

## On the Albanian Epos

(Instead of a Preface)

There is no national literature without epic features nourish by the native folklore. And Albanian literature, being part of the cultural heritage of one of the oldest nations in Europe, has inherited a rich folkloric tradition, whose most important part is the epos made of characteristic legends (in prose and verse), ballads, and epic lays, which have been preserved through centuries by word of mouth from generation to generation. They were collected, recorded and published in book form by some Albanian writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as J. De Rada (*National Rhapsodies*, 1866), Z. Schiro (*War Songs*, 1897, *Popular Songs of Albania* 1901), Th. Mitko (*The Albanian Bee*, 1878), Z. Jubani (*Collection of Albanian Folksongs and Rhapsodies*, 1871), H. Mosi (*Albanian Folksongs*, 1909), V. Prendushi (*National Treasures of Folksongs*, 1910), E. Koliqi, Dom A. Sirdani, K. Taipi, M. Kuteli (*Albanian Ancient Folktales*-prose rendering of ballads and rhapsodies, particularly in the epic lays of Mujo and Halil Cycles, 1965), etc. But highland bards still sign them accompanied by their characteristic one-stringed lute.

The Albanian epos shares some common features and motifs with the folk epic poems of other countries, particularly with those of neighbouring countries. This is due not simply to territorial vicinity, but especially to similar ways of life, customs and social-historical conditions. Meanwhile, the Albanian epos treats themes and motifs which are prominent and typical for the Albanian character, mentality and traditions. These mark the originality of our epos and make it different from the legends and ballads of the other countries.

The Albanian legends, ballads and epic lays focus on such themes and motifs as: the pledge of honour faith or promise (linked with the keepsake, such as a ring or a necklace, or a particular mark, such as some hidden mole or scar), sacrifice, warfare, and defence (construction of castles). Other chief motifs that are treated in the Albanian legends and ballads are: recognition (*husband-wife, brother-sister, brother-brother*), metamorphoses or magic transfiguration/ transmogrification (serpent, dove, dragon, etc.), disguise (as a beggar, a woman, etc.), reunion of youthful lovers after death (by means of transfiguration into plants-flowers or trees such as rose, willow, birch, cypress, vine, apple tree, pear tree, etc. growing out of their respective graves).

**Faith** is the central theme in the most Albanian legends and ballads. The *institution of faith* as a motif is closely linked with the *sworn promise-the given word of honour*. It is the main motif in “*The Legend of Rozafa Castle*”, in “*The Legend of the Young Man, the Maid and the Monster*”, in “*Konstandin’s Faith*” (based on two famous and most beautiful ballads, “*Little Konstantine*” and “*Konstantine and*

*Doruntina*”), in the ballad “*The Faith of Ago Ymer*”, in “*Gjergj Elez Alia*” - one of the most popular ballads, and in the epic lay “*Halil’s Marriage*”.

The theme of *faith* is often interwoven with the motif of *recognition*. Sometimes the motif of *recognition* brings about a happy end, but in Albania ballads more often than not it causes a tragic ending. When the *recognition* theme involves the recognition of husband and wife, it usually ends happily, but when it involves the recognition of brother and brother or, more particularly, brother and sister, it has a tragic end.

Keeping the promise or swearing the pledge of honour is often accompanied by the ordeal of danger and the test of courage, loyalty and honour. The recognition is fulfilled by sudden disclosure of a hitherto hidden sign (a keepsake, such as the wedding ring, or a mark, such as a mole or a scar in a hidden part of the partner’s body- on the arm or thigh, under the armpit, etc.), of a password or a secret phrase, or the lifting of the disguise of the man (as a beggar, a girl, etc., such as Hail who was disguised as a girl to be with his beloved Tanusha, in “*Halil’s Marriage*”).

The legends often employ supernatural elements such as fairies, spirits of the hours, monsters, dragons, etc., as in “*Muj and The three snappish Fairies*”.

An interesting theme of some Albanian legends and ballads is magical transfiguration, which may or may not involve loyalty, devotion and love. Transmogrification and transfiguration may require some sacrifice and usually has a tragic end. The young man of the lyrical ballad is transfigured into a serpent or a dove, whereas the girl is transfigured as a monster or a witch (an ugly old hag).

Elegiac and lyrical ballads blend the theme of *faith* with the theme of *tragic love*. In the end both lovers die - they are usually killed. Here transfiguration occurs posthumously when the unfortunate lovers are reunited. Here they are not transfigured into animals or birds, but into plants, suggesting the continuity of life in other shape. There is a reunion of the trees growing from the graves and clasping each other, such as cypress and a vine. Sometimes, as in the ballads “*Gjon Pretika*” and “*Ashike Ymeri and White Begzade*”, the trees embraced over the two graves of the youthful lovers yield fruit. Sometimes there is a thorn-bush which hinders them from reuniting, which might symbolize a social or a religious barrier, or simply a selfish mother-in-law.

Natural phenomena such as thunder, lightening, or storm, accompany the epic deeds of the characters of these legends, ballads and rhapsodies.

In such ballads as “*Aga Ymeri*”, “*Ymer Aga*”, “*Halil’s wedding*”, and “*Chieftain Zook*”, the motif of *recognition* of husband and wife is closely linked with the motif of *promise* and *pledge of honour*, with the *ring* as a sign of recognition. The motifs of these Albanian ballads are similar to the Scottish ballads *Hind Horn*. The newly-wed couple are bound to keep the promise of loyalty for a fixed period of time. In “*Hind Horn*” this period is 7 years, whereas in Albanian ballads it is 9 years (or 9 years and 9 days) as in “*Little Konstantine*” and “*Aga Ymer*”.

The motif of **brother-and-sister recognition** is treated in the Albanian ballads “*Gjino Vaku*”, “*Gjon Pretika*”, “*Ali Borxhalia*”, and in the Arbëreshi variant “*Olimpia and Vllastari*”. This motif is closely interwoven with the motif of **kidnapping** a bride. These two motifs are also treated in similar Scottish ballads such as “*Lizzie Wan*”, “*Babylon*” or “*The Bonnie Banks o’Fordie*” and “*The Bonnie Hind*.” The treatment of the themes of *the brother and sister recognition* and *kidnapping a bride* in both

Albanian and Scottish ballads might imply that such ballads should have been composed at a similar phase of social and historical development, i.e when polygamy and incest had already been forbidden by the collective morals in a society based on monogamy and couple marriage. But, unlike Scottish ballads, in the Albanian ballads incest is not executed, the marriage of brother and sister is not consumed. Recognition in due time, at the right moment, or some mysterious force prevents it from taking place. Thus, in "Olimpia and Vllastar" a black winged bird flies round the tent of the young man warning that "brother is kissing his sister"; in the other ballad "Ali Borxhalia" a dove nestles between the couple in bed and "doesn't allow to snap(join)"; in "Gjon Pretika" recognition of brother and sister occurs during an exchange of bitter words, and then brother and sister embrace each other and collapse weeping: "Where Gjon fell, a quince tree grew; where Blega fell, a pomegranate tree grew" The motifs of *brother and sister recognition and bride kidnapping* are treated also in Norwegian, Icelandic and Finish ballads. In the Finish epos "Kalevala" the legendary song of Kalevala is similar to our ballads and to Scottish ballad "Bonnie Hind"

The theme of *transfiguration (metamorphosis)* -the transformation of humans into monsters and the reversal back into humans by magic or witchcraft is closely linked with the motive of  *nereides*, sea nymphs, and that of *bride kidnapping*. These mythological themes are to be found in our ballad "The serpent boy" which is similar to the Scottish ballads "Kemp Owyne" and "Tam Lin". The mythological motif of metamorphosis is one of the most ancient and widely spread in the folklore of many nations in Europe and Asia. An Indian legend is very similar to our ballad "Serpent boy"

The motif of *tragic love* is linked with that of *eternal loyalty* in the Albanian ballad "Ashike Ymeri and White Begzadja" and others. Such a motif exists at least in seven variants in the Scottish ballad "Earl Brand." In "Ashike Ymer and White Begzade" the reunion of the trees growing on the graves of the youthful lovers is described with tenderness and fine lyrical approach: the trees (an apple tree and pear tree) embrace each other fondly over the two graves and then, after their reunion, they yield fruit. Whereas in the Arbëreshi variant the young man grows from the grave in the shape of a cypress the girl as a vine climbing round and embracing it fondly.

The chief motif of the fine Albanian ballad "Kostandine and Doruntina" is **the fulfilled promise**-the pledge of honour to bring the sister back home after long years of marriage in foreign land far away from home. This motif is closely interwoven with the motif of **poisoning** and the motif of *transfiguration*. Variants of these motifs are used in the Scottish ballad "Lord Randal". Another interesting motif is that of the *target contest* by throwing stones in the Albanian ballads "Mother Brought up Two Orphans" and "Muj and the Fairies". This motif is widely used in the English ballads "Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough, and William of Cloudesly", "A Gest of Robyn Hode", and "Robin Hood and the Potter". This motif was used to test the shooting skills of the warriors.

**Disguised identity** is a theme widely used in Albanian ballads such as "Chieftain Zook" and "Halil's wedding", as well as in the English ballads of the Robin Hood Cycle. In "Robin Hood and the Bishop" the hero is disguised as an old woman; in

*“Robin Hood and the Bishop of Hereford”* Robin Hood and six of his yeomen are disguised as shepherds etc.

This quick survey of the Albanian Epos and its common features with the English and Scottish ballads points out only some of the main motifs and themes which characterize the ballads, legends and epic poems in Albanian folklore.

**The present edition “ FAITH AND FAIRIES”, the first of its kind in the English language, is an interesting prose rendering of the most popular Albanian verse legends and epic lays. The tales of this collection acquaint the English reader with the chief themes and motifs of the Albanian Epos and present an original overview of the epic folk tradition of the Albanian nation.**

**PROF. DR. REFIK KADIJA**

## *Rozafa's Castle*

...For three days and three nights an impenetrable fog covered the river Buna from one bank to the other, over several miles. Suddenly a mysterious wind gently gifted it up into the Valdanuz hill, where the three brothers were building a castle and had been watching the fog with interest.

They were strong men and the best masons in the land. They were proud of their skilful crafts and felt rewarded, when progress was being made successfully. However on this occasion their work on this castle was making them very unhappy, indeed.

Every day they built the walls to be strong and true, breaking the heavy stone into the right shape and size for building, then carving it with beautiful images of the legends. However at night, to their astonishment and horror, their work fell to pieces. This happened repeatedly and, in their frustration, they decided one night to keep watch and to find out, who was responsible for such destruction.

One by one and then together, the three brothers kept watch, determined to fall upon the necks of those unknown perpetrators, who by night turned to stones and rubble that which by day had been walls. That night the sky was a deep inky black and through the death-like silence until midnight, they watched and listened, but saw and heard nothing. Then suddenly, as if an earthquake had begun, the walls started to rattle and shake, then to tumble down around their heads. The force was so strong, that the stones spilt from the bottom to the top, as if it were a piece of paper that a little child could destroy with fingers. In horror and distress, they fled back their home.

