again.

“Spare my life; I will do whatever you ask for! I will do your will in this world but spare my life. “ — In shock, he was not aware of words that came out of his mouth.

“Oh! Do you think you are the first one to say it? “ — She said walking around him. He was to say something but she interrupted him: “You are not, you are not. But today... you are lucky. I am in a playful mood. I will enjoy showing yet another young man, who thinks himself a hero that he is in fact, weak, a coward. Before I take his

soul, I shall take his pride. Haven't one as daring as yourself in a while. " She paused but soon continued: "Since you have agreed to play with the Demoness, it is the part of her role, in this story of ours, to give you guidance and tests. Isn't it so? ". — She said moving away, getting closer and moving the scythe with her, almost in a dance. "Tomorrow, in the evening, you shall come to the Maiden's Rock where I shall give you your assignments. Do not tell anyone where you come and why you go, because I will know and I will kill you before I got to play with your pride — don't ruin the game for either of us."

As she said that, she vanished with the wind. Dorin woke up, as from a dream, but he knew that it was not a dream. She left strand of her long, golden hair on his shirt, which he left on the ground when he took it off, to show him that she was not a mere hallucination. That day, the young man, went home with fear and tremble in his chest. He spoke to his parents, neighbors and friends, naturally and normally, and nobody could tell by the look of his face, that he had been through the most frightening moment of his life. He smiled, spoke and thought of the ways, he would go to the place tomorrow.

Day One

The next day, Dorin worked on the fields as usual. His body moved, his lips were tight, and he let out no sound, for he spoke very little while he worked. At certain moment, he was looking around, but there was nothing extraordinary that day. The fields were as usual, the wind was very quiet and there was no cloud in the sky. During his usual break, he controlled the urge to take a short nap. He smoked his tobacco and went straight back to his work. The closer the evening would get, the more frightened he was. Never did a day on the fields, pass quicker to him. But the sunset was there, very soon, and it was the time for departure. The previous day, he had told everyone who would be expecting him that evening and night that he was to go for a walk to the woods, for sometimes he had a habit of doing it, and nobody would see anything particularly strange about that. He packed his scythe, knife, and tobacco in a tiny leather bag he wore, and with sweat still clinging to his body, he went in the opposite direction that the other villagers went – for they went, towards the village, and he went, towards the Maiden's Rock.

He knew where the Maiden's Rock was. For it was a about an hour of walk to the North. It was behind villages and it was known for its dangerous beasts. Wolves, bears, boars could be heard any time of the day. The young man walked past the villages until there was nothing next to him. Not a single trace of a human life was there. He heard the sound of birds, in the distance some water, was heard as well. The young man's senses were so alert, that not a single sound, not a single move, not a single smell, would escape him. He was afraid, but at the

same time, inside of him, was courage, that he was not aware of, but that pushed him forward to the dangerous wood. Finally, he reached what was the Maiden's Rock. Behind the plain, where he stood, was a mountain, a rock, shaped as a young maiden, sitting, with head down, holding palms of her hands against her face, hair falling down around her. The shape was very delicate, sometimes barely noticeable. The legend said, that a young woman, long time ago, suffered a sorrow so deep, that she ran into a forest, and in her sorrow, turned into a great rock. Some narrations said that she was killed by the beasts and then became a rock. But others said that she simply, became that, out of her own agony. Dorin was looking at the rock, standing in the middle of the meadow beneath it. There was nothing when he just came, but very soon, the wind started to blow. It was the same kind of wind, he felt the day before. He knew that she was there, that she was real, and that she would come to him. In the distance, he quickly noticed her shape. She had long golden hair, broken wreath on her head, and large scythe in her hand. From a distance she was as beautiful as a fairy. Every step closer, once again, she became grotesque and scary, frightening and intense. Before he knew it, she was in front of him.

She looks at him, smiles and then her face became serious one again.

"So, you have come. " — She said calmly.

"Yes, I have. " — He looked at her.

"That's already more of progress than many others have made. " — she laughed slightly, "most think I was but a phantom, and never appear. But you are here." — she looked at him once again.

