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opening extract from

My Swordhand is Singing

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The Song

There is a land beyond the forests. A land so beautiful that as you stand at the edge of the trees and gaze across the pastures to the snow-brushed mountains, you know that heaven is surely but a step away. From this land comes a song, and from the song comes a story. A story of murder.

Down from the mountains one day came three shepherds. They had been in the high pastures for weeks with their flocks and were glad to be heading home, but in the minds of two of the shepherds, there was death.

The third shepherd, the youngest of the three, and maybe the richest and maybe the most handsome, knew nothing of this, until one of his lambs, the smallest lamb, that he had saved from dying in a late Spring snow, came to him and warned him of the plot to kill him.

Now the shepherd looked sadly at his lamb, and said:

'If this is true, then I am doomed to die. But, my faithful creature, do this for me. When they have killed me, tell them to lie my bones somewhere close by, and bury my pipes with me, so that when the wind blows, it will play a tune and my sheep may come near, and my dogs too.

'Tell them not that I am dead, but instead that I went to

marry a princess from a distant land. Tell them how a star fell at my wedding, tell them how the sun and moon came down to hold my bride's crown, tell them how the trees were my guests, and the mountains my priests. How birds were my fiddlers, and stars my torchlight.

'But if one day you meet a white-haired woman; my mother, my old mother, tell her simply that I went to marry a princess, there on heaven's doorstep.'

And so it all came to be.



Deep in the Woods

When he fell for the fifth time, when his face plunged into the deep snow, when his hands burnt from the cold but he didn't care, Radu the woodcutter knew he was going to die. Somewhere behind him in the darknesses of the forest he could hear the man who had attacked him. He was scared now, almost too scared to move, almost too cold to run anymore, but still he knew something was wrong. Something that should not be.

He got up and stumbled on desperately, sending snow flying in little spurts. Even here among the thickness of the trees it lay heavily on the ground, whisked and funnelled by the east wind into strange hills and troughs, like white beasts lurking at the foot of the birches.

Radu looked behind him, but could see nothing. Nothing but the vast unfathomable forest. It was said you could ride from Poland to Turkey and never leave the trees behind, but he knew that wasn't true. Nothing could be that big! Not even the Mother Forest.

He stopped for a moment, listening hard, but all he could hear was his own panting as he sucked air into his painful chest. He no longer knew where he was, though the forest

had been his home all his life. His hut and his village were far away. He looked around, straining to recognise anything, but all he saw was a hundred thousand silver birch trees.

A branch cracked, and with horror Radu's eyes snapped back to his pursuer. Now Radu saw him again, he knew what was wrong.

'In the name of Jesus and the Forest . . . '

The words fell dead in the softness of the snow, but even as they did Radu turned and began to run, lurching wildly from tree to tree. His right hand left a smear of blood on the paper bark of a birch, but that wound was irrelevant now. It was such a short while since he'd been cutting wood with his axe. The axe that lay somewhere in the snow, its blade stained with blood, already frozen. *His* blood.

He hit another two trees, but barely noticed, and suddenly he realised where he was. Close to Chust, where his fellow woodcutter Tomas lived in a hut outside the village.

For a fleeting moment a flame of hope ignited in his heart. He had run fast, the village was only a short way through the trees, and he could no longer hear his attacker behind him.

But then Radu rounded a tree and ran straight into him.

The man was not tall, but he was fat. Bloated. His skin was as white as the trees around them. There was dried blood at the corners of his shrivelled mouth. It had taken Radu all this time to recognise him.

Radu took a step backwards, his fur boots brushing through the snow. He tripped over an unseen root, but kept his feet. He lifted a hand and pointed at the man.

'But Willem. You're dead!'

The man lunged forward and shoved his hand like a knife into Radu's chest, feeling for his heart.

'Not any more,' he said.

And now it was Radu who fell dead in the softness of the snow.



2 Slivovitz and Snow

Peter trudged behind his father towards Chust, shivering as he went. Their hut lay a little way behind them, outside the village itself. St Andrew's Eve was still a few days off, and the snow was strong already. It would be a brutal winter. Through the cold Peter could smell his father; even the biting wind could not rid him of the constant reek of slivovitz and beer.

'Did you know Radu well, Father?' Peter said, simply so there was something to say. His father didn't reply and Peter knew the answer anyway. They didn't know anyone well – until they had come to Chust they had never stayed in one place long enough to know anyone at all. But Peter was aware that his father had helped Radu, the woodcutter from Koroceni, once or twice in the last year. Sometimes even the most solitary of woodcutters needed help felling a large tree.

The edge of the village was in front of them.

'Hurry,' said Tomas. 'They won't wait for us.'

'They can't be starting,' said Peter. 'I can't hear the church bell.'

His father spat into the snow, but didn't look round.

'There won't be bells at a suicide's funeral.'

He walked into the village, through a small gate in the rickety birch paling that marked the boundary. The fence, no more than knee high, and capped by a ragged thatch, was designed to stop chickens from wandering too far. It ran right around the settlement, marking its perimeter; apart from a few fields, everything beyond it was forest. In places along its length, as here, were gates with porches.

Peter hesitated at this gateway, nervous. It wasn't just that they weren't liked in the village; there was more to it than that.

'Suicide?'