In the morning the three brothers returned anxious and worried. Their big hammers and tools, which they used for cutting and carving, lay idle. They had no heart to resume their labours and in silence they sat, their heads buried in their hand lost in thought.

All of a sudden, they spied an old man, shuffling towards them. Nobody knew where he had come from! Once he had been tall, but now he was hunchbacked and no more than a bag of bones, supported by his crook, which he held in front to steady himself. His far-away eyes refocused, as he drew closer, for they were almost hidden beneath a thick beard of pure white whiskers, which covered his wrinkled face. He wore a tunic of lugubrious grey and simple pair ox-skin sandals. When he spoke, his voice resounded like an echo, as if he were in a cave.

“Good morning, stonemasons!” he said.

“Good morning, old man!” they replied.

“Your faces are chiselled with concern, my friends and why do you not set to work this late, for the sun is high in the sky?”

“We have lost our patience, sir” said the first brother.

“We are catching the wind in our nets” said the second in dismay.

“We are working in vain” said the third.

The first brother continued, “We do all we can by daylight to build the walls of this castle, but by night they fall down again. Do you know, good old man, what has caused this to happen?”

The old man scratched his head in thought and the dust from his travels rose up from his amble mane in clouds of a desert storm. He shook his head as a token of approval and asked,

“Have you sacrificed anything in the grounds of the castle for good luck?”

“Yes,” they replied in unison. “At first a cockerel, then a sheep and two days ago, an ox” cried the third brother.

The old man sighed and looked skywards in dismay.

“It needs more, much more!” he cried.

The three brothers looked puzzled, but spoke not a word. The old man returned his beguiling gaze upon them and finally said sternly,

“The castle spirits seek a human life.”

In shock and astonishment the brothers were dumbstruck, as if a bone was stuck in their throats. Never before they had been asked to do such a thing, for they had built many temples and castles and made many sacrifices, but never human.

“Yes,” insisted the old man, “and from your closest family.”

His words were like poison, slipping slowly down the reluctant throats of each brother in turn.

“You must offer the life of one that you love and that person must be walled alive into the castle, so that its foundations may remain true and strong for all to see.”

Their ashen faces were as white as death, as the old man continued his instruction.

“You are married man, no doubt?”

They nodded.

“If you want your castle to stay standing, you must pledge to each to breathe not a word of your thoughts to your wives. Whichever wife brings you your lunches, she will be the sacrifice.”

The old man lowered his eyes in sorrow, retraced three steps backwards and vanished into thin air, as if he had never been there.

That night the brothers returned home with heavy hearts. Their heads were hung in sorrow and thought, for they could eat nothing and retired early to their beds. For whilst they stood before the door and fastened their eyes on each other, just to remind everybody not to break the faith.

Though the light in the eldest brother’s room had been blown out, if you had been listening, you would have heard a tiny whisper from behind the door. The same was true of the second brother, but the youngest said nothing to his wife and did not sleep a wink all the night.

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The following day, when the sun was a long way in the sky and the lunchtime was nearing, the mother of the three sons called her first daughter-in-law.

“Daughter, my sons will be tired and hungry. Please, take them their lunch, water and wine-bottle.”

“I’m sorry, lady mother,” she replied sweetly. “Today I can’t go to the castle. I feel unwell, for I have a headache.”

The mother then called her second daughter in-law.

“Daughter, my sons will be tired and hungry. Please take them their lunch, water and wine-bottle.”

“I’m sorry, lady mother, I cannot go to the castle today, my parents are waiting for me in the village, for they have important news for me.”

The colour in lady mother’s cheeks rose with frustration as she called her third daughter -in- law, whose name was Rozafa.

“Daughter, my sons will be tired and hungry. Please, take them their lunch, water and wine-bottle.”

“Of course, lady mother,” she answered from the window, where she was nursing her baby son.

Rozafa was tall and elegant like a Cyprus tree, with long golden hair and a smile to warm the winter nights. She was kind and obedient and much loved by all the family.

“Lady Mother, I’ll do as you ask, but my son is sleeping and I’m afraid to wake him for he will cry.”

“I shall see after him.” said the first daughter.

“I shall cradle him in your absence,” said the second daughter.

Rozafa collected the bread and fruit in her basket, water and wine-bottles in her leather sack and left for the hillside.

The sun beat down upon the ground, as she walked towards the castle high on the hill. As she climbed the cobbled slope, she looked to the east at the magical shores of Lake Shkodra, which glistened with clear beauty. Cradled by the snow-capped mountains, it had always been a sacred place of peace for her.

High above the hill the three brothers toiled like never before. Their big hammers broke the stones into shape, as the walls continued to rise up into the sky. It was a glorious sight to behold, for their work brought a welcome distraction to their thoughts and they said not a word to each other.

The first brother eventually broke their silence, as he straightened himself and rubbed the stiffness from his back.

“I am so thirsty!” he cried.

“Wait for just a little while, brother, for I can see one of our wives climbing the hill.” said the second.

All at once they turned and three pairs of anxious eyes scoured the horizon in desperation to see, who it was. Suddenly the third brother dropped his hammer upon the stone, splitting it in two, as if his heart had just broken. But instead, his beating heart raced fast beneath his chest in shock and disbelief and his face turned pale with sadness.

“Good day, my brothers-in-law, good day, my lord!” said Rozafa sweetly, as she moved gracefully towards them.

“What is this, my lord that such a pale face greets me so and why do you not meet my gaze?” she inquired, as she placed the basket and sack upon the ground at their feet.

“Say to me, please, what has happened, for I do not know why you are so silent,” she continued.

The first brother took courage and raised his eyes to meet hers.

“Today has brought misfortune to you and my youngest brother, good sister, for the walls of this castle we build, will not stay up without a living sacrifice of man or woman. This person must be walled in, and chosen by chance and that decision was to be the wife, who brought us our meal today. We are sorry, Rozafa...” he said and held his head in shame.

The third brother collapsed upon a stone and sat as silent as the night. Gently Rozafa approached him and placed her trembling hand on his shoulder to comfort him, while a solitary tear like a pearl slipped slowly down her beautiful face.

“Take yourself in hand, my love, for this has been our luck today. Carry yourself high, as high as the castle walls, for the people are waiting for you all to finish your work. I am ready, my brothers, but, before you wall me in, please, heed my requests.”

Though her voice trembled with fear and emotion, she spoke her words with the dignity of legends.

“When you wall me in, it must be so that my right eye, my right foot, my right hand and my right breast are left out through the stone. For, when my little son cries, I can still watch him with my eye, cradle him with my foot, caress him with my hand and nurse him with my breast. My son will be a brave man! May he be king one day and reign upon this proud land!”

...Rozafa's wishes were honoured and even today, after many hundreds of generations, her castle remains high above the beautiful city of Shkodra, in Northern Albania. Legend has it that the white stones of the castle, which are continuously damp, will always run wet with the tears of Rozafa and the milk of her breast...



## *The Young Man, the Girl and the Monster*

Once upon a time there was a mother, who had but one son. He was the apple of her eye, her life and her hope. As a young huntsman he was strong and fearless for none in the whole country could compare with him, but in his heart he was full of sorrow, because he was between two fires. (His mother was one fire and a young girl in the village another fire, which tore his loyalty in two.)

All winter long the people of the village struggled to survive, for food was scarce and hunting a fruitless hardship. Yet it was widely known, that there was an abundance of game on Monster Mountain, but the young man was forbidden to go there.

“See here my son!” she would scold, “You may hunt, where you like except the Monster Mountain, for it is an evil place, where you will be killed or turned into stone.”

But his sweet heart in the village said exactly the opposite and cried,

“Do not tell that you love me, if you will not go to the Monster Mountain, for nowhere else will you find such food to eat!”

The young man loved much his old mother and much his young girl and was torn between their requests. His mother’s words were there to make him fearful, but his sweetheart’s words were to make him courageous.

For many days and nights he wrestled with his thoughts, until finally he could resist the challenge no more. Early one morning, before the mist had cleared from the hillside and, the ice in the well was still solid, he took his spear, his bow and arrows, his chain mail and finally his horse and set off for Monster Mountain.

At the base of the mountain a vast forest grew. The trees were taller than he had ever seen before and the grass rose up to his knees. The beauty and abundance of nature mesmerised him and he continued to ride deeper into the forest, with no concern for his safety.

He saw wild duck and geese, hares, roebuck and wild goats throughout the wood. They had never seen a man before, or had never caused to fear one, so they stood still gazing back at him, for the young man could not believe his luck.

All of a sudden the earth began to shake around him. The evergreen trees trembled and their leaves fell from the branches, as if it were autumn. A deadly howl echoed at first from one side and then from another, causing such confusion, that his horse became

so frightened, that bolted into a clearing. To his horror and astonishment, there stood in front of the most hideous creature he had ever seen.

The She-monster was shape of a burnt Cedar tree; gnarled, twisted and the colour of thick black charcoal. Seven heads, rotated from its body mounted on long spindly, reptilian necks, which twisted and stretched in all directions. Each head housed an evil eye, which was emerald green with red pupil and no eyelid, so that it missed nothing. From its repulsive smelling mouths, rows and rows of rotting teeth guarded the most hollow, dark and cavernous space you should never want to visit.

In a twinkling the young man was surrounded by her heads and a pair of strong unyielding arms. One head was so close, that its nauseous breath was too hot to withstand and the young man turned his face away in disgust.

It was instinctive for him to reach for his bow, but before he could raise a single arrow to the target, she had grabbed the bow and broken it in two. He fought with his spear, but the black monster again reached for it and broke it, as if it were a blade of straw.

The young man had only his sword to fight with, but, no sooner had he raised it high into the air and leap forward to attack, the She-monster puffed at him and the sword flew from his tightened grip and was thrust into a bole.

Seven heads began to laugh, as her blackened body shook with delight. The She-monster was enjoying herself so much, that each time she burst into laughter, great balls of fire shot from one of her heads, scorching the ground and scaring away the animals.

“And now, poor fellow,” the She-monster cried, “I shall eat you up, as I have eaten the others before.”

The young man steadied himself upon his horse, looked up in dismay and cried,

“You have beaten me, monster! I have nothing else to fight you with, but I have but one request. Let me go to see my mother for the last time, to bid her a final farewell and to beg her pardon, for I disobeyed her and went my own way. Then I shall return and you can eat me, as promised.”

“Don’t make me laugh, young fellow!” scoffed the Monster, “I’m not in the mind to let you go, for I’m pretty certain, that you should not return.”

“I will!” replied the young man. “I pledge you my faith, I promise you “Besa”.

“Besa!” cried the monster, “What is this?”

“It is more than a vow, it is more than the faith, it is more sacred than life.” replied the young man in a humble voice, “Though, I’m not sure, that you can understand this.”