"I had nothing to lose for coming, and a lot for not. If I came here, and you turned to be but a phantom, I would have been happy." — he said.

"Are you happy that you see me? That I am real?" — Her face was prideful.

"Not quite happy." — He was honest.

"Oh, what a misfortune." — she told him, "Good for me... I don't care about your happiness. Or the lack of it. But I am glad, you have come. For I haven't had any brave lad in a while to play with..." — she stopped and then continued: "I will not hold you for long, brave lad. I shall give you the first task. You know how it goes in stories that your elders tell you?" — she waited for a response.

"Yes, I do." — his response was quick and cold.

"Yes, you do. A lad must complete, three tasks, before he can have his fate. I shall give you a chance for a fairy tale to live. So I shall give you three tasks. But you can't know the other two, before you complete the first. " —

she walked around him in circles, moving her scythe, the wind moving her hair. He was following her with his eyes, all along.

“As you can see”— she continued, “my wreath is quite dry. A lot of flowers have fallen off, and I can’t pick the fresh ones, for if I pick them, they dry and die. But... I do not want any flowers for my wreath. They have to be flowers from the forest called Trnica. In there, there are two special kinds of flowers — one is yellow as the sun, named Turnasol, and other, as white as the full moon, called Lunia. There is no other yellow or white flower there, so you cannot miss them. But be aware, for they grow in between the thorns, and are guarded by a fierce and wild guardian. You will pick them for me, make a wreath yourself and bring it. If I find out, and I will, that anyone else but you, weaved the wreath... I shall end the fairy tale, and you will die. Have you understood?” — she looked at his face.

“Yes, I did.”

“You have, two days, to complete this task. If you are not here, two days after, after the sunset, I will consider that you didn’t do it, and I shall look for you. Shall I find you alive, I will make sure, you do not remain so. Is it clear? “

“Yes, it is clear.” — he said. She suddenly disappeared, and he was left all alone in the big meadow. He looked once again, at the rock, then turned around and walked back home. He did not have much faith in either living or dying of this, all he knew was that he had to do it. With that thought on his mind, he fell asleep that night, prepared to go to the dark forest of Trnica.

Task One

He sneaked out of his house as quiet as a fox when it goes behind its prey. He made no sound and nobody woke. When he walked out of the house, he looked around to make sure nobody was around and that nobody was to follow him. When he was sure that he was alone, he moved in direction of Trnica. In a backpack that pressed his young back was some food, water, medicine, a knife and an old gun. He walked through the village, every once in a while turning around. He felt no fear or excitement. He walked with a firm, calm step through the villages and fields. He was standing in front of Trnica forest sooner than he expected. Where is he to find the flowers? From the safety of a large field, filled with wildflowers, he looked towards the big, dark forest that was in front of him. The forest was dark and tall, the trees between it thick and no the legends of it so severe that hunters, even during the brightness of a day, would not dare to walk inside. There were no signs of fatigue or sleep on the handsome youth’s face and taking a breath, he moved forward.

The forest was difficult to move through. It was thick and heavy. He heard the sound of owls and wind moving between the trees. There were no flowers anywhere around him. There was nothing but thick, strong roots and grass that grew on top of them. Clueless about where he was heading, he moved forward. He relied on the knowledge and instinct of his feet and body to guide him. The forest seemed endless and there was no flower around him yet. Very soon, he was on another meadow, surrounded by the high trees and forests around him. Turning on his left, the light wind blowing, he saw flowers spread all over the grass. They were pink, red and blue, but not one was yellow or white, neither did they grow among the thorns. But the trail of flowers, lured him, he followed the flowery path until he was finally there — standing in front of a big bush full of thorns. In between the thorns, he saw beautiful, round and shiny yellow and white flowers. As if he forgot, another warning that the fearsome woman had given him, he reached for the flower, but At that moment, he heard a screech. At once, he moved his hand; one of the thorns caught it and left a mark on his bronzed by the sun, skin. A large, gryphon-like creature was flying above him, reaching for him. He moved quickly and animal fled above. It stopped at the top of the bush, looked at the young man below, and made another, frightening, dying scream.

