

EPISODE 03: TODORATZ

PATH IN THE FOREST

GABRIEL (89) OFF: Sunday, 21st June Anno Domini 6896.

I did not let MARKO sleep, but woke him up with the first sunbeams. And the story plot was consistent: at first, he would curse me and his destitute fate, then would calm down and become glee. That certain morning was gloomy. During torrid days and brisk nights, as it is common in the mountains, the daybreaks are shrouded in fog. If the day remains windless, the fog may linger until the sun scatters it. During that time nature is placid, the bird's singing is seldom, and steps and voices reverberate extraordinarily. I do not fancy much the fog.

We jaunted silently. Even MARKO dismounted and trudged alongside. Yonder the path was narrow, he walked behind me.

GABRIEL: Take heed not to tap Tsoka's croup for it will kick out.

MARKO: Why don't you say! Nasty habit.

GABRIEL: Indeed. Sometimes it is welcome.

MARKO: I wouldn't say so, but you know better. You are a Kosingas.

GABRIEL: You will know as well, be patient.

GABRIEL (89) OFF: I was not in the mood for arguments, particularly as I noted that MARKO scarcely was listening to what I was saying. I was hoping that I would be able to teach him, but I didn't want constantly to lose time with him. And then happened something that I couldn't forgive myself ever.

Suddenly, Tsoka halted and almost toppled me over to the ground.

MARKO: I hadn't touched it, I wouldn't touch it.

GABRIEL: C'mon, Tsoka, why did you dig in?

GABRIEL 89: Marko lowered his hand on the sword hilt. But nothing. Nobody nor anything was behind us, save dead silence. But why would Tsoka dig itself in like that? Shudder started crawling up my spine. I closed my eyes and perceived a terrible mistake that I made. How is it possible that, after a legion of years

fighting the wraiths, I fell for their oldest scams? Nobody was behind us, but ahead..... I sighed.

I turned around slowly, keeping my breath, as if it might be the last one. Gazing at the simulacrum enshrouded by the fog in front of us, my legs stumbled and my knees buckled. As if all the strength had left me at once, and a terrible fear gripped me. A fear that overthrows. In a moment, I caught Marko's shoulder and sustained. He startled, glancing at me, while I was fraughted with the reek of Hades, experiencing that dread like it was for the first time and not of twenty years afore. Old wounds started to soar. Marko turned pale, as if he perceived my state, glancing along the road.

Thirty feet ahead, in all its vain dread, emerged a humanoid wraith, mounted. On such a horse, alas! Marvellous horse, and alas what a rider! Pure embodiment of the greatest Hades' abomination - the uttermost powerful creature after the immortal deities!

MARKO: God help us, GABRIEL, what is this?

GABRIEL: A Todoratz.

TODORATZ: I come in peace.

The creature hissed through his teeth and stretched his mouth into a horrid grin, his nostrils folding and unfolding. He was sniffing his opponents.

GABRIEL 89: What I dreaded for the past twenty years occurred in a moment when I least expected it. It seemed like those twenty years suddenly vanished and my body again felt the pain and fatigue to which I was exposed during the long days of thralldom with these creatures. I could even sense the taste of decay and bits that pestered me.

TODORATZ: Don't be afraid of me, voyagers.

GABRIEL: What do you want here, Sketeba? Your place is yonder, in that putrid swamp, not hither on the surface. And since when do you come in peace, when you are unaware of peace?

TODORATZ: You haven't forgotten me, monk. You fawning one.

GABRIEL: How can I forget you, when my body is marked and cicatrized mostly by your hands? As much as I try, I cannot forget your vile face... But I would rather sunder it from your body.

TODORATZ: I know that you would fancy that much, but your wish will remain unfulfilled, as well as my own, since... how many years have passed? ... From the time when I was persuading Lord Daba to shred you and throw to the Drakes? But alas! He declined. He fancied much to relish glancing how I excruciate you.

He is to blame that you are still alive and that you have stolen the Wolfclaw from him. Now, he is bursting with ire. I should have cut you in pieces then.

GABRIEL: A plenty of matter we ought to fulfil, but we didn't. Maybe because we were destined to encounter once again. You haven't answered. If you come in peace, what are you looking for here?