In the silence of clearing, now scorched and smoldering, the seven heads of the She-monster gathered together in a group for a moment to think and discuss the young man’s request.

“I have never heard of this word “Besa” or of its significance to mere mortals. I have eaten all well today and I’m curious to know, what it is like. You may go now, but tomorrow at daybreak I want you back here.” she cried.

The young man jumped onto his horse and galloped straight home, where his mother was anxiously waiting for him.

“Why so late, my son?” she exclaimed, “and why is your hair scorched with fire?”

From the Monster's flames, mother, when I was hunting." he replied. "Let me embrace you and kiss you for the last time, dear mother, for I have to return tomorrow at daybreak. I gave the Monster my faith."

The mother so heart-broken shrieked at the top of her voice and wept. Her son knelt beside her feet with his head, resting on her lap, as she caressed his fallen locks and soothed his sobbing.

Much later he rose up and left the house, turning back at the end of the road to see his mother's face for the last time, because she was heart-broken and knew that she was about to lose everything that she had left. Into the village he rode to the house of his sweetheart.

"Where were you today?" she enquired, as he stood trembling at her doorway.

"I was on the Monster Mountain." he replied.

She stood on tip-toes, placing her slender arms around him and said, "I'm so happy now, for I know that you truly love me."

"That I do, but I have to go back there tomorrow, for I was beaten by the Monster and she waits for me to eat me all up. I promised her my faith in exchange for one last chance to say my farewell to you."

The young girl neither shrieked nor wept, but went quickly into her room, dressed for travelling and bridled her white horse.

"What do you think you are doing?" exclaimed the young man in surprise.

"I'm coming with you." she replied adamantly.

"Oh no, you are not! The She-monster is a terrible beast, who breathes fire from her mouths and you are far too beautiful to perish along side me."

But the young girl had made up her mind within an instant and would not be moved. The young man knew from past experience, that it was no good to try and talk his sweetheart out of anything that she had set her mind to, but he had to try.

"I will not let you go alone, my love. Otherwise you must stay here with me." she said firmly.

"I cannot allow you to come. Though I love you more than myself, please, do not ask me this. I have given my faith to the monster and must return alone. Better to be dead, then alive breaking it." he replied soulfully.

The young girl looked up to his sad face and smiled so sweetly, that it lifted his heart. Without another word, she jumped onto her horse and waited for him to ride out with her to the mountain. Her long dark hair seemed to dance like a horse tail, as she cantered ahead of him and she rode with such confidence and elegance, he knew that if she asked him to, he would follow her to the ends of the world.

All through the night they rode. The stars and the moon lay hidden beneath a thick blanket of cloud and the forest was so silent, that the absence of noise enveloped them with an airy sense of foreboding. Just before dawn, as the first rays of daybreak crept in through the trees, the two riders came to the clearing. The girl looked as fresh and tireless, as if she had just woken up to a new day, instead of roaming the wild mountain the whole night long.

Suddenly the ground beneath their horses' hooves began to shake and tremble. But this time the horses stood still as rocks, as the She-monster appeared to them through the morning mist and gazed at them.

“You came back to me, young fellow! Well done and you brought me Besa also.” exclaimed the Monster in surprise and amusement. She thought that “Besa” was the name of the girl.

“Besa is beautiful and tender. Yesterday I was not hungry and I let you go, but today I am ravenous and will eat you first, young man and then Besa.”

“She-monster, you are mad!” cried the young girl. “How can you eat Besa, how can you devour the faith of a young heart? Yesterday a promise was made to you and honoured, but today you have none.”

The young girl glared at the She-monster with her dazzling blue eyes and, to her astonishment, the She-monster could not move, nor breathe fire from her belly. Her massive tail lay still and her powerful seven heads were paralysed in an instant. A sudden panic flashed across her seven faces, for never before had the She-monster met her match.

“Who are you, girl, that makes me powerless and frightens me with your beauty?” the She-monster lamented. “For the light from within you is blinding me!”

“I am the moon and the sun daughter. I am a piece of heaven that falls down upon the bad creatures of this world to help the good ones.” she answered.

“You vanquish me, girl, for there is no place on this world for me now, that you have taken my power away. I will go beneath the ground for all eternity and from such darkness I will never return.” spat the She-monster in anger.

The She-monster turned into a ball of white flames, which lit the clearing with a brilliant light for all to see. It wasn't long before her ashes were all that remained, which the wind gathered up and blew high into the treetops.

From then on the young man and woman walked peacefully and hunted throughout the forest for many years to come. It was written that she was the last evil monster on earth, but let us wait, who knows, she may return in another guise...

## *Konstandin's Faith*

Very long ago there was a mother who had twelve sons, strong and true. They were brave, handsome and stood like oak trees in the forest. Her thirteenth child had been a girl, called Doruntina, who the brothers loved with all their hearts, for she grew faster into a beautiful woman.

It was not long before, word of her loveliness had spread throughout the land like wild fire, for many men wanted to marry her and could come to the mother's house to ask her daughter's hand in marriage.

The brothers were wise and cared so deeply for their sister, that none of her suitors were given their permission to do so.

One day, a young man who had travelled many miles across the mountains arrived at her door for the same reason. He was tall, handsome, and strong and, above all, was of noble and illustrious birth.

Doruntina, her mother (who was a widow) and the twelve brothers were delighted to welcome the young man into their family. However they had but one reservation, namely that he came from a neighbouring country, nine mountains far away and the prospect of Doruntina leaving them was all too much to bear.

Her mother and the eleven of Doruntina's brothers refused to give him her hand in marriage, but Kostandin, the youngest brother was so insistent in his praises, that eventually he persuaded the family to change their minds.

"He has a good name, my brothers!" he said in a loud voice. "He earned respect for his bravery in his own country, which I have heard tell, please, do not hesitate, mother. He has won my heart at first sight!"

The mother still opposed his words and said, "What are you talking about, Kostandin? How can I send away my only daughter so far, that she would never return to me in good time or bad?"

"Do not worry, lady mother! I give my faith that, when you need her through good time or bad, in well or woe, I shall go and bring her to you."

The mother and the brothers thought for some time then, finally at nightfall, they agreed, for they trusted their youngest brother, who was brave and faithful.

The wedding celebrations lasted for nine days and nine nights and the entire village came to celebrate, to sing to dance and to make merry. The wine flowed like a river and everyone rejoiced for the happy couple. On the tenth day Doruntina, who was in tears as she embraced her mother and her twelve brothers, left with her new husband for his far away country and a new life together.

It was not long after the wedding that the clarion call was sounded throughout the land, for the enemy had invaded and every man who could fight took up arms and went forth to his unit to defend his country.

The twelve brothers did not need to be asked twice and volunteered straight away. As fighting men few could match their courage and tenacity. At home their mother was left alone, waiting news of them. Every hour and every day she knelt in prayer and asked the gods to protect her sons, whether she was in church or at home. The fire she kept burning and in the village she would work with other women, making clothes and bandages to be taken to the battlefield.

Sadly it was not long before, the tragic news that six of her sons had been killed, arrived one cold and wintry evening. Her heart was broken in two and yet she did not weep, for deep in her soul she knew, that the blood they had shed for their country, had not been in vain.

Overnight flecks of grey appeared in her mane of jet-black hair and the brightness of her beautiful brown eyes had faded a little with heartache and worry.

Four days passed and then, to her utter dismay and disbelief, Lady Mother received news that her remaining sons had perished in battle also, including her beloved Kostandin. That night she tore the hair from her head and cried out in such anguish, that the mountains around her shuddered to the sound of pain.

"Damn you death!" she screamed, "How dare you carry away my twelve sons? Do you want to carry away my daughter, too? The only ray of hope I still have."

In the coming weeks, the foe, who had fought as fiercely as they could, was finally defeated. All the sons who had died were brought back to the families and buried in the village, with the greatest respect. One hundred black battle horses drew the gun carriages through the cobbled streets, towards the cemetery, as crowds lined the streets to mourn their dead and to pay their respects.

The first to be buried in the cemetery were the widow's twelve sons... So valiant were their deeds in battle, that the widow was overcome with pride and grief, at the same time. Every Friday she would come to each grave and whisper to her sons words that no one could hear, as she placed a single white rose on the top of each grave stone.

In less than a week, Lady Mother, who had stood tall and beautiful, with a mane of black hair and bright shining eyes, was reduced to a little old lady. Her head of hair had been ripped away and what remained had turned white with shock. The weight of grief

and heartache had reduced her diminished frame to a hunchback and her twinkling eyes were lost in sorrow, as her beautiful skin turned pale and thin as tissue paper.

The years passed and Lady Mother continued to visit her sons each day. Her steps faltered for she had shrunk like a fist and was little more than a bag of bones. At each grave she lit a candle and whispered to each of her sons in turn. When she finally reached Kostandin, she lit two candles and tore her hair in dismay, crying,

“My son, my son! Damn you, Kostandin. You wedded your sister too far from me, rotting in the grave you are and rotting your faith with you!”

That night, in the deepest and in the quietest hour, when neither moon nor stars showed their faces, the cemetery lay peaceful. Each grave was lined row upon row and of the brothers; their headstones lay beside one other. One, two, three... ten, eleven, but wait! What of the twelfth headstone? The grave slate began to move and the ground shifted, as a shadowy form rose up from its resting-place, as silent as night itself...

It was Kostandin!

All of a sudden the grave slate turned into a black stallion, the grave ground turned into a horse saddle and Kostandin jumped on the horseback and rode like a thunder into the hills. So swift was the beast, that they covered the nine mountains, nine fields and nine rivers in only a few hours. By daybreak Kostandin was at Doruntina's house, but when he knocked, there was no answer. He knocked again and still there was no answer.

In the next house a little voice said,

“They are at a wedding in the village.”

Kostandin slowly rode towards the settlement, which was full of festivity and laughter. He spied three girls and asked,

“O pretty ladies, have you seen Doruntina, my sister?”

“She is here, handsome man.” they replied smiling and blushing, in their pretty velvet gowns of blue and gold.

After he had taken just a few steps, Doruntina saw him and could not believe her eyes. She cried out with surprise and delight and rushed forward to embrace and kiss him. Her tears of joy cascaded down her cheek.

“Kostandin, my brother, I can barely believe you are here! I am so glad that you came. May you live long, for I have been waiting for you for three long years without a word of family news from you? Let us go and dance together”.

“No, sister.” he replied, “We have no time today, I have come to take you to Lady Mother, for she is waiting for you.”

Doruntina was surprised and ventured to ask hesitantly,

“For weal or woe, in good times or bad, please tell me, dear brother, if I am to ride with you in my gayest dress or in mourning gown?”

“Come as you are, there is no time to change.” he replied.

He lifted her on the horse's rump and they rode as fast as the stallion could carry them. Doruntina placed her arms around his waist and said not a word, for she didn't know, what to say. Her brother looked and spoke and smelt different from what she

remembered of him. She racked her brains for a good while, until finally she could resist no longer and asked him,

“Kostandin, my brother, why has your face changed so much, since I saw you last.”