Looking at the animal there, open and vulnerable, he pulled out a gun from his bag. He aimed at its chest, proud and exposed, pulled the trigger and shoot. But the beast was fast, and as soon as it heard the sound of the trigger, flew above and started moving in circle above Dorin. Its sounds were stronger, more frightening than before, the attempted attack angered him and the young man below him knew he was to try to fly towards him and dig his eyes out with its claws and beak. That was what the beast did. Before there was time for the young man to gather himself, the animal was on him, grabbing, holding, and screaming against his ears, clapping with its wings, confusing the prey below him, overwhelmed with sounds, moves, pain and fear. Dorin was protecting his eyes with his arms, and not knowing when and how he found the one instant when the beast's claws weren't positioned right above his eyes, with every atom of strength in his body and mind, he grabbed the animal by the neck. It was moving quickly, hitting him with its wings. He was fast to take the knife out of his bag and pierce it through the animal's neck, right next to his other hand with which he held it. His hand let go of the neck, the animal screamed yet stronger and moved around confused and delirious. Dorin once again, took the gun, and standing tall, catching the animal's gaze for a moment, shot once again. The bullet hit its head and very soon, the noise was replaced by a potent silence. Dorin was still standing and looking the blood coming out of the animal's head and neck, falling on the gentle petals of flowers around it. He

was waiting for it, by some magic, to wake up and go for him headless and more irate than ever, but there was no such a thing. It stood there, majestically beautiful and frightening, even in its death.

Dorin's face, arms and hands were covered in scratches and blood. His forehead and hair, damp with sweat. He walked towards the bush once again. Taking the bloody knife, he cut the thorn and reached for the flowers. The moon flowers were shining silver, even when plucked, the sun flowers, shone gold. He was cutting, with his knife, longer strands, so he could make wreath. His hands and arms were constantly torn and hurt, the new scratches appeared with every move, but he was numb to his senses. The only thing he felt was the great will of his heart. Once he collected enough flowers, he sat down on the meadow, to make a wreath. His hands were hurting, and he did not know how to begin. No matter what he did, the flowers fell out and there was no way they would hold up. Annoyed and tired, he refused to listen to the irritated voice in his head, but always tried, once again. Then he remembered, once, not long time ago, he braided the hair of now, betrothed. She taught him how to do it and how to move three strands of hair one over the other, until they were entangled together. He started braiding the flowers, his fingers moving on their own and when he saw the wreath getting shape, he for the first time that night, felt a sweet delight in his heart. Upon completion, he picked up his gun and a knife and took a feather from the beastly bird for memory. Tomorrow he was to bring the wreath to the woman with the scythe. He did not fail. With a renewed courage and faith in himself, he walked back to his village and his house.

The next day, he wore a long sleeved shirt to hide his scratches and torn skin from those inside his home. Those on his face, they did not ask about, for they were smaller, and they assumed, they were just a normal occurrence in a young man's life. Just like every other day of his summer life, he packed early and walked towards the fields. On the way there, he knocked at his maiden's window, greeted her and promised he'd stop by, once again, in the evening. He told her nothing of his adventures, but wise as she was, and perceptive as she was, she felt something strange happening within him. But, judging in her mind, that perhaps it was just weariness of the late evening of the summer fieldwork, she felt at peace, again. She followed him walk from her window, in to the mist of the early morning, and finally when he was out of her sight, she went back in, for there was a lot of work for her that day as well.

He worked as usual, in rhythm, as if dancing, having nothing but movement on his mind. The evening came, once again, sooner than he thought it would. He looked inside the bag, and seeing that the wreath was still intact, walked towards Maiden's Rock. This time the woman was waiting for him. A slight pride covered his

face when he took out the wreath. The stern expression of her face changed for a moment, awe and joy-like look appeared on her face. But she was her old and stern self very quickly.

“You have brought it.” — she said at once.

“I have.” — Dorin handed it to her.