TODORATZ: I wanted to encounter the Warrior from the Prophecy in person. Entire forest murmurs of him. At last, he emerged. But now when I'm aware of him... he isn't such outstanding one. I learned he is in not a Kosingas yet, but I may experience his mellow fear and that he might be slayed easily.

GABRIEL: Then you ought to slay me first, you miscreant!

TODORATZ: Verily!

Sketeba's demon pranced. The creature drew his sabre.

GABRIEL 89: At that very moment, Marko jumped and gawky tried to draw his sword that resembled to ligneous child's toy compared to Sketeba's chisel, but the haft got tangled in his cloak thus remained halfway down. Retrieving my instinct of old, along with Sketeba, I unfolded my mantle over my left shoulder, and in my left hand raised the Viper sling, tightened at my belt, sighting at the Todoratz. Revealing thus the hauberk with dragon scales and crest of Kosingas, that gleamed on my chest, surprising both Sketeba and Marko, who gaped in amazement, for the monk disappeared abruptly and a formidable warrior emerged.

I already wanted to fire my sling as if sunder the Todoratz's head, when I heard Tsoka braying behind us. That was heehaw of dread, hence I retorted. Swiftly turning around, on two paces behind Marko, I perceived a Yeller with a black dagger, prepared to stab him from the back with his poisonous blade. Its thick black blood splattered us. Its lifeless body fell withering onto the ground. I didn't forget Sketeba, thus drawing out my short sword Wolfclaw, I was prepared to assault... But the Todoratz vanished. I remained stern, hearkening the fog-enshrouded heavy and ominous silence. Keen death silence. Placidity. As if Sketeba and the Yeller have dismayed all of life around us.

Still griping the Wolfclaw, I turned around to look at the Yeller who was withering on the ground with its last strength, while Marko was gazing at it terrified. Its pallid body was twitching painfully, palms fisted. The Dragon tear had shattered its huge head, leaving the dark, mucous, curdled mass scattered on the ground. Poor Marko was appalled. Astounded, for one moment he gazed at the demon's carcass, the next at me in the shining armour with a sword in my hand, and then at the place where the terrible Todoratz stood. Half drown sword was still in King's hand, and all of the sudden, he ebbed and sat on the ground.

GABRIEL 89: Whether by coincidence or not, a breeze started to disperse the fog, singing through the tree branches. What a relief! And luck. I felt my sweaty face refreshed. The ominous and difficult silence disappeared.

MARKO: Will I ever see my wife and son again?

GABRIEL 89: At once I was aware how much MARKO was terrified. I couldn't blame him. Humans rarely survive such an encounter, or in the worst case, they have been taken as thralls to Hades, where promptly they bid to die.

GABRIEL: It's all up to you whether or not you will see them again. Without my today's succour, you certainly would not have seen them again. If you get your wits and become a Kosingas, you could have some expectancy of seeing them.

MARKO: How dumb and heedless I was. You were telling me this all the time, and I did not believe you. They wanted to kill me.... They could have killed me.

GABRIEL: This time, you remained, but whether you will be able to do that next time, we shall see.

MARKO: Whence did you get those commodities? How come I did not notice you wore those all this time? Am I so utterly blind?

GABRIEL: Far more matter you ought to hearken, afore you could perceive. As you can see, there isn't much time, you ought to learn fast. This matter cannot be apprehended on mistakes, for some mistakes are singular. Now that the forest knows about you, all our foes will bid not only to slay, but to cranny and devour you as well.

MARKO: Like... this one?

GABRIEL: This is a Yeller. A Demon of the underworld. Their master is Lame Daba. How much do you know about the old faith, King.

MARKO: Trifles.

GABRIEL: Before the Holy Cross-conversion, our people worshipped several deities. The most important were: Yarilo, Svetovid, Svarog, Dazhbog, Perun and... Trojan.

MARKO: The last one was a Fallen one.