“I have caught a cold, sister.”

“Why is your face so pale?” she asked once more.

“I have come a long, long way, dear sister.”

“Why then, Kostandin does your body smell of mould?” she enquired.

“It is the smoke of war, Doruntina.”

For the remainder of the journey she sat meekly behind him, contented to ride with her brother and to anticipate with joy a reunion with all her brothers and Lady Mother, for she had been a long time away from her family.

...The journey had been long and tiring and darkness had fallen, by the time they reached the outskirts of her village. Doruntina’s heart beat fast against her breast, as she surveyed the first houses and the chimneys of the village, where she had been born.

The horse finally stopped outside Lady Mother’s house but, to Doruntina’s astonishment, the home light had been extinguished and the windows were closed tight shut.

“Kostandin, where are my brothers, why do they not come outside to greet me?” she cried.

“Maybe they are at a wedding not far from here.” he exclaimed.

“Why are the windows sealed?” she asked.

“Not to let the bats in, I suspect” replied Kostandin as earnestly as he could.

Kostandin reached over and stroked her hair. For a moment he looked lovingly into her face, as if he was looking at her for the last time. Then turning away, reached for the horse’s reins and said,

“Go inside to your mother, there is something else I have to do.”

He left Doruntina at the gate, turned back his horse and rode to the church. He passed the eleven graves of his brothers and stood like a statue at the twelfth place. In an instant he disappeared in the ground and the horse saddle turned into the grave ground and his great black stallion became the grave slate once more. A deep silence fell into the cemetery. The birds, the night crickets and the mountain wolves made not a single sound for the rest of the night.

Doruntina opened the door and walked along the yard. It was deserted. She walked to the door and knocked once, then twice, but there was no answer. She knocked harder and this time she was able to hear the muffled whispers of a tiny voice inside,

“Who is it?” came the cry.

“Mother, open the door, it’s I, Doruntina.”

“What, what did you say! Are you death that has come to take me with you, at last? I am ready, only I would like to see for the last time my dearest daughter, Doruntina” croaked Lady Mother.

“But it’s I, mother, Doruntina. Do you not recognise my voice?”

“Whoever you are, I do not fear of you.” replied Lady Mother. Then all at once the door was opened.



Doruntina placed her arms around her mother's neck and kissed her. Lady Mother could not believe her eyes and kept rubbing them in wonder and disbelief. She touched her hair and stroked her face to know, it was true.

"Dear daughter! How good of you to come here! I have missed you so much. Where is your husband? Who did you come with?" she enquired.

"With Kostandin, mother." replied Doruntina.

Lady Mother was astonished in disbelief.

"Did I hear you correctly? You said with Kostandin, didn't you?"

"Yes, Lady Mother, I did."

"No, daughter, do not laugh at poor mother."

"Yes, mother, upon my life he brought me here and went away for a while, for he had something else to do." Doruntina replied.

"You have dreamt this, my dearest child, do not rave, for it hurts my soul to hear you speak in such ways."

"I swear to you, mother, he brought me here!" she began to cry, for Doruntina had not expected to be chastised at their reunion.

"You are insane, daughter! Kostandin and the eleven brothers were killed three years ago in the battle. I buried them all myself." exclaimed Lady Mother.

These words struck Doruntina's heart like a thunderbolt. They embraced each other, but sadly the shock was all too much for them and they, too, then fell down dead...

## *The Faith of Aga Ymer*

The warrior Aga Ymer had just got married. There was a great wedding party with lots to eat and drink for all the guests and the festivities went on into the night. The next day Aga Ymer received a letter from the king.

"Our enemies have drawn their forces upon us, make haste to court, for I need you and your men, as soon as possible." wrote the king.

This unexpected news came as sad surprise to Aga Ymer, for he wanted to spend as much time as possible with his new bride. He was torn between his duties to his country, which was in danger and was calling him to arms and his beautiful wife, with whom he had spent just one night. Reluctantly he knew he would have to return to the King's court.

At daybreak he saddled his horse, took arms, bid his parent's farewell and then returned to the bridal suite, where his wife sat at her dressing table, combing her long,

auburn hair in front of the mirror and was sweetly singing the songs of her childhood. He drew slowly and embraced her. For a moment she was afraid, for she had not expected to see him in chain mail that day,

“Why have you worn these clothes?” she enquired fearfully.

“I came to kiss you and to bid your farewell, sweet wife.” he replied.

“What did you say? Have you to go, my lord? Only last night we were married, I do not understand, why you have to leave me so soon.” she exclaimed with a trembling voice.

Taking her face in his strong hands and wiping away her tears, he answered her soulfully,

“I had a message from the King. Our enemies have sailed and I am to take the men folk to defend our country.”

“What am I to do without you?” she cried. “Take me with you, husband, for we cannot be parted so soon!”

And her tears swelled up inside her, until she thought her heart would break. But Aga Ymer hung his head in sorrow, saying,

“Sweet wife, I cannot take you with me, for the battle will be fierce and you may lose your life. Wait here for me and promise me your faith.”

“I love you more than life, Aga Ymer!” she cried “Without you my life would have little meaning. I promise to keep “besa” (faith), until you return. May God protect you, my love, but how long will you be away? A week, nine days, perhaps.” she enquired.

Aga Ymer burst out laughing and took her sweet face in his hands once more.

“Nine days is no time, my love and the battlefield is many weeks away from here. The war could continue for months, even years, so that if you truly love me, I ask that you wait nine years and nine days for me. If after this time I have not returned, you must know that I am dead and you must take another.”

The young bride held her head in sorrow for a moment, tried very hard not to show her sadness, then she looked up into the face of her husband for one last time, because she truly loved him and said quietly,

“My dearest husband, I give you my faith with all my heart and will wait for you nine years and nine days, for I know you will return to me.”

Aga Ymer kissed his wife for the last time before his journey, then turned to the door and left. As his horse trotted away, the trumpets in the court resounded throughout the town, for many men were also leaving. The young bride looked from her balcony window at the ashen plumes of dust, where the horses had been, as far as she could see, and then she closed the shutters, went inside and wept.

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...The months passed and the battle between the two opponents was fierce and deadly. Aga Ymer and his men were constantly out numbered, sometimes as many as ten to one man. Day and sometimes night the battle raged on and many men from both sides fell beneath the sword. They fought with the courageous heart of a lion, but Aga Ymer and his men were surrounded and the enemy brought down his horse with a single blow to the neck. Aga Ymer sprung to his feet and swung his huge sword from the left to the right, killing as many enemies that lay in his path.

But the fortune was not on his side and at the height of battle his sword shattered in two, as he gripped the handle with his great hands. Countless enemy soldiers raced towards him to disarm him, knock him down and chain him to ground. They had strict orders to bring him alive to the King, where he would be held in the deepest, darkest dungeon for all to know.

The towering walls of this cell were coated with mildew and thick, green slim. The floor was solid stone, hard and cold as a block of ice. A tiny window high in the corner of the room afforded the smallest suggestion of life outside and his bed was so battered and small, that at night his legs would hung over the edge into utter darkness.

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Each day he waited patiently for news from his king, but the days, the weeks, the months and finally the years passed by and still he heard nothing. They had forgotten their brave and mighty warrior; of this he was certain.

His hair grew long and his beard stretched down to his waist, for there were no barbers to keep him shaven in goal. He would have gone crazy with frustration, had he not remembered to sing with pride the folk songs of his brave land. The patient gaoler, who stood watch over his cell by day and night, was astonished, that he should still have the spirit to sing.

The seasons changed from spring to summer, to autumn and winter back round again and still he sang to keep himself warm in the winter and to cool himself in the summer.

“Where did your strength come from?” asked the gaoler one day, as he sat listening to him through the door. “You have languished in this cell for exactly nine years and yet continue to sing as sweetly as the birds in the trees.”

Another gaoler also asked him the same question, for they were astounded by his strength of will.

“Aga Ymer, why do you not tire of this terrible place? You have been here nine years and yet you have not lost heart.”

“How many?” cried Aga Ymer in surprise.

“Including today, nine years and three days” came the replay.

The next day his cell was silent for the very first time, his food and wine remained untouched and he spoke not a word to anyone. The second day the same thing happened.

News of Aga Ymer’s lamenting spread through the Royal Court like wild fire. The king was far away fighting in another land, but his daughter, the Princess, was curious to know, why this had suddenly happened. For in the flower gardens of the palace, Aga Ymer’s cell window lay at ground level and his beautiful voice would echo to the rose bushes, making them grow rich and exquisite in colour.

She and her courtiers with their dainty feet and gay hearts, had often stood beside the flower beds, listening to his song, wondering how such a man could still find joy in his heart, when he was locked away so deep beneath the ground. At daybreak on the third morning, the princess visited the dungeons, unexpectedly.

“Gaoler, why does Aga Ymer not sing?” she asked.

“Your highness!” exclaimed the gaoler, as he bowed low in respect. “I do not know. For two days and two nights he has said nothing, nor taken food or water.”

“I wish to see him!” she demanded suddenly “Please, open the door and wait outside.”

The princess entered quietly and through the dimlight that cast a sombre shadow, she found Aga Ymer, huddled in the corner with his head hung low. So deep was he in his thoughts that he did not look up, nor rise to his feet in respect. The Princess approached him and said quietly,

“You are Aga Ymer, a brave man and mighty warrior. With a voice to charm the birds from the trees.”

He shook his head in approval (for the Albanian way is to shake your head when you mean “Yes” and to nod it, when you mean “No”) and looked at her with puzzlement, as to wonder, why she should want to visit such a lowly prisoner in a foreign land.

The king’s daughter continued,

“I have also heard that for two days now, you have neither sung nor taken food or water. Why is this so, Aga Ymer?”

“I fell into a deep despair, Princess, for three nights past I dreamt of my home. My house had burnt down, my mother and father had died and my beautiful wife had remarried. I slept only one night with her, after our wedding and then I came to war. My wife gave me her faith, that she would wait nine years and nine days for me and that time now draws close.” he replied.

The Princess threw back her long mane of ebony hair and laughed in disbelief.

“Nine years and nine days is a long time. Where have you found such a woman, who would wait so long for her husband, when she has only spent one night with him?” she enquired.

“My wife, Princess, has given me her faith, which is something sacred” he answered “For women as well as men. It is a promise never to be broken and, I am pretty sure, she has kept her promise to me. Tomorrow nine years and six days will have passed and in three more she will take another.” he sighed.

The Princess was so intrigued to now more of his heart, that she questioned him further. For in her country a man’s word was not so highly valued. In the gloom of Aga Ymer’s cell, a shaft of spring light pierced the skin through his forehead and the sorrow in his dark brown eyes was indeed great.

“Is you wife so pretty, as to compel you to fall into deep despair, Aga Ymer?” the princess demanded. “In the entire world and, certainly in our country, there are a great many beautiful women, who, thanks to your name and bravery, could be yours without any doubt.”