“It is well-made. And you made it. I know.”

She was looking at the wreath with an enchanted sight. Her eyes for the first time, had life to them. She removed the old wreath and bent down for Dorin to put the new one on her head. “The flowers will die if my hands touch them” — she reminded him. Dorin gently placed it on top of her head. The silver and gold shone against her golden hair. “Well done youth...” she came closer, “but you have still not gotten permission to live. I shall play with you some more.”

“I am waiting.” — self-assurance rang in his voice.

She stopped, looking at him judgingly. Finally, she spoke.

“There is a nearby village... West of here. In there, there is a cottage, and a cave. In those places... A young man’s bones have been scattered. You will bring them to me.” — she glanced at him looking for a reaction but his face showed nothing.

He was aghast. “Bring you bones? What will you do with the bones, demon?”

The word demon angered her, and she moved her scythe. Pieces of grass rose and fell down. The sound of the scythe hitting against the wind still filled the air.

She was calm again and rose the scythe against his neck. “Next time it will be your head I’ll mow. Or perhaps your gentle maiden’s? So you wander the forests, among wolves and bears. Humiliated. A madman. You have no way out of this, you thoughtless dimwit, other than to do your part! Do you wish you had died that day on the fields?” — she laughed.

“No, I don’t wish I had died that day.” — he moved towards her, new courage rising up in him. “I will bring, bone by bone, flesh by flesh, just to see the expression of defeat against your face.” — he said in anger.

“Oh you naive youth. I win regardless the outcome.” — she said and disappeared with the wind. The gray clouds moved. Storm was to come that day.

The clouds were everywhere that day. The workers in the field were glancing at the sky, wondering whether the rain will come soon. The winds blew, the clouds flew but rain did not come until later that day. They walked home earlier that day. Dorin was quiet and secretive that day. He was sitting under an apple tree, on a wooden

bench, his fiancé by his side, his gaze distant, looking, but seeing nothing. Anfisa was sitting by his side, carefully studying his every move, trying to find in it an evidence for what she felt was a change in his mood lately. Very little of it came.

“Dorin.” — she called. A few moments passed before he responded.

“Yes?”

“Where are you?” — her dark eyes were piercing, demanding answers in their softness.

“I am here” — he responded.

“No you are not.” — she did not stop looking at him. “What are the cuts on your arms?”

“The grass can be tall and sharp.” — he said, finally, turning towards her but not looking at her eyes.

“That is not from the grass.” — she smiled.

“Kind of grass... I picked some berries. They were among the thorns.” — he tried to save his face.

“Berries you say... where they worth the pain?” — she said teasingly.

“They were.” — he lifted up his eyes to look at her. She smiled with a wise and aware smile, but said nothing at that moment.

That evening, the sound of rain and thunder put everyone to sleep earlier than they had thought. The soft, tender sound of drops made Dorin sleepy too. When he was sure that everyone was in their deepest sleep, he walked out of the house. The rain did not stop, the road was muddy and slippery and the sound of thunder frightening, but there was little choice to be made that day. His boots were falling, digging in the ground; his raincoat was covered in raindrops. He felt more than he felt the other day. All of a sudden, he thought, how perhaps, what happened with the beast was but a lucky chance and that the adventure was to kill him. “At least I will die a hero” — he thought and continued walking. The neighboring village seemed more distant than usual that day, but finally, he saw the scattered houses and heard the dogs bark. He had to walk to the very end of it, and walk uphill to the place of hunters’ cottage and a cave that was near it.

He saw the cottage, standing proud on a meadow with trees around it. He walked towards it and suddenly heard a voice, coming from a cloud, or sky, or wind, he knew not, saying: “Forward, youth, forward”. He turned around, holding tight around his weapon, but nothing came. “Forward” — voice heard again, “in vain you seek, you cannot see me with your eyes.” — the whispering voice said. Dorin walked forward towards the cottage. “Yes, yes, that way.” — the voice said, this time deeper, more masculine. Dorin shut down every thought in his mind that told him that everything, beginning with the woman and everything else was but

hallucination.