GABRIEL: It was said of him that he was the deuce, but the Church proclaimed him the Fallen one, for Daba, indeed, resemble to devil. But our folks beloved him. He was the god of heaven, earth and underworld. That is why he had three

heads, and in some places they named him the Three-headed. He wasn't that evil, more stern... Don't forget, Marko: it ought to be known to whom which soul goes. The god that does not get any souls, perishes in oblivion. Oblivion is worse than death. Like they've never existed. When the Church commenced spreading the Word of God, our people accepted it and slowly thrust the old gods into limbo. But the old faith was, and still is vigorous among our people. It is deep-rooted. Kosingases always made an effort that the Church should avoid and approve existence of those sane roots. The Roman Church counteracted, craving for absolute dominion from the beginning, not just over the people, but monarchs as well. All who jeopardize its power should be anathematized. That is why, even today, they kill, burn, torture, and exile all those who are different and think differently. In that purge, many good creatures were killed, and the trail of their existence was extinguished. Our Church accepted those customs that were not menacing and that couldn't be uprooted. Thus, fair deities were graced and renamed. Some of them became God's angels. Others were doomed, like Trojan was. At that time, more than a few hundred years ago, Saint Theodore mostly spread God's Word and he gave the final blow to Trojan. Wandering through underground tunnels, he came upon Trojan's temple. In a fierce battle with his priests, Theodore cut them all down and then he stole Trojan's helmet, cloak and staff. Without those artefacts Trojan was doomed, because all gods possess their own tools which give them certain powers and which were ordained by Mother in order to rule over the others. Without their relics, in time, they grow weak. But Trojan, cunning as he was, promptly slashed his two heads – heaven and earth, withholding the underworld for himself, thus becoming one of the most dreadful and most powerful daemons - Lame Daba. His followers glorified their god's descendancy, and together they swore that on every Saint Theodore's Day they will emerge onto the surface, killing and taking humans in thralldom. Hence, humans nominated them Todoratzs, though unfairly, for they were Trojan's. The Yellers are their daemons, very sly and adept killers, to whom, among other creatures, shape-shifting was ordained, thus they may take human form and emerge onto the day light. Lame Daba avail them when he urges on killing somebody, like you, this time.

MARKO: How come this Todoratz appeared here if the Node is in Uomulle?

GABRIEL: From the Node, tunnels lead in every direction. Some of those tunnels open their outer gates onto the surface. Mostly in caves or gorges. Sketeba knew where we were going and he waited for us at the nearest exit.

MARKO: If he is so powerful, why did he run away from us?

GABRIEL: If the Yeller had killed you, he would have stayed to attack me. He counted on the fact that the two of them would easily overcome me.

MARKO: He was afraid of you?

GABRIEL: No. They are afraid of this. The Wolfclaw sword and the Viper sling. These arms can kill any creature from the Hades, even Lame Daba himself. What the Wolfclaw cuts, never heals again. I stole it from Lame Daba. And he desperately craves to retrieve it.

THROUGH THE FOREST

GABRIEL (89) OFF: The day was decreasing and we hadn't passed much of expected. The path led us further to the north-west along the ridge, and in the distance we could perceive the lower Kruglitsa's peak. We reached the Rankovitsa creek springing at the foot of Hag's Rock. Several minuter streams flowed into it, thus Rankovitsa on certain parts was two to three fathoms wide and waist-deep. The days grew hotter, and we felt that moisture increase, since we were walking through the forest. To cool down, cold water suited us more than anything else, and even Tsoka and Sharatz stepped into the stream in order to refresh. Even the mountain was not providing shade like in the previous days. A very hot summer was ahead.

We located a suitable spot – a pebble-covered strand, so we took our clothes off promptly, yearning to refresh in the water. Marko then for the first time saw my scars, and he couldn't hide his dread. He was ashamed for gazing, but the expression on his face said everything. I did not blame him, for I was aware of my appearance. It would be ungrateful and grievous to explain each cicatrix, but would rather mention that there was no part of my body that didn't bear a scar from various bites, claw scratches and wounds from different weapons.

MARKO: GABRIEL, you look as gnawed by a monster and then spat out.

GABRIEL: You're not far from the truth. Those are all memories from Hades.

MARKO: I heard something about it, but I can't wait to hear it from you.

GABRIEL: There is time, King. All in good time. Wine must also be savoured, otherwise it strikes straight to the head.

MARKO: You know me, I'm not afraid of getting drunk.