Aga Ymer looked up into the eyes of the princess and, though she was petite, he knew she was as strong in heart as he was and he answered her in a strong voice.

“I know, princess that the world is full of beautiful and noble women, but I chose my wife and she chose me, but in three days time she will be mine no longer.”

A silence fell around them for even in the gloom, it was as if the birds and the plants outside were waiting for the princess to answer. She realised straight away that Aga Ymer was a resolute and faithful man and would not dishonour himself. The princess wanted very much to put his words to the test.

“How may I help you?” she said suddenly.

“You should beg your father to set me free for some days, so that I may tell my wife, that I am still alive.” he replied in anticipation.

“How many days?”

“Nine days. Three to go, three to stay and three to return.” he answered.

This was indeed a big favour to ask of the princess, but he had no choice. She thought for a moment and then said,

“You will have to give me nine purses of gold, one for each day that you are gone.

“Princess!” said Aga Ymer, “I have languished in this cell for nine years and I have no money to give you.”

Once more they both fell silent, as they racked their brains for a solution.

“My father is at war at present, what guarantee do I have from you to let you go and thus return?” she asked.

“My faith.” replied Aga Ymer.

“But faith is only a word and everyone may play on words.” she scolded.

Aga Ymer rose to his feet, standing tall in front of her. He nodded his head in denial, saying,

“No princess you are wrong! The faith is not just a word; it is a sacred thing and the very spirit of our hearts. It is more precious than life itself.”

The Princess was stunned by his words, but still she was not sure. “What would my father say if he knew, that a man, who had languished nine years in goal, was set free and gave his word to return? He would not expect to see him again and would severely punish those who had set him free in the first place.”

“Dead or alive I shall be here!”

“Yet I believe you, Aga Ymer, so go now, before I change my mind, and take the fastest horse you can.”

He fastened his eyes on hers and ran out, leaving the gaolers very surprised indeed.

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Aga Ymer chose a mighty bay horse, which ran so fast; it was swift as an arrow that it never tired, running day and night. It was foaming at its mouth, but it still ran. It was as if the horse, knew that its unknown rider was on a desperate mission.

For three days and nights they travelled and only rested for a few hours between midnight and sunrise. On the third day, just after daybreak, they cantered into a valley, which Aga Ymer recognised as his own. The sweet smell of heather and willow trees filled his lungs with longing and delight to be home once more and a solitary tear trickled down his cheek, burying itself beneath his long, dark beard.

The valley river meandered effortlessly towards the sea in the distance. He scoured the horizon for his house beside the estuary and closed his eyes, filling his lungs with the sweet smell of the salty sea and, in silence, he listened to the seagulls, as they cried and screeched overhead.

Down into the valley he rode and by the river's edge he took his horse for a well deserved drink. As the horse lowered its wondrous mane, Aga Ymer sank to his knees and submerged back his head beneath the ice cool waters. The chill took his breath away and he threw back his head in surprise and delight. His thick mane of hair rose up like the

head feathers of a proud peacock and, as he shook the residual water from his face, the bay mare looked at him in mocking surprise, for he had soaked her from head to hoof.

Suddenly he saw an old woman, walking towards him. At once he realised her as his mother. His heart skipped a beat and it was all he could do not to rush forward and embrace her.

“Good afternoon, dear mother!” he greeted her with excitement.

“Good afternoon, war prisoner.” she replied.

“How do you know who I am?” he enquired.

“Though your long, uncombed hair hangs down around your shoulders, you are strangely familiar to me.” she muttered.

She took a deep melancholy sigh and rested upon her walking stick, as the morning sun was warming her face and she gazed the stranger in front of her.

“By the way, young man, have you heard anything of my son, Aga Ymer?”

“Yes” he replied, “I saw him three weeks past. He was killed not long ago in battle. I washed him myself and lamented him, for he was a good warrior.”

The old lady seemed to crumble with his words. She looked up to the heavens and sobbed with all her heart. It cut him to his soul to see her so distressed, for the temptation to reveal his identity was very strong and would easily have taken away her pain.

Somewhere inside he found the strength to resist, for this was not the time to disclose himself and, instead, he asked,

“What are those people doing there, mother?”

“The wedding guests of another man, who this day will be the husband of Aga Ymer’s wife. She has waited faithfully, poor thing, for nine years and nine days as he had asked. But on a day of celebration I am heart-broken, for my son is dead.” she cried out loud.

Not wishing to delay, Aga Ymer bid his mother farewell and rode to the wedding.

“Good day, wedding guests!” he announced.

“Good day war prisoner!” they replied and one asked solemnly,

“Have you heard anything of Aga Ymer?”

“Yes,” he replied, “I saw him three weeks past. He was killed not long ago in battle. I washed him myself and lamented him, for he was a good warrior.”

The wedding guests looked at each other and smiled, but the bride faltered in her steps and turned her head away in sorrow. Beneath her lace bridal veil a single tear fell to the ground and was swept away by the dust and commotion of many feet. Aga Ymer however watched her in silence.

“See here, wedding guests,” he cried, “...before Aga Ymer died, he asked that I speak with his wife before her wedding day. Do I have your permission?”

“Yes, of course!” they cried.

As he drew close to the bride, he found her uncomfortable in his presence, for she quickly drew away from him.

“Why are you out of temper, o’Bride?” he enquired.

“I lost my first husband, war prisoner and now I am to another betrothed.” she replied tearfully.

“Did you love Aga Ymer?”

“Oh yes, war prisoner, with all my heart for nine years and nine days I waited his return, for we have spent but one night together.”

“Would you know him after nine years?” he asked again.

“Surely, I would!” she replied, “...for he has a mole in his right forearm and another beneath his armpit.”

Aga Ymer rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and pointed to the moles, which nestled exactly, where the bride had said. That very moment her face lit up with delight and she threw her arms around him in ecstasy. They held each other so close; it was as if they were one, much to the surprise of the guests.

After a moment the bride tossed her veil upon the ground and spoke to all her guests that stood so astonished around her.

“To all here this comes as a great surprise, but my first husband has returned to me and he is mine forever. I have promised to wait for him nine years and nine days and I would have done so by midnight tonight. But, by a miracle, he has returned within the day and we will be together.”

She turned and in the morning sunshine, they walked to their home by the sea.

In a far away country, three days ride from Aga Ymer’s own village, the King had returned to court and was furious with his daughter. His prize prisoner had been set free in his absence, which caused him great anger and humiliation. There was no other way, but to imprison his daughter, the princess, in Aga Ymer’s place and to sentence her to death, for her folly.

“Please, father!” she cried, “Wait until nightfall, before you have done with me, I am sorry to have shamed you, but Aga Ymer vowed he would return within nine days of his freedom. Tonight is the last day.” she sobbed, as she raised her soft willow arms towards him.

“Child, you are both beautiful and foolish? I don’t know, what to make of you!” he exclaimed in anger, for she was his only daughter and he loved her dearly. “The bird that flies out of the cage does not return I assure you.” said the King solemnly. He turned from her and left in sorrow, as his great robes of red velvet and ermine flowed like waves upon the beach behind him and the gaoler locked the door.

In the dark and filthy hallway the Princess strained to hear his words, as he ordered the headsman to sharpen his axe and make ready the execution at sunset. She fell to her knees on the cold stone floor and wept like never before.

As the last flickers of daylight retreated from the window, a large raucous gathering of peasants had accumulated outside and were singing and making merry. It was not every day that the King, who they feared and respected, laid on such unexpected event...

The Princess was brought to the guillotine by ox cart, her lily white face veiled with a muslin hood, braided with gold, from which she could see out, but others could not see in. Her hands were roughly tied behind her back and her wrists, bound together with leather twine, so that she could not move them. She wore a simple dress of white silk and slippers made of leather, bound with gold braid.

The courtiers openly wept and her lady-in-waiting pulled at the cart to prevent it from moving. She was swiftly carried away. Finally the Princess dismounted nervously from the cart and she was roughly handled to a rapturous applause up the wooden steps to the guillotine. For a moment, in fear, she tripped and the axe-man caught her in arms.

“Do not worry, my pretty, I’ll be ‘aving, yeh!” he cried coarsely.

She knelt forward and her whole body shook with terror, for she had not expected to lose her life in such a cruel and unnecessary way, nor for the sake of something so trivial, as her father’s pride. The peasants were silenced, as she placed her slender neck on to the slap in front of her. Every living thing in the courtyard stood motionless, as the axe-man raised his blade high into the air and prepared to swing it down up, the Princess’s pure white skin.

Just at the moment, there came a loud shrill from the crowd.

“Wait, wait!” cried the watch-keeper, “He is coming!”

All at once the crowd turned their attentions to the great man astride his bay mare, as he galloped towards the executioner’s platform. He dismounted and ran towards the King shouting,

“Long live the Princess, I have returned, as I promised you I would. Open the jail doors now, o King. I was a prisoner and I am still yours!”

The King and all the people stood silent, in astonishment, for none would have believed such a thing, had they not seen with their own eyes. The Princess beneath her executioner’s veil shed tears of joy and relief, for had she not been bound, she would have embraced Aga Ymer for his selfless act.

Aga Ymer and the King stood eye to eye, because both men were as big and strong as oak trees. The King looked at Aga Ymer first with astonishment and then with understanding. At the corner of his mouth, a hint of a smile began to emerge and the King proudly cried,

“To have an enemy as you, Aga Ymer, is indeed good luck. You are free to go!” and the crowd rejoiced.

## *Gjergj Elez Ali*

...In the corner of the room, in a house made of stone, stood a wooden bed. Through the curtain lace a single thread of sunlight cast her trail upon the body of a man barely alive. Looking at him you could hardly say he was a man, a shadow or a cadaver, for he lay down and did not move. Had you known the pale face of this man, your heart would have broken with sadness. For he was Gjergj Elez Ali. In all the land there was no greater man to serve his country or fight the enemy who dared to challenge him. His bravery and prowess were legendary, his compassion and nobility of equal worth and yet



for nine years he languished at the door of life and death, with nine deep wounds upon his body and yet he did not die.

His parents had died, his friends had been killed in battle and others had forgotten him. Only a sister remained to care for him and this she did day after day and night after night. For she was so devoted to him, that she would not leave his side, not for a moment.

She washed his wounds with spring water. So terrible were they, that each time she saw them, she should weep upon them, and then dry them with her long silken hair. She dressed them tenderly with her mother's silk head-scarf and clothed him in the finest linen she could find. Softly she placed her slender arms around him and spoke words of comfort and reassurance, until she was so tired, that she fell asleep beside his pillow.

She was the anchor that kept him in this life, without her he would not have survived. The nine wounds ached extremely, but Gjergj made not a sound, for he loved his sister so much, that he could not bear to see her further distressed by his condition. The tenth wound was in his soul. It tortured him far more than the others, to know, that whilst he lived, the walls of their humble home were little more than a jail to his sister.