“Yes, there!” — the voice suddenly said. The rain was still falling down, the soil was bathed in it. “Go inside”. — the voice said. Holding his little purse tightly, every moment ready to pull out the gun and shoot, he opened the shaky, wooden door and found himself inside the cottage. The rain was coming through the holes in the roof, and in the room that he found himself in, was nothing but a big table.

“See that table?” — the voice said.

“I do.” — Dorin responded not knowing where to look.

“Move it, under it, is something you can remove. Go, do not stand, if you wish to live.” — the voice commanded. Dorin moved the table. “Now, remove the plank. Three of them. Those in the middle. Do it!” — the voice was louder. Dorin moved the planks and there saw a gray sack. “There are bones in it” — the voice said, “but not all of them.” — it stopped, theatrically, “for the rest... you will have to follow me to the cave. Are you scared? Will you do it youth?”

“I will.” — he responded calmly, rain still did not stop. “Then come” — the voice whispered.

He walked out of the cottage, carrying the sack in his hands. He did not want to think of the bones that were inside or the ones that he had to yet find. The cave was not far away, and despite the heavy rain, they reached it quickly. “Here” — said the voice, “I knew of your arrival, so I left you a shovel. Just here, in front of the cave, so you can dig. You do not dig inside the cave, but here, right in front of it where you stand. Do it.” Dorin left his bags on the wet ground, took the shovel and started digging through the wet soil. His feet were slipping, his shovel was falling in directions he did not want it to, but he continued digging. All the time the rain did not stop. The sweat was on his forehead, against his back, the muscles on them, tense and stretched, but he continued without a break. He found himself in a whole, hitting against something hard. He was sure those were the bones he had to find. But then suddenly, the rain and thunder and wind got stronger and the soil that he dug out started falling down at him.

“What is it, youth?” — the voice said. “Is it hard to dig?” — he had a teasing tone.

Dorin spoke nothing and just fought with the soil that was falling on his shoulders, his head, his eyes, while trying to grab for the bone he thought he reached. His eyes were dusty, his heart full of fear, his mind confused and noisy, but dug under the bone he initially had hit and brought it up to his hand. He touched it. The soil that was falling, suddenly stopped. The voice went silent.

“You took it?” — it said, disbelief heard in his voice. “You took it? You took it?”

“I did.” — barely awake he said.

“Continue. Take them all or I will bury you alive!” — it screamed.

Dorin continued digging, hitting against bones and digging them out. The fight against rain, land, nature and the voice finished. He climbed himself up, picked up the sack. The voice did not speak a word more. Dorin looked around once again and walked back home.

Task Three

The sun lit the next day's morning. The soil, still wet, welcomed its rays and very quickly that morning, was it warm and pleasant. As the hours passed, the day got warmer and it was one of those days when the sun is slightly low and the swarms of insects could be seen against it. Dorin could not have taken the bones he got the previous night — he hid them in a safe place in the attic, and he was to go back for them after the day's labor. Evening came faster than those before. He went home a little earlier — for he knew it would be empty then and his movement in the attic would not bring any unwanted attention. He took the sack with the bones and walked towards the place where he usually met the frightening woman.

Once again, he was near the Maiden's Rock and heard the familiar air blowing that did not come from any wind. She appeared in front of him very soon, and seeing him alive and well, her face created a slight smile.

“You are here.” — she said, the red around her eyes fiery.

“Yes, I am. I have brought what you asked for.” — He said dropping the sack in front of her.

“Open it.” — she said.

Dorin bent down and started untying the knots. He moved it of bones — skull, limbs, fell down on the ground. She looked at him.

“I knew you did it. My little birds told me. I wanted to see if you are bold to do it till the very end. This is a little game after all, is it not, youth?” — a loathsome laughter came out of her lungs.

“Now, for the very last one... The very test of your courage and strength. Your last task.” — she made a theatrical pause.

“Say it!” — he said, nervous and tired.