GABRIEL (89) OFF: It was about ten o'clock in the morning when we outflanked Kruglitsa from the south side and continued towards the north-west. We were walking on the bare ridge and the sun was blazing. Closely tree kilometres ahead rose Damien's Rock, and then Plavchevo Hill. From there, the road slowly descended to the confluence of the river Lukovska into Toplitsa, where the village Merchez is settled.

I knew this village and I was happy to meet again the friends I haven't seen for a long time. By my reckoning, we should reach the village around noon, but as heavy sun was blazing us all along the road, we retarded, hence at length we arrived into the village when the sun was fading away behind the mountain. Marko was happy that he would be comfort in locals' hospitality, thus he crooned on Sharatz mounted. He was particularly pleased that the villagers knew me, hence he could expect a keen welcome.

MERCHEZ VILLAGE

GABRIEL (89) OFF: The rack of locals was gathered at the entrance by the time we approached the village. Compared to the village of Hag's Rock, Merchez was a bigger village with more than fifty houses. It was wealthier, and the houses were better adorned. Somewhere even surrounded by fences, and some had pens.

GABRIEL: What a welcome! Such hospitality can only be expected from friends!

MIROSH: And that is how we should welcome a friend and a saviour!

GABRIEL: I greet you, MIROSH. I am pleased to see you.

MIROSH: Likewise, GABRIEL. We haven't seen each other for two years.

GABRIEL (89) OFF: MIROSH was my age, but due to hard villager's life he seemed to be older. The land was fertile around the confluence of the river Lukovska into Toplitsa, and there the villagers usually grew wheat and barley, whilst on surrounding hummocks plum trees were planted. The children were responsible for modicum cattle.

The other villagers as well approached and greeted me. They were tapping me on the back while I was walking through the crowd.

GABRIEL: My friends, I am pleased that I am with you again. This is my good friend MARKO. We are through-farers. It was inevitable for me to pass by and not see you.

MIROSH: You are always welcome, Gabriel. We are primarily glad that you arrived to my son Bratoslav's wedding. I invite you two to rejoice with us tomorrow!

MIROSH'S HOUSE

GABRIEL 89: MIROSH led us into the house, where we were welcomed by his wife Zlata, twenty years old son Bratoslav, and his daughters: the eldest, fifteen-year-old Draga, Bozaya, Dragana, Nanota, Maria and the youngest Yefimiya, who was ten. The women hastened kowtowing towards me, how would kiss my hand.

GABRIEL: Do not kiss me, women. I am not of monks who require that.

ZLATA: We are forever grateful to you, Gabriel.

MIROSH: Be seated. You are our guests. Zlata, bring them a bucket of water to refresh themselves. Bratoslav, take the horse and the donkey behind the house, give them water and feed them. Girls, clean the table and offer to guests something to eat..

ZLATA brought a wooden bucket of water and let MARKO wash his face and hands first.

MARKO: I see that you are all very fond of the monk.

MIROSH: Certainly! He hasn't told you? Two years ago, the bandits of Strashtan attacked the village. They formerly invaded the village, yet came in minority, thus did not dare approach, but lurked out from the woods. But that year, they got their wits, gathered the group, and assailed us one night. There were about twenty of them, all mounted. They were snatching our cattle and women. Keen and bloody was that. We killed three of them and they killed ten of ours. Our son Zvezdan was among the slayed. Eighteen years old. Bratoslav is my only son, now. And six daughters.... . Anyhow, the bandits stole all our cattle and snatched fifteen women, among them my Zlata and three daughters: Draga, Bozaya and Yefimiya. The other three hid themselves in the hay. They took them somewhere. The next day we gathered and armed ourselves with whatever we owned, and started after the bandits. For five days we pursued them, but they were nowhere to be found. We had to return to the village. Two days later, the monk came carrying out the women and the cattle. We were astonished. Who is he? Where did he come from? How did he save the women and the cattle? We asked him, but he remained silent. We asked the women, but they didn't know. They said they were chained in one cave, and that morning at the cave's mouth a monk appeared with keys to the padlocks and freed them. They don't know what happened nor did they hear anything, but when they came out, they could see all the bandits were lying dead. How did he alone slay them, nobody knows. That is how it was.