In spring the birds called to her to walk the green meadows and enjoy all of creation, for her beauty and modesty were as pure as life itself. Many suitors came to seek her hand, but all were turned away.

For nine years Gjergj Elez Ali lay in his house, until one day news spread to his village, that the Black Baloz\* (\* one of mythological characters in Albanian legends and folk ballads, who was imagined as a giant, coming from the sea and bringing misfortune to the people.) had risen from the sea.

Standing 9 foot in height and weighing more than an elephant, each his footstep caused the ground to shiver and quake beneath it and for the villagers nearby to run for their lives. His skin was smooth like a dolphin. He looked just like a man who had spent a long time in water; wrinkled like a prune and covered in seaweed and barnacles.

It was so such a cruel giant, that the villagers lived in constant fear, for they knew, that should they disobey the creature, it would smash them to pieces. Each day it spent on land, brought heartache, for it would need sustenance and instructed the villagers to provide him a roasted ram and a living maiden. If they disobeyed, it would go on an evil rampage, killing everyone in its path. Many brave men who stood up to the giant lost their lives for it carried bigger and more deadlier weapons than anyone had ever seen or tried to carry themselves.

No-one had thought to tell Gjergj Elez Ali of their troubles, for he had spent so long at death's door, he was not expected to help.

How could he rise from his bed to help them? His sweet sister had known all along, but she, too, kept quiet, until the day before it was Gjergj Elez Ali's turn to send to Baloz the roast ram and the maiden...

Whilst he slept that morning and full of heartache, his sister lay her head beside her brother and whispered her lament,

"How could death forget us, dear brother? Our mother and father have long since passed on and lie beneath the linden tree. The house neither crumbles nor falls to ruin, without the hand of a man to keep it so. Yet you lie rotting alive at home, your sister's body tomorrow will fall into Baloz's hands...Life without honour is much worse than death." the poor maiden cried.

Her tears against his cheek woke him gently. He thought, it was rain seeping in through a hole in the roof and he cursed his house.

“May you be black, my house! From top to bottom may moss cover you and snakes abide within! Why did you let the rain fall upon me?” he cried in frustration.

She wiped her teary, stained cheek and sobbed,

“It is not the rain, dear brother, the roof does not leak.”

Though she tried to hide her distress, Gjergj Elez Ali placed his weak arm around her and looked closely at her face. He had never seen her cry in front of him.

“Why are you weeping, dear sister? It breaks my heart to see you so. Nine years I have been as a tiny beech leaf amidst the turbulent wind, courting life one day, courting death the next. Please, sister, tell me, have I ever been hard on you? Are you tired, perhaps, your brother has been languishing for such a long time? May be, you long to marry, for you have many suitors? Please, tell me sister, what causes you such pain?” he said tenderly.

“No brother, do not say this! You are never hard on me, neither do I tire looking after you, for you are my dearest brother and whilst you live, there is light in my heart.” she said, trying as best to smile at him. “I weep, Gjergj, because tomorrow Baloz is waiting for our roast and...me, poor me! For two weeks he has terrorised the villagers. I wanted to keep this news from you, as long as possible, for I do not know who will look after you, when I am gone.” she cried with all her sweet heart.

The morning sunbeams, which filtered through the window, moved silently through the shadows as she described all that happened. It was high noon, by the time she finished and Gjergj Elez Ali had listened throughout, saying not a word.

In just one moment, he had forgotten his nine wounds and the nine years he had spent languishing in his bed. He stood up straight as a rod of iron, moved his feet to the cold stone floor and stood tall and strong as an oak tree.

“Fetch my grey mare, sister and take her to the best blacksmith in the town, send my regards and ask him to shoe her that I may ride out to slay the Black Baloz” he cried.

Astonished as she was, she dressed quickly, mounted the horse and rode as fast as she could to the town, where the blacksmith lived.

Where he saw her pretty face at his door, he lay down his tools and came straight to meet her.

“What pretty lady do I owe this honour?”

“To shoe this horse well with your best brass nails. It is Gjergj Elez Ali’s mare. He sends his best regards and tomorrow he will fight the Baloz to death.” she replied.

The blacksmith laughed at her straight in the face.

“Yes, pretty lady, I have long heard this name, but for years he is no more in life. What good would this do? Instead, I propose that I will shoe your mare with finest nails in exchange for a kiss...”

“Hold your tongue, farrier, my brother said you were the best, but I see you are no more than a rascal.” she scorned him bitterly.

She went out and rode to another blacksmith, who was now old and well respected. She had been there once or twice with his brother, when she was a little girl.

He stood six foot tall, with arms like small tree trunks and a chest the size of a barrel of ale. Each day he would toil in the darkness and heat of the furnace. On the anvil he would smite the horseshoes he made to any size that was required, and, as his mighty hammer came down upon the metal, sparks would fly up into the air like fireworks.

In the doorway she stood admiring his work, until he finished, where he placed the smouldering horseshoe into a bucket of cool water and watched as it hissed and the steam rose up in great clouds.

“Miss Ali!” he cried, when she told him who was. She wiped the moisture from his hands and came over to shake hers.

“Gjergj Elez Ali has sent me and his best regards, for he wishes you to shoe his horse with the finest brass nails. Tomorrow he will ride to the Baloz and slay him, so that we may be rid of the giant forever.”

The blacksmith didn’t laugh at her, nor try to take advantage. He smiled with kindness and immediately set to work with Gjergj Elez Ali’s mare.

“I am delighted to hear, that Gjergj is well, miss. I will shoe his mare as never before, so that he may ride like the wind. Give my love to your brother. May success attend him, it is my privilege to help such a man.” replied the blacksmith, as he began his work.

Later that day, she returned to find Gjergj Elez Ali outside their home, dressed in his battle uniform. He embraced his sister and sent to the Baloz these words.

“My flock of sheep and rams grow fat not for you, evil Baloz, nor does my dear sister live to be yours. Without her I have no one to attend my wounds. Tomorrow I will kill you and, if I fail, only then you will have what is mine.”

That night, brother and sister sat chatting until dawn. Neither of them was tired nor afraid, but happy that for the first time in nine years Gjergj Elez Ali was able to care for his sister. He fetched water from the well and fed the livestock, while she prepared their supper by the fire.

As the dawn rose from the east, the sun’s rays inflamed the field of battle with bright red light. Gjergj Elez Ali rode to the field, just as the colours turned to daybreak and the Baloz stood angry and silent in front of him.

“Who dares to challenge the Baloz?” cried the giant.

“It is Gjergj Elez Ali, who will slay you like the wild beast that you are!” he shouted in reply.

“Do not waste your pathetic life, Gjergj Elez Ali, for I see that you have been wounded many times. I have no heart to hit a weak man like you. Go home, give me your ram and your pretty sister and I will hear no more from you!”

“I cannot do that, evil Baloz,” cried Gjergj Elez Ali, “...though I have one foot in the grave, death has yet to claim me and I will until my last breath fight, until you are dead and your head severed from your shoulders.”

The grey mare reared up at the monster, then galloped with all her courage at the Baloz. Gjergj’s words had stunned the giant into anger and he threw his mace at them

as hard as he could, but the mare was quick as lightning and dropped to her fore knees, as the club flew through the air directly at them.

The force was so great, as it struck the ground, that it buried itself twelve spades deep beneath the hard sunbaked soil, shrouding itself in a dense cloud of dust and debris.

At full gallop and with all the frustrations and anger of nine years languishing in his bed, Gjergj hurled his mace with the strength of ten mighty men at the Baloz's head, crying aloud.

“Be gone, evil Baloz, for I am Gjergj Elez Ali!”

Faster than sound and more deadly than a bullet the mace flew through the air, turning over and over again. It struck the giant right in the centre of his forehead and, though the Baloz wore a steel head plate, this was no match and the plate ripped open, as if it were a coconut that had fallen from the highest palm tree.

His head also was split in two as the hatred and injustice of Gjergj's might tore through the giant's head. At that very second it seemed, as if everything was in a slow motion, for the giant stood rooted to the ground in horror and disbelief. Then slowly he began to topple backwards and with a sound as fearsome as an earthquake, his mighty body collapsed and struck the parched soil sending shock waves across the valley.

It was several minutes, before the dust finally settled and Gjergj dismounted and walked silently to where the giant now lay dead. Baloz's head lay tilted to one side and his helmet was cast away. His eyes, though completely still, stared up at Gjergj in astonishment and disbelief. Gjergj unsheathed his sword and with a single blow beheaded the monster.

The cadaver or body of the giant he trailed behind his horse to the river and tossed it into the torrent.

Immediately the waters turned black and the repugnant smell caused both, horse and rider, to turn away. The river carried the body back to the sea, from where it first came, far, far away...

Hauling the head by its thick black hair onto the horse's saddle, Gjergj rode down the hillside to the village, where the people greeted him with triumphant cheers and cries of delight.

“Listen, good people, for this is the last will I give you. My sister has taken care of me these last nine years and held me back from the doors of death, where I belonged. She has much to look forward to and I ask you now to take care of her, to allow her happiness and joy, for she is my dearest sister and deserves so. I bequeath all that I have to her that she may live good and happy life with a husband, worthy of her kindness and loyalty.” Gjergj Elez Ali shouted at the top of his voice.

Quietly he sat down upon the cobblestones, embraced his sister, closed his eyes and fell silently asleep into peaceful death. The villagers buried their hero with the greatest respect beneath the linden tree he loved to sit beneath, so that his enduring spirit would continue to live through the beauty of nature. Some nights his sister would open the shutters and look at the linden tree, illuminated by the moon, for she could clearly hear birds singing,

Look and hear, oh passer-by,  
To this grave you're coming by,  
Stop your words, your whine or cry,

For beneath this linden tree  
There lies Gjergj Elez Ali.

## The Brave Men of Jutbina

### *Muj's Power*

Once upon a time in a mountainous country in the Northern Albania, called Jutbina, there was a man who had two sons and one daughter. His eldest son was called Muj(Mooy), his youngest son, Halil and his daughter Kunya.

The two sons were in every way their father's likeness and strength. Muj, the eldest, had his father's height and might, his patience, intelligence and wit also. Halil, though slighter in frame, was wise and skilful in almost anything he put his hand to.

Day and night their father worked the land and still they barely made enough to survive the winter months. When Muj was fourteen years old, he had grown to five foot ten inches tall and in desperation his father sent him to work for the rich gentry as a cow-herdsman.

The rich man charged him with a large herd of prize cattle, which he would take each day to high, luscious pastures, where the grass grew green and tall and where the cooler breezes kept the flies away.

Muj begrudged his father nothing and with good heart he would rise before dawn, when the stars twinkled above his head and would make for the meadow to collect his animals. In his weathered hands he carried a staff, a bag full of bread, cheese and water to take with him, his one-stringed lute and a shepherd's pipe.