“Ooh... do not hurry. You will not be pleased with this one. You should be grateful I offer you a few moments of pride in your accomplishments so far... The next one might be your downfall. What do you think?” — she giggled with a giggle of a young maiden, seductive and playful.

“You have said that before.” — he told her.

“True, true. But I asked for nothing that you have personal attachment for. Have not I?” — she closed her eyes and opened them slowly, looking at him, hiding her gaze under her eyebrows.

“True, you have not.” — Dorin responded. He could feel fear growing in his gut.

“Well... that is to change.” — she faced him directly. A proud smirk was on her face. “No hero can be a hero before he proves to the world he is free of worldly attachment and silly sentimental delusions. Is it not true, my youth? Is that not what tales and wisdom of the elderly tell?” — she did not let him respond. “Oh it is, it is true.” He felt no fear since the beginning of the adventure, but he felt it now. Somewhere, something in his body, or his mind, or elsewhere, for he knew its exact place not, was telling him, what she could suggest.

“This time...” — she was behind him, he did not turn around. “This time... you will bring me your beautiful maiden.”

With a speed of wind, he turned towards her. Looking in this belief, thinking himself stupid, she would have never let him won. He was like a mouse that a cat plays with before she kills him. Fear, anger, fury, shame consumed his whole being.

“What is it youth?” — she said — “would you like to kill me?” — her laugh was loathsome again. “I am already dead. You can only kill the living” — she lifted up her scythe and placed it on his neck. “So? Do you give up?” “Do I get to kill you now? Do not worry. I give credit where credit is due. I shall tell to my birds and friends you were better than other youths!”

“What do you need her for?!” — he shouted.

“Oh... lady talks are not concern of you. You need to trust me. I can kill your maiden this very moment. But I do not. Maybe I will kill you either way when you bring her, maybe I will not. “

“And what if I do not bring her?” — he asked.

“Oh... you will die... Or maybe her. Or both...” — “or maybe... leaving one of you... with madness so strong, so big, sorrow so strong, so big, that will make you walk the forest and be eaten alive by wolves and bears. What do you think? I would have to think a little before I decide what ending I give to your story!” — her voice was gentle and despite her fearsome face, it became softer as she spoke those words.

“You witch!” — he screamed.

“Oh, no, not a witch. Do not insult me.” — she took a piece of his hair with her scythe.

“Will you bring me the maiden?”

“I will.” — he knew not why he said those words. But something inside of him was stronger than all his reason

or sentiments.

“Do not tell her where you bring her. I will know if I do. Tell her something else. I shall wait for you...

Tomorrow. At the noon, when the sun is strongest.” — she spoke and disappeared with the wind.

He stopped in the forest before going back home. Thousands of thoughts were on his mind, but he did not dare pay attention to any. He knew that only way out of the labyrinth he was in was to complete it — dead or alive.

He walked back to the village and knocked on Anfisa’s window. She opened the window. A dark and thick braid was falling on her side, her eyes were open and lively.

“Tired?” — she asked him.

“A little... Yourself?”

“I am not bad. There was a lot of work in the yard.” — she smiled, placing a hand on her cheeks.

“I wanted to ask you...” — he stared.

“Yes, ask.”

“Would you like to come with me tomorrow... for a picnic, at Maiden’s Rock.” — his entire body was covered in uncomfortable, numb feeling, from uttering that lie.

“Sure. When?” — she asked.

“Before noon, wait for me. We will be there around noon. It should be a nice day. I will work harder and finish earlier tomorrow.” — he said.

“Alright. See you tomorrow then. Now go either your home or my home but do not stand here like a beggar!” — she pinched his cheek. He walked in, had some food, before he headed back home, restless about the next day. Never did he hope more that he would wake up to see everything that happened has been a dream, a phantom, or that by going there with Anfisa, it would be evident, clear, that it was his imagination that created everything, that no fearsome woman with a scythe existed. He woke up early, did almost a whole day’s work in couple of hours he had in the morning and walked to Anfisa’s home. She was waiting for him, wearing a white, long embroidered dress. It ended right above her ankles. In her right hand, she carried a basket in which she put food and drinks and a blanket. Dorin was consumed with guilt upon seeing her. “Liar” — said the voices in his mind — “is she your sacrificial lamb? And look how ceremonially dressed she is! Unaware of your treachery! Don’t you have shame? Dignity? Should have put your neck under that scythe! Coward! Liar! Coward!” — they screamed. He moved, refusing to listen to them. His thought were not a reliable companion those days.