GABRIEL: It's behind our backs now. There is no need to remember those bitter moments. Move on.

MARKO: I see, my good host that the year was fruitful.

MIROSH: Praise to God. And peaceful.

GABRIEL: Soon it won't. A war is brewing again.

MIROSH: We know. We heard rumours. War-list is thriving. The peasants are war-familiar.

GABRIEL: Did they come by here as well?

MIROSH: Yes, they have selected 120 men. Among them are Bratoslav and myself.

GABRIEL: They did not allow you to keep your oneling at home?

MIROSH: Yes, they did, but I did not accept. I want him to fight for his country. I don't want people afterwards to rumour how Mirosh wanted to spare his son... The two of us are going to war together.

GABRIEL: It is preferably for a family that one patriarch remains in case you don't come back.

MIROSH: No.

An unpleasant silence fell upon us, but MARKO interrupted it addressing Bratoslav.

MARKO: Well, tell me, is the bride charming? Is she jovial, looking forward for the nuptial vows?

BRATOSLAV: Of course she is. She chirps all day long.

MARKO: And that's the way it is.

Meanwhile, the housewives laid the table as for the mere feast.

MARKO: May happiness enter both houses! Well, my good host, do you have any daughter of marriageable age? My son Matthew is now ready for marriage. A diligent and tender woman will suit him. Curvy as well. Those are the mothers of the male heirs.

MIROSH: We can make an arrangement, knight. But don't expect a nobleman's dowry from us. We are not rich.

MARKO: I did not ask for a dowry, but a daughter for my son. Anyway, you are rich in honesty, diligence and honour. That is what my son needs.

MIROSH: Here is my Draga. She is fifteen and ready for marriage. She can cook, spin wool, knit, she is clean...

MARKO: Your daughter is beautiful, my good host. You own my trust.

GABRIEL (89) OFF: Once we had eaten everything that was put on the table, and after merry conversation and jokes, the host and his guests started trading the tides. MIROSH was mostly listening to what I had to say, and Marko started to doze off. When the host noticed that, he offered us to repose in the other room where he shared the bed with his wife. I refused, and accepted to sleep outdoors, behind the house.

MIROSH: Still you sleep under the open sky, Gabriel?

GABRIEL: Yes. Marko and I will sleep outside under the stars.

GABRIEL (89) OFF: Behind the house, I landed Marko onto the ground, and after some wallowing, he fell into sleep huddled. Then I took out the rugs for both of us, and once I spread them on the ground, somehow tugged Marko onto one of them and covered myself with the another. I laid beside him glancing at the night sky dotted with stars. My delight was marred by MARKO's snoring merely.

MORNING IN THE VILLAGE

GABRIEL (89) OFF: Erelong daybreak in the east, in MIROSH's house tumult was stirring up. Householder was commanding and preaching to skirts how to brace themselves for nuptials. Once he had parsed errands, MIROSH came out wending towards his two guests. He found me on my feet, but huddled Marko still was sleeping and snoring.

MIROSH: Your friend fancies to sleep, doesn't he?

GABRIEL: He would sleep till noon if I let him. Get up, Marko. We have work to do. We ought to help nuptial's preparation.

MARKO: Of course! We have to slay pigs and sheep. We have to roast the meat, pour the wine and beer, chill the brandy.

MIROSH: Verily, my knight. Drink one brandy dew. I hope you will not object that we shall carry out the wedding by the old customs.

MARKO: Is the priest coming?

MIROSH: The church is far away from here.

MARKO: I respect the customs of my host and I will not meddle. Tell me, Mirosh, has Bratoslav abducted the girl and now he is marrying her by force? I know for that common custom.

MIROSH: No, I swear he hasn't! Mara is from our village. A few days ago I visited her father with Bratoslav and we agreed her nuptial-ransom. Bratoslav is reverend lad that would never seize a girl, nor would I welcome such into my home. It is an uncomely custom.

MARKO: All right then.