The best pastures where he grazed the cattle were so far from the village, that he was free to do all what he wished, away from interference and other people. He never grew lonely and would climb trees, play his lute, wind his pipe, eat his food and drink cold spring water and lie down in blanket full of green grass, praising God for his freedom.

Well after dark he would return to the rich man's farm to deliver the prize cattle full of milk; with their utters almost dragging along the ground. So delighted was the rich man, that Muj was praised highly for his efforts.

However the other shepherds soon resented him, because they were jealous that Muj should make such an impression on their master. Always they would jeer at him, as he walked past and laugh, for they were much older and more experienced than Muj, but they were also very lazy and would cheat their master at any opportunity. Muj was smart enough to keep his head cool and did not react to their cruel remarks, though in his heart his anger burnt and his pride was much offended.

Every day was the same. He rose early and returned home well after dark; he ate his supper and went to bed.

One day, as he sat with his herd upon the pastures, he became so lost in his play games and amusements that the cattle stayed far out of sight. He had been hanging upside

down from the branches of an oak tree, winding his pipe, when he suddenly realised that he could no longer hear the cattle bells, which would jingle so distinctly around their necks.

He fell to the ground with a thud and for the next few hours he scoured all places he could think of, for he knew every blade of grass that grew upon the hillside. And still he could not find them.

The sun slowly sank beneath the mountaintop and it suddenly grew dark well before the sunset in the lowlands, where the horizon stretches the sea. Frantically he tried to think, where they have wandered to, or maybe that has been stolen from right under his nose. How could he return to his master without his cattle?

He walked and walked, until he could walk no more, for his heart grew heavier with every step he took. Eventually he sat down upon a stony crag, close his eyes and fell asleep, praying that in the morrow his cattle would return.

He had slept for more than a few hours, when he woke to hear the sound of babies crying. For a while he thought he was dreaming, but as he rubbed his eyes and then again, the image of two cradles in front of him remained. In them, to his astonishment, lay two tiny infants, sobbing their little hearts out, for they were lonely and frightened so far away from home.

Not racking his brains, who had brought the two cradles there, he stood up and got near them. He felt such pity for their plight, that he forgot his own and lulled them gently to sleep once more, rocking their cradles and winding sweet lullabies with his pipe. As they fell asleep, Muj returned to his rock and slept once more.

Just after midnight he awoke with a fright for a strange noise disturbed him from his slumbers. He shook his head, as he tried to refocus, but this time he saw two bright red lights shining on the hill top. In front of the lights the silhouettes of two beautiful maidens appeared to descend towards him.

“God bless you, mountain fairies!” he cried “May the Lord increase your number.” For though he had heard of them, he had never seen them before and everyone knew that they were a lucky omen.

“Who are you? What are you doing here? Do you know that this is our spring?” they cried together, for his presence had startled them.

“I am Muj or Gjeto Basho Muj.” he proudly replied, for well he knew, that whatever happened, he would not turn and run away. “I’m a cow herd-man and all day long I tend to my master’s cattle here in the mountains. But I lost them and I wandered many miles in search of them and still they are not to be found. It became dark and I stopped to rest, but my sleep was interrupted by the sound of two infants, crying their little hearts and this is why I am here.” he replied.

The angelic fairies first looked at each other and then at Muj. They were slim, tall and fair, crowned with a glow of heavenly light; so similar were they in likeness, that they had to be twins, thought Muj.

“Are you mountain fairies?” asked Muj eventually, for he could resist no longer.

“Yes, we are, Muj, and we know that you are a good fellow, who helps others before himself. We will grant you anything you desire.” they replied earnestly.

Muj fell silent for a moment. His first wish was the return of his cattle and yet they would grant him anything he wanted. Wealth, strenght, position, anything!

“First I need my master’s cattle returned to me.” he said tentatively.

“It is done with ease” replied the first fairy, smiling.

“I would not ask this normally, but there are several shepherds in the village, who bare me so much a grudge, that is cruel to my heart to be near them. Can you make me strong, that I may beat?” Muj suddenly asked.

“Is it this all you want, Muj?”

“Yes, I think so.” he replied.

“Then let it be done, for I shall nurse you with my breast and strength shall be yours a hundred fold.” The first fairy cried with delight.

Just he had drunk only three drops of milk at fairy's breast, he was satiated...At once he felt himself so strong, as he grabbed an oak tree and threw it down.

"No, it is not enough." said the second fairy. "See that rock there, lift as high as you can, above your head, if you like."

Muj looked at the huge mound of stone the size of two cattle. He scratched his head, but not wanting to look unmanly, he walked over to it, bent his knees and hugged it tight with both arms together. He pulled and strained, but the rock would not move an inch. Muj stood up red-faced and glared at the fairies, as they sat there sniggering.

"What mischief do you make?" he said smiling at them.

"Take another three drops of milk." said the second fairy, as she drew closer to him.

After he did so, he hugged the rock with both arms together. His whole body seemed to tingle with a magical strength he had not expected. Up went the rock, as if it were his younger nephew, who used to ride upon his broad shoulders.

"Tell me fairies, where should I throw this stone? To the Jutbina field or to the Yellow Troughs below?" he cried out loud..

The fairies were delighted with his progress, but feared that any further drops of milk would be too much. That night they talked and laughed until daybreak. Never had three strangers become such solid friends in such a short space of time. The silent moon, which had gone out behind the clouds, reappeared to listen to their tales and sent them moon-beams of light, so that they could see each others faces and know each others hearts.

"We love you, Muj!" cried the second fairy, as she wiped a solitary tear from her lily-white cheek. "Our dearest wish is that you become our best friend, on whom we can rely. For when you are in trouble or danger, we will be there for you and, likewise, when we need your help and guidance, you will come to our aid."

"Nothing would make me happier than to be your closest friend and guardian." He smiled and placed a single kiss upon each fairy's blushing cheek.

With that the fairies picked up their cradles and disappeared into the morning mist that clothed the pastures, as if they had never been there, leaving Muj to question, whether this strange night had all just been a wonderful dream.

Several feet away lay the big rock that had caused such interest. He knelt beside it and hugged it as tightly as he could, then straightened his legs and, as if it were magic, he lifted it with ease right up to chest height, then dropped it to ground just about missing his feet, which would have been very painful! He smiled with satisfaction and went in search of his herd, which very soon appeared as if from nowhere.

Down into Jutbina he returned triumphantly and not a little humbled by his experiences, for losing the herd had taught to be more careful. The other shepherds were preparing to leave, just as Muj arrived.

"Are you still alive, poor boy?" the oldest shepherd cried sarcastically. "We had given you up for dead and thought that wolves had got you. More's the pity!" They laughed and mocked.

Then reaching forward, the biggest shepherd grabbed Muj around his throat and thrust him against a wall. Muj was so angered by the bully, that he clutched his hand instinctively and held it tight.



“That’s a fine hold you have there, boy! I am pretty sure that you would like to beat me.” he hissed, for Muj’s grip was beginning to hurt and overwhelm him.

“You’re right, you’ve taunted me too long!” cried Muj and with that he lifted the ruffian up by his collar and hurled him nine or ten feet into the bushes, as if he were a wee pebble.

He expected the other shepherds to come to his assistance and attack him, but like the cowards that they were, they turned and fled in the opposite direction. Muj slowly walked up to the quivering bundle, that was the shepherd bully and glared at him, then without saying another word, he turned on his heels and walked away.

In such a small and isolated place as Jutbina, news spread very quickly and Muj’s master was not only relieved to see him returned safely with his herd, but also proud that he had taken to hand the other shepherds, who had brought nothing but problems.

Would Muj stay on and look after his master’s herd? No. The work required little skin and Muj knew that his destiny lay far, far away. He returned to his family and began to make his living as a huntsman, roaming the highlands high above the village in search of food for all the villagers.

The work brought bountiful rewards, for no ordinary man would dare to hunt alone in such wild and inhospitable woods, even the wolves revered him, when they caught his scent upon the wind.

Did Muj live happily ever after? Let us wait and see, for there are many stories to tell of him and his friends.

## *Muj and the Three Snappish Fairies*

The days ran so fast into each other, that the years seemed like months and the months like weeks. Muj was growing up very fast, indeed and his reputation through the land grew with him, for he was brave, honest and kind.

He didn't kill the wolves with arrows, as the other huntsmen did, but grabbing them around their necks. The bears that he killed, he brought home carrying on his shoulders, and so, he was a real dread for the other wild beasts of the woods and, when they caught his scent upon the wind, they howled in terror and run away, as fast as their four legs could carry them.

The pastures and the woodlands were so beautiful, rich and unbroken, that they were soon brought to the attention of highland folk from another country, known as the Krale, who were the sworn enemy of the Motherland. They coveted these places most highly and they wished they conquered the land and took its people as prisoners and slaves. Gjeto Basho Muj was still only young, barely twenty years old, but it was to him that all the people of Jutbina turned, in this most frightening time of need.

Muj rallied sixty of his strongest and bravest men in a Tsheta (a group of fighters). He led the men as they climbed the mountain. Old Dizdar followed behind, then Bud Ali Tali, Zuk, Aga Hasap, Gulik and many other brave men. Amidst them marched Muj's faithful brother, Halil, who was just seventeen years old, for he refused to leave his brother's side. Though he was of slighter frame, his heart was as brave as a lion; he was deft, as quick and agile as a squirrel and would follow his brother wherever he led them.

The enemy tried for many months to conquer "The brave men's Tsheta" but to no avail. Each step they took onto the sacred soil of Jutbina was swiftly cut down by Muj's fighters, who guarded the border like an eagle on the wing. Silence soon fell across the land, as the Krale retreated behind the mountain to plot their next attack, for they were as cunning as hyenas and they would not back down.

The days soon passed and the weeks filled the months to overflowing. Two years passed and still no sign of the Krale. Muj remained faithful to his fighters, but he grew impatient and decided to take himself a wife, whose name was Ajkuna. She was as beautiful as sunrise and as diligent in her works, as Gjeto Basho Muj could ever have wanted, but sadly she lived many miles from Jutbina.

This did not seem to deter them and Muj gathered three hundred of guests from Jutbina to travel the hillside to the wedding party in Ajkuna's village. The brave men's Tsheta wore the finest gold ceremonial uniforms, as they carried their golden swords and shields upon their backs. Those who rode horses wore saddles and bridles braided in gold also. Just before they were out to leave the Jutbina for Ajkuna's village, he gathered his guests in the square and said.

"My friends and comrades. When you climb the mountain, be careful, for at the top there is a shady copse, where a spring runs out from the rock. Whatever you do, you must not stop there, nor take refreshment from the waters however tempting it may seem." he cried out with concern. "For this belongs to the snappish fairies and your merry-making will make them angry."

The wedding guests were puzzled for they had been looking forward to the day, but pledged their word, each and everyone not to stop at the shady place, mounted the horses and set off to the bride's home, singing and merry-making. Muj and Halil stayed at home, as it was customary.