“Is something wrong?” — she said to him after she gazed upon his face.

“I am just tired.”

She did not trust him but did not insist. “Perhaps you should rest soon.” He nodded without a word, and they walked towards the Maiden’s Rock, speaking very little.

Finally, they had arrived. It was sunny and warm, there were no clouds or wind. Anfisa spread the blanket and put out the drinks and food she brought. Dorin was standing tall, his hands on his hips, looking for the familiar silhouette. But there was none. Maybe it really was just his imagination, a heatstroke.

“Sit.” — she said to him.

He sat down and took some of the fruit from the basket. A few more minutes passed before he felt the well-known wind against his skin. She was coming. “Someone is walking towards us.” — Anfisa said. Her long white dress was moving behind her, against the wind, the wreath on her head, fresh and perfumed. From distance, she appeared peaceful, like a fairy. He looked in direction to which Anfisa pointed. Very soon she was before them. They both stood up.

“Well... well” — she said. Anfisa was scared but could not move. “Look at you two lovebirds.” — she smiled.

“Who is this Dorin? Do you know her?” — she looked at him, then again at woman.

“I do know her.” — he could not lie another time.

“Oh he does. He is a good servant of mine. He has done many tasks for me. And today he brought you to me.” — she laughed.

Anfisa looked at Dorin.

“What did you do?” — she asked him.

He looked towards her, just to open his mouth to speak, but the woman stopped him. “He was being a hero... saving his and your life, my sweet maiden.” Anfisa was so overwhelmed that she could not identify a single emotion that passed through her. “So I thought it... if he is to be a hero, why not give you to be a heroine. It is only fair, is it not, my sweet maiden?” — she looked at her.

“Why are you involving her in this?” — Dorin asked.

“Oh, she was involved from the moment you decided to play with me, you stupid.” — she smiled with a smile of a witch and looked at Anfisa again.

“My dear, you know, that you will have to play... or you will leave me with a difficult choice...” — she stopped, “to pick what way to finish this tragedy. Details of which I explained to your darling. A lot of death happens in

it, my dear girl. I am sure you want to prevent it?“

Anfisa wanted to move, but could not. She did not know whether it was magic or fear, or something else, but she found herself powerless.

“I want to prevent it.“ — she said, feeling there was no other option.

“No!“ — screamed Dorin. “She is a cheat.“ He looked again at the woman. “Kill me. It was a game between me and you. It is either me or you that loses and nobody else!“ — he screamed.

“Oh you! Give lady a chance.“ — she said.

At that moment, she moved her arms, and before them appeared, a long wooden table, on it a banquet. At the center of the table, were two chairs, on one of them, the bones which Dorin previously bought, were somehow, connected. They were fully dressed — a white shirt and dark pants.

“See this beautiful banquet, my dear maiden?“ — the woman spoke.

“Yes.“ — said Anfisa, her voice shivering. Dorin looked, feeling powerless, consumed by guilt, once again realizing that he cannot play by his rules.

“Do you see the young man sitting at the very center of it?“ — she pointed.

“Yes.“ — Anfisa said.

“And you see me?“ — she turned towards Anfisa.

“I do“ — said Anfisa looking at her scary presence.

“Now... I will ask you three questions. If you answer correctly, the game your darling had begun will finish. You shall live. But if not... one of you, or both, will die.

“Ask me.“ — said Anfisa. Dorin looked at her, he was to say something, but she grabbed his arm, and he stopped.

“Alright... What is this banquet?“ — she asked.

Anfisa stopped for a moment. She looked at the chairs, at the clothes, at the placements, order. It looked festive.