GABRIEL 89: Erelong, other Mirosh's cousins began to arrive from the village, men and women with children, all carrying baskets of food. It hadn't dawned properly yet, and both outdoor and indoor, already around thirty people and numerous children gathered. A tumult and merry chattering begun, and when they started to slay the pigs and sheep, half of the village gathered to help or to get in the way, at least. It was still early morning when the fragrance of spit-roasted pork and mutton was disseminated throughout, and visitors from nearby villages Magovo and Zuch started to arrive. The bride had cousins in Zuch and MIROSH in Magovo. All of them ought to be invited, albeit they will come on their own. Merriment was all around, even before the minstrels arrived. Two pipers and one on the tambourine started playing soon after the first brandy and Marko's brief persuasion. I stood alongside glancing the merry throng with contentment. Sparsely villagers would be jovial and heedless due to their burdensome lives, hence such banquets would last for a few days. This wedding would also last two to three days, although I told Mirosh that Marko and I must continue our journey the next day.

Around noon, Mirosh led his son and nuptials to ransom the bride. The bride's house was at the other part of the village, thus queue trailed behind. Yonder, the bride's father Bratesha, a hard-working man and an old warrior of hoary hair and wide shoulders, hid the bride, as the custom obliged. Bratesha was the most experienced warrior in the village. In the battle at Toplitsa a few years ago, he lost his left arm to the elbow. Nevertheless was a cripple since then, he never stopped working in the field and when recently army registrars visited their village, Bratesha was the first to be enlisted.

BRATESHA

NOTARY: We won't register you, you lost your arm.

BRATESHA: I only used my left arm to scratch myself and it didn't serve for anything else.

NOTARY: Nevertheless.

BRATESHA: The hell you won't...

GABRIEL 89: When they refused him again, Bratesha became so angry that he took the notary by the throat and raised him from the ground. Two younger soldiers who were his escort, dashed to save the notary, but they could not release the grip, hence they dangled like children from his arm, but the old man prevailed. Such was the strength in his arm. When the notary finally yelped that he will enlist him for the army, the old man exempted, and all three fell to the ground.

BRATESHA: Now you know how the enemy feels when I grab him by the throat, and I don't need my left arm for that!

NOTARY: All right, I will enlist you if you insist.

NUPTIALS

MIROSH: Take heed, Bratoslav, don't let the bride to peek at you through a hole in a stone from her hiding place, for then she will wear the trousers in the house. Hide and don't look out.

GABRIEL 89: The nuptials cried quips and quibbles in order to inveigle the bride's father to bring her out. After bride-price was paid-up in two cows and five sheep, Bratesha went into the house to bring the bride out. She was vested in a long white linen dress decorated with folklore motives and with wild flowers in her hair. Jelica's comely face was smiling, and her eyes were concealed in humble. The father brought his daughter to the groom and hand-in-hand they went back into the house. And there clamour was already settled. The guests welcomed the bride and groom with cries and clapping, making a way for them to pass into the garden where the wedding ceremony was to be held. When the newlyweds halted in front of a tree stump, the ritual began as the custom

ordained: a black rooster was yielded to Mirosh, who then severed its head on the stump with a single axe-blow, wrapping it into a rag briefly, as to repel foul spirits and curses. Then the housefather took out a big rotund wedding cake in the form of a flat bread, decorated with sun and the moon batter-carvings. He seated it on the stump, and the bride and groom took a piece each and fed one another. The youngest male child among the guests approached them, and Mara lifted him three times into the air, wishing her first three children to be male. Jelica's mother then unbraided her daughter's hair, weaving it out to her waist, and with a sharp knife she deftly shortened it to her shoulders. Then a veil, as a token of a married woman, was garbed on the bride's head. The groom took the bride by the hand and led her towards the house, where they halted and both kneeled in front of the doorstep. The bride bent and kissed the wood of the doorstep as a token of homage to groom's ancestors, whose ashes were inhumed underneath. Then she raised and leaped over the doorstep, taking heed not to step on it. Thus both entered the house and closed the door. Outside, minstrels began to play with merriment, so guest began to dance traditional circle dance known as Kolo, forgetting about the newlyweds and intrushing on provisions.

Marko was the loudest and merriest of all. One would say that he was marrying his son and not Mirosh. I was standing on the side, with a bowl of goat cheese and bacon. As it was a ceremonious occasion, I was enjoying some sweet wine. Later, I went to see Tsoka, fed it with hay and gave it water.