Peter ran after his father, and caught up quickly. The ground was a mess of frozen mud and slush, and his father was unsteady on his feet, as usual.

'Be quiet,' Tomas said, glaring at his son. He nodded at the huts, and Peter understood he should not have spoken. That was all right. Peter was used to silence, used to keeping his own company; thanks to his taciturn father, most conversations Peter had took place in his own head.

Two sour-faced old women stood in the shadow of a low doorway. They spoke under their breath to each other and stared at Tomas and his son, a heavy man who looked older than he probably was, and his strong, young boy.

Peter knew they were not liked, and the village had little to offer. There was something bleak and unsettling about the place, almost menacing, though Peter could not have put it into words, and yet for all that Tomas seemed content to stay. And in truth, Peter was happy to stay too. They finally seemed to have put down some roots after years and years of moving, and besides, there was Agnes.

They hurried on, down the slight hill that led to the area laughingly called the square, as if this was some great city in the south and not a Godforsaken village in the middle of nowhere. Chust was home to no more than two hundred people, but here in the centre there were houses in place of huts; a few of them had two storeys. As they went Peter kept an eye out for Agnes, but it was not a day to be abroad unless you had business to attend to. They passed the end of the street where she lived with her mother, still in mourning after her husband's death. Briefly Peter slowed his pace, hoping for some sign of Agnes, but there was none.

Slipping from the far corner of the square, a small track squeezed between two of the larger houses in the village; the priest's house and the feldsar's house. That way led to the church, which lay on a rise beyond. Peter could see its sagging wood-tiled roof with the onion-dome tower on its back, halfway along, like a boy riding a pig, but was surprised when his father strode away towards the other side of the square.

He paused, and then understood. He should have known better. Radu was a suicide; there would be no bells, and there would be no holy ground for him either. Peter hurried on.

His father was nearly at the far side of the village.

'They think he killed himself?'

Tomas said nothing.

'Father?'

Tomas stopped for a moment and looked, not at his son, but somewhere away over his shoulder.

'He was found hanging from a tree by a rope round his neck. So he killed himself. Wouldn't be the first lonely woodcutter to have done that.'

Something occurred to Peter.

'Why isn't he going to be buried in his own village?'

His father grunted.

'That type of death. They wanted nothing to do with him. Said he died on Chust land so we could deal with him.'

'And we agreed?' asked Peter.

'Who is "we"? There is no "we" here,' Tomas said, abruptly. Then he sighed. 'There was no choice. It was that, or leave him to the wolves. And anyway, the Elders commanded it.'

They were out of the village now, and through the trees they could see a few people gathered in a small clearing.

Peter thought about Radu, about how he might have died. His father told him he was a dreamer, but Peter couldn't dream what might have happened to Radu. It was not the stuff of dreams, it was the stuff of nightmares.

'But Father,' Peter whispered. 'You said Radu's chest was burst, that his heart was pierced.'

'What of it?'

'Well, he can't have done that to himself and then hung himself from a tree.'

'So it must have happened afterwards.'

'You mean someone else did it to him after he was dead? Who would do that? Why?'

Tomas shrugged.

'The wolves . . . ?'

Peter was about to reply, but could tell his father was being deliberately obtuse.

'Listen, Peter. If a man is hanging from a tree by a rope, he killed himself. If Anna told them that's what happened then that's what happened. Let it lie!'

Peter was not satisfied, but said no more. There was something troubling his father, he knew.

They made their way towards the meagre funeral party. There was Daniel, the priest, and Teodor, the feldsar; half doctor, half sorcerer. Radu might only have been a woodcutter, and not even from the village, but still two of its most important inhabitants had come to bury him. Peter wondered why. Why were both of them here? He knew they didn't always get on. People were as likely to visit Teodor with spiritual needs as Daniel, and just as likely to pray for their health with Daniel as visit the doctor. Each man knew he had to tolerate the other. An uneasy alliance.

A little way away stood the village sexton, an old man with strong arms but few teeth. It was clear he wanted nothing to do with the affair, and having struggled to dig a shallow hole in the frozen ground, he leant on the top of his tall spade, sucking his gums, peering out from under a black wide-brimmed felt hat.

Snow continued to trickle down round and about as Tomas nodded greetings to the others.

Outsiders were never welcome, even if this father and son had taken to their work well enough. They were a strange pair. The father was a drunk, everyone knew that, but there was an air about him. Something in the way he held himself. He was fat from drink, his face flushed and his eyes milky, but he still had a head of strong black hair.

The son was a young man, really, new to the game. He

had even darker, thicker hair, and his skin was smooth and brown, as if he was from somewhere in the south. His eyes were rich and dark brown, like Turkish coffee, but he was nervous, for all his young strength, and there was something more refined about him than his father. Few of the villagers had ever wondered what might have happened to the boy's mother, though it must have been from her that this refinement came.

Peter was absorbed in his own thoughts. Wolves couldn't have done that to Radu's chest after he hung himself from the tree. It didn't make sense. Someone must have stabbed him through the heart with great force, and then hung his body in the tree afterwards.

But why? Most murderers tried to conceal their victims' bodies. Why display it instead?

To Peter, it seemed like a warning; a warning that death was walking in the woods.

And Peter was right.