“It is wedding banquet!“ — said Anfisa. The woman turned towards her. Her eyes opened wide, the red underneath them was less, and something that looked like hope appeared on her face.

“That is a correct answer. You are a smart girl. If you fail... I will be so angry. So angry.“ — expressionless face but furious air came from her again.

“I shall not fail.“ — said Anfisa. Dorin once again looked at her, not knowing where her courage came from.

But then he remembered himself while he was performing his tasks.

“What am I?” — she asked.

Anfisa looked at her. “A girl? A woman? A fairy? A witch?” — Anfisa thought. She took a little time. There were so many possible answers to that question. “Do you give up?” — the woman asked. “No” — said Anfisa.

“It must be in the context of first question.” — thought Anfisa. “It is a wedding banquet, she has a wreath and white dress and the question is “What am I?” “ — Anfisa was thinking. She felt the woman’s striking gaze on her. She then looked at her.

“You are the bride!” — Anfisa said.

The woman opened her eyes even wider. The red in her eyes was now even less and her face was becoming more pleasant. “One more... one more... but if you fail this one... I will be very very angry. Much angrier than before. I might even give you suffering worse than death!” — she screamed.

“Ask me.” — said Anfisa, confidently. She smiled at the woman. Dorin looked at the exchange between the two women, banquet, feeling as if he were awaiting his death sentence.

“Last question... What is my name?” — she looked at Anfisa. This time there was no smug on her face. There was fear, hope and anger combined. For the first time, her face clearly showed emotion.

Anfisa took a breather. “She is a bride, there is a wedding... Her betrothed looks dead. She looks dead. She looks like a ghost. She has a scythe, blond hair, a bride’s attire.” — thought

Anfisa. Then it came to her, she remembered the old stories about maidens who died on their wedding day and who roamed this world still, stuck between life and afterlife.

“Your name is...” — Anfisa made a break before she said it. Woman stared at her, Dorin’s eyes were wide open — “Your name is Poludnica.” — Anfisa said.

The woman looked at her in disbelief. “Yes, I am Poludnica. But before I was Poludnica, I was Luludja.” — she said that and moved her arms once again.

The bones that were sitting behind the table, became a young man with a light brown hair and deep, brown eyes. The frightening woman became a young maiden, with cheeks bright and smile so wide. Her scythe became a flower bouquet. Dorin looked at Anfisa, relief and pride on his face. The woman approached them.

“Thank you for freeing me and for freeing my beloved.” — she was suddenly pleasant and kind.

“Tell us more!” — Dorin said in a demanding voice.

“I will, but, please, come sit at my banquet. You are the only wedding guests.” — she took them by their hands.

Her dress was flowing against the wind, her golden hair shone with the sun. They were seated down across the newlyweds.

Luludja started to speak: “I was to be wedded long time ago when... I fell from a bridge and died. My betrothed was so affected by this that he had lost his mind. He walked in forests. He died after he was attacked by animals. His body scattered, torn. He became the spirit of the forest. I was told by an old crone who could contact, is, wandering spirits, that the only way for us to ever be liberated from living like we did, was to fulfill our heart’s desire — of being united and leaving to the heavens in pair, the way we were brought down from it, before we parted.” — she stopped. “The witch told me, that only a young maiden could recognize who I was. For she told me, that only a maiden knows a maiden’s heart. But before maiden, her lad had to perform all the rest. It was very difficult to find one, not to mention, two people who were able to do it“ — she smiled looking at Dorin and Anfisa. “I wandered... looking for young men who were with a maiden. Many I have killed... I grew angry and I was not in control. I was ready to do anything to have our souls freed... And our souls reunited.“ — she stood up and her betrothed followed her.

“To express my gratitude... I shall forever ask spirits and gods to bring joy and happiness to you and your families.“

The fairies, animals and all other creatures came out of the forest, brought food and drink. The wedding was light, full of song and magic, but nobody except Dorin and Anfisa saw it or heard it. Dorin and Anfisa, Luludja and Maxim, found a peaceful way back home, that night.

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