NUPTIALS

GABRIEL: The merrymaking continued deep into the night under the light of the torches and a big fire that was lit in the middle of the garden. After midnight, the noise started to diminish and only the piper remained to play while the other two laid in the hay drunk. King Marko was lying under the table snoring. In the still of the night, the third musician flopped drunk and what was left of the guests dispersed, complaining that they were going to sleep and it has not even dawned yet. **MIROSH** was convincing them that revelry will be continued tomorrow at noon and that they were invited to come again. Finally, they farewell with embraces and kisses and went their homes. A few of the guests spent the night at **MIROSH's** house and garden. At length, I retired and sought for a place where I would tarry until dawn. I laid beside a haystack from where I could spot Marko. After yesterday's encountering with Sketeba, it was clear that it was only a matter of time when they would attempt to kill the King again. The fact that the Todoratzs were involved in this plot concerning the Prophecy, learned me that the conspiracy was extensive, and that they, as the most powerful were at its head. But what puzzled me uttermost was the matter of their assault, being

unable to step out into the daylight. Even if they did it on a cloudy or misty day, they knew that the clouds would disperse at some point and that the sun would blind them. I suspected that they had a strong ally somewhere hidden in the shadows...

THE MORNING AFTER THE NUPTIALS

GABRIEL 89: The sun was already high up in the sky and I still couldn't wake Marko up. For a few moments was I shaking him, pulling, pouring water on him, but still he laid as dead. If it was not for his raving and cursing, I would have really thought that he was dead. By mere chance, around ten o'clock, the King finally got up, and immediately laid, holding on his head.

He was moaning with pain.

GABRIEL 89: Zlata brought honey for him and compelled him eat three large spoonfuls. He was eating frowning but remained silent.

MARKO: You better bring me a cup of brandy dew...

GABRIEL: You should drink cold water instead.

GABRIEL 89: Marko gulped cold water from the well and calmed down a bit. In the meantime, I packed some food, wine and brandy dew that Mirosh gave me for the journey and saddled Sharatz and Tsoka.

With MIROSH and Sharatz I approached Marko, while he was still holding his head.

GABRIEL: Get up, Marko. Say goodbye to the host, for we ought to go. A long journey is ahead. We ought to avoid calamity to occur here, like it happened the day before yesterday.

MARKO: Promptly we should go. My good host Mirosh, thank you for your hospitality and forgive us if we went astray. Your word is mere reliance to me that you will tend Draga safe for my Matthew.

MIROSH: Don't worry, Marko. On your next arrival, bring your son withal, pay bride-price for my daughter and take her with you. Thank you for staying, and I hope that our hospitality was on your will.

KOPAONIK

GABRIEL (89) OFF: We continued the same way in the north-west, upstream of the Toplitsa river. The river was five fathoms wide there, with sandbanks on both sides, thus there was a space for a good road to be stamped down. On both sides, hills covered with forests were rising. The day was lovely and pleasant for a journey. It was merely marred by Marko's groaning and moaning. We had to stop several times so that he could drink water from the river, and once he entered into the water to refresh himself.

It was past noon when we reached the bottom of Sudimlj where the rivers Derekar and Borovats flow into Toplitsa. All that time we spent in silence. As we were not weary, we left Toplitsa and forwarded upstream of the Derekar river. The wooded peaks of Kopaonik were already beyond us. I was hoping that tomorrow we would reach the Elven Forest on Yelovarnik.

But the road along the Derekar river was laborious to follow for it was just a goat's path by the water. The path was overgrown with high grass, which indicated that nobody had passed this way recently. By noon, we reached a lane where the hills flared ahead with the ridge Kavnishte as interlock in front of us. As Yelovarnik was on the opposite side and nigh, to Marko's delight I told him that we would spend the night here. There, several streams flew down the hills and the grass was soft and dense. We chose a dry place, spread our rugs and lit the fire. It was a clear and quiet night. Fresh air descended from Kopaonik, so we had to put on our long jackets. We approached the fire and dozed off. Tsoka and Sharatz were quiet, which brought me relief.

GABRIEL: Tomorrow anon we go visiting.

MARKO: Is that so? Have we arrived to... that beautiful lady?

GABRIEL: Yes. On the opposite slope of this hill a place named Yelovarnik is settled and.... the Elven Forest.

MARKO: The Elven Forest? Do... Elves...dwell there?

GABRIEL: Yes... Elf-men, Elf-women. This is one of their last settlements in these parts.

MARKO: Why last?

GABRIEL: Humans impel them. The Church intimidates the people by preaching that the Elves are foul and perilous creatures, as if we of yore didn't dwell withal in harmony. Our Church covets predominance. It ought to be known to whom each soul goes. Nigh towns entire forests are being cut down. The Elven people feel unwelcome yonder, hence they departed.

MARKO: Where to?

GABRIEL: To the north, as remote as possible from humans. And they are not forlorn in their departings. Many forest creatures are humans-loathed and they do not feel safe anymore. Humans forsake them.

MARKO: Such a bereavement.

GABRIEL: Humans became vigorous. In the past, they fought against terrible evil creatures, so they made alliances with everybody who was against them. But after the Flood drowned all of their enemies, humans started making war one against the other, and with time they forgot the old alliances. Slowly, the fraternity recoiled afore the hatred for all inhuman.

MARKO: I've hearkened tales and lays about Fairies and Elves, but I have never encountered them and I know nothing about them. If we are going to visit them tomorrow, please relate me something about them so that I do not dishonour myself...

GABRIEL (89) OFF: I started to narrate Marko everything, or nearly everything I learned about the Elven people. Certain matter is rather to remain untold, for Gods may do what cattle may not and some tidings are entrusted to a single person. Namely, the Elven people were amid the oldest in the world and they remained the most faithful to the forest, where they dwelled and whose part they were. Whether they were settled high in the mountains or in the valley, the Elven people fancied to tarry nigh water, especially by the waterfalls and cascades which elevate water-dim and tumult. Afore the Flood they dwelled in tree houses, and afterwards, betrayed by the humans, they withdrew into trees and stumps, remote as possible from the eyes of the humans who did not look upon them any more as friends and former allies during the wars against Todoratzs, Ghouls and other evil creatures and demons. Many became invisible, or visible only when they wished to be seen, big or small, but lest to daunt and decry humans, they took human shape and appearance. After the humans rejected their friendship, they would usually took the form of some small bird, like a sparrow, whereby remain unnoticed to the inquisitives. At night, they would candescence, and the ignorant would thought that those were plain fireflies.

As I said, afore the Flood they were allies of humans and brave warriors, as well as among the greatest masters in forging weapons. Whether they forged swords or made bows, both humans and creatures coveted equally for Elvish-forged arms. Inasmuch the gods. It was well known that what an Elf forges or a Fairy spins into the string was a blend of skills and magic, and the runes carved on such weapons proved that in the blade or in the bow were entwined secret spells that provide special power and strength. Besides forging such arms for themselves, which they guarded jealously and hid selfishly, the Elven people would, once in a while, forge weapons for remarkable heroes in the past,

ordained with honourable purposes and brave deeds. Sometimes they did that at someone's bidding, and at times, foreseeing that it would be required of them, they would hide finished weapons and were quiet about them, waiting for their owner to emerge and obtain them. The Elven people learned not only of remote past, but some of them could foresee the future. "We see down the road further than a man does, but only up to the first bend. What is behind the bend, we will know when we reach it", they used to say. That is why such weapons sometimes vanished in oblivion, hidden somewhere from the eyes of its never emerged owner. Sometimes, a hero himself would hide it before his death and protect it from the evil. Sometimes it happened that such arms were found by mere chance by Dwarfs, who were skilled miners, by Todoratzs or even by Ghouls, who roamed in underground tunnels and caves. Often such weapons would reach the hands of the gods.

The Elven people were always loyal to the humans, and often children were born out of such mutual love. What marvellous heroes would these children grow into! However, when the time comes, I will tell you more about this matter. Today, the Elven people seldom show themselves to the humans, and even less seldom would they dance and sing with them. There were a few of the chosen ones whom they were ready to trust. Kosingases were among them.