Several hours the later, the guests reached the top of the mountain. Certainly on such a glorious day the sun shone down upon them and their affords made them very

thirsty, indeed. However they heeded every word that Muj had said and dismounted from their horses, ceased their singing and walked silently past the shady place.

Though they were tired and their throats parched and sore, they arrived safe at Ajkuna's village and were greeted with great hospitality and a bountiful feast, with plenty to eat and drink. They sang and danced until daybreak, for it was customary to celebrate a wedding twice, once with bride's family in her house and once with the groom's family, in his house.

Then, when the starlight had died away and the reddish glow of dawn was just about peeping over the horizon, the guests, including the bride, set their faces towards home to Jutbina.

Not for an instant did they cease their merriment. The horse bells jangled as they travelled homeward, for they were pride to escort their master's bride. On their way they encountered many strangers who greeted them with warmth and shared their happiness with a glass of wine and a song, wishing Ajkuna great happiness, for she was the bride of "the brave Gjeto Basho Muj."

It was not long before they had retraced their steps to the shady place, which Muj had warned them about, the place where they had stopped their merriment in silence and respect the day before. However on this occasion old Dizdar Aga, who was second in command, didn't want to obey his instruction, for he was older than Muj and resented his authority.

"Look here, wedding guests! I am the oldest of you, including Muj and I have passed this place many times. We have always rested here, we have danced, made merry and refreshed ourselves with the beautiful spring water and yet nothing happened to us then. It seems to me, that Muj is the evil one and has invented this lie to test our loyalty, for, as eggs are eggs, he wishes us to hurry, that he may kiss the lips of his sweet wife, as soon as possible."

The wedding guests burst into laughter and many felt that old Dizdar Aga's words rang with some truth, for the sun dazzled the day and made the guests very warm, indeed.

Like a pack of dominos, each guest followed the lead of the next and slowly they dismounted from their horses and walked to the edges of the crystal pool, which the spring had made.

They refreshed themselves lying down in the sweet grass around them to rest and to eat from their baskets. Some of them began to sing, to joke and dance, others clapped their hands and bathed in the water, which soon turned muddy with their footprints, as the highlands around resounded with their joy and gaiety.

All of a sudden, an almighty roar came from behind them, sending terror into the hearts of all but the bravest folk. A high, menacing wind ripped the leaves from the tops of the tallest oak trees, gathering them up into three whirlwinds, which danced and swung this way and that, causing many of the horses to bolt with fright.

The guests froze in terror, astounded by what was happening to them. The water pool froze as ice and when the whirlwinds died away, the leaves scattered and three anger fairies stood amidst them. Without a word, they raised up their wards and turned the guests into stone and, what horses remained, into tree trunks. All was deathly silent once more. No dancing, no singing, no wind in the trees, nor bird-song to accompany such a

melody. The only noise to be heard was the drip, drip, drip of the water pool defrosting, as the sun beat down upon them.

For some reason Muj's bride remained unharmed, standing silently, as she did amidst her companions. Clothed in her beautiful white wedding gown, she stared in disbelief at the adamantine faces, which a few moments ago had been full of life. What should she do? For she had no idea, where she was and had never ventured further than her own land. There was no-one to comfort her, nor show her the way to get help.

Suddenly the fairies reappeared before her. Their faces were old and twisted in anger. Faster than light they threw a sack over the bride's head and dragged her away, as she struggled and fought with them, to their cave, far away from the shady place. Inside it smelt of earth and moss. There was a little light to be had and, as her eyes adjusted to what could be found, Ajkuna realised she was hopelessly lost.

The snappish fairies eyed her with delight and danced with excitement to have such a prize.

"Why am I here?" enquired Ajkuna, as they settled down once more. "... and why did you not turn me to stone, as you did the others?"

"You should stay with us, for there is much that you can help us with." replied the first snappish fairy.

"You shall cook our meal and clean the cave." replied the second fairy, for she was slothful and lazy.

"You should fetch water for us from the spring, for it is hot and thirsty work guarding it." replied the third, whose watchful eyes were hidden behind a pair of thick rimmed spectacles.

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Gjeto Basho Muj stood outside his house, pacing up and down in the searing heat of the early afternoon. Where on this earth had his bride and the wedding guest got to? He had laid out a splendid and bountiful feast for everyone, for he wanted to show his appreciation, as best he could for all their support.

He strained his ears to hear the sound of singing and laughter, or even the distinctive neighing of the horses amongst themselves, for Jutbina lay in the valley, which was deep and wide, so that the sound of the mountains could echo many miles away.

His brother Halil, who was always good in a crisis, tried to calm down, saying that the guests were unexpectedly delayed and they should wait just a little while longer. But Muj had waited all that he could and with a sense of foreboding he decided to take to the hills in search of them. He knew perfectly well, that snappish fairies could be spiteful and cruel, when disturbed, so he laded his horse bags with plenty of food for his guests, he turned his grey mare to the hills and cantered away.

"I shall come with you!" cried faithful Halil.

"No Halil, I must go alone. Come what may, one of us must stay alive!" shouted Muj through a thick cloud of dust and horseshoes.

After an hour or so of hard riding, Muj finally arrived at the shady place, on the top of the mountain. He dismounted and silently wandered the glade in search of his bride

and guests. Tree trunks appeared to block his way, where there had been none before and the stones, which were strangely familiar, in shape and size to a human, were cast with the faces of his friends and fellow warriors.

“Lo and behold, this stone has the face of Zuk and the face of Bud Ali Tali!” cried out in hanger.

Each stone he recognised and yet, in his searching, he could not find his bride, for he looked and counted every last one, except Ajkuna. His despair and anger at such stupidity could not be measured, as he tried to reason with himself, what had happened to his beautiful wife. “Surely she must be alive.” he thought out aloud.

He mounted his horse and became to search the pastures, the hillside and the springs he knew and those he did not. Hour after hour he roamed and for mile upon mile, too. He rode so deep into the woods, that even the sun rays could not penetrate the leaf cover and, only when the wind blew, the higher branches above did the shafts of light catch a glimpse of the ground below. Suddenly from near blindness, Muj rode into a lonely clearing, where a beautiful stream flowed towards the sunset. Hot and tired, he dismounted and refreshed himself in the crystal waters. “This enchanted spot was exactly sort of the place, where the snappish fairies would claim as their own,” he thought.

Muj was not sure, why he felt this so strongly, but he rested and lay in wait there for the rest of the day and night and for two days more.

Lying in wait, he watched many beautiful animals come to the pool to drink. Birds sat in the nearby trees, singing sweetly to one other, as the most timid roebuck deer presumed its safety and walked boldly to the waters-edge without concern. Muj cursed himself, for not carrying his bow and arrows for hunting.

On the third day Muj was beginning to lose heart, for the pool seemed to attract only animals. The sun was raising high into the sky and his limbs had stiffened, where he had lain for a long time. Slowly and quietly he rose to his feet and surveyed the horizon. Though trees surrounded the clearing and clothed it in darkness, the slightest change in light or form would be easy to see.

He looked, then looked again and, to his astonishment, a tiny glow of white, no bigger than a pin-head, appeared from through the darkness from far away. With every step the figure took it seemed to grow a little larger, as Muj’s heart began to beat a little faster. Soon he could make out the shape of a woman and her soft singing, echoing through the trees.

He rubbed his eyes; his heart aching for the maiden to be his wife, for the white dress could be easily a wedding gown. Nearer and nearer she came through the darkness, until she suddenly stopped out into the sunlight, where Muj instantly recognised her.

“Ajkuna, Ajkuna!” he cried aloud in delight.

They ran into each other’s arms and held each other close, not for a moment wanting to let go.

“Ajkuna, what happened, my love, for I have been so worried about you.”

“My lord!” replied Ajkuna. “The wedding guests decided to rest at the shady place you warned them of. With singing, dancing and refreshments we must have disturbed the snappish fairies, for they suddenly appeared as whirlwinds and turned them all to stone and the horses to tree trunks.”

“But how did you escape, Ajkuna, for you are the only one alive?” enquired Muj.

“The snappish fairies have made me their slave. I cook, clean and fetch the water for them to stay alive. Let us go husband, please don’t let me go back to them!” she cried in despair.

“No, my dearest wife! If you do not return, they will hound us down for the rest of our lives together. I cannot leave our friends as stone, nor you and I the slaves of the fairies. I will move heaven and earth and wager my life for you, but I must find a solution to reverse everything that has happened, and for this I need your help.”

Ajkuna looked at her husband and hid her disappointment as best as she could. To find Muj was the most wonderful thing that could happen, but to lose him so quickly, even for a short time was agony. In her heart she knew he was right.

“What do you think we should do?” she enquired.

“That my love is up to you.” he replied with a smile. “Just remember, that I am close by and no harm will come of you. Be wise and diligent and win their hearts with your kindness, for their confidence is our great weapon.”

“I will do this, my husband and all I will learn from them, I will tell you. Tonight the snappish fairies will dine at this pool beneath the moonlight and I will serve them, as their slave.” replied Ajkuna.

Time had passed quickly and she hurried away with a pitcher full of water, so as not to draw the fairies suspicion.

“Until tonight!” cried Muj.

She ran as fast as she could, without spilling the water and arrived at the cave, breathless.

“Why were you such a long time?” cried the first fairy.

“The pool was muted by the deer that drank at the water’s edge,” she cried “...and I waited until it was clear before drawing from it.”

“Very well.” they replied together.

That evening, when the sun had long since dipped below the horizon and the night sky was peppered with stars, the moon took celestial centre stage, filling the heavens with a yellow glow, the colour of an egg yolk. It rose so high into the sky that for the first time in many years, a ring of light encircled it thousands of miles wide. In ancient times this was always seen as a good omen.

The snappish fairies were in high spirits and took their bride with them to the pool. As they sat down upon the green grass, they began to eat and to drink from the picnic that Ajkuna had laid before them. As they ate, Ajkuna stood away from them, with her head held low, for she was much annoyed and she did not wish them to see her face.

The youngest fairy asked her,

“Why do you not eat, o’bride? Are you not well or are you missing your people?”

“No!” replied Ajkuna, “God bless you, little fairy. I am not ill, nor do I miss my wedding guests, because I could never have dreamt of a life such as this. You have all shown me such kindness and love, that I know I belong here with you forever. If you did not love me, you would have turned me into a stone. All I do for you, is done out of love and the pleasure it brings me to do your bidding.” she lied.

The fairies were astounded by her generous words, as they sat upon the grass sipping honey and elderflower wine. Then Ajkuna continued.

“As I look, I am mesmerised by your beauty, for you are like women and yet you are not. You are stronger and brighter than the wedding guests, of whom many were warriors. Never I have felt more protected than I do now, for I had no sisters, when I lived in my village and now I have three.” she smiled sweetly. “Yet I have one question, that I would like to ask you, but I am frightened to offend and have dared not to ask it.”

The fairies were indeed flattered by Ajkuna’s words and, without a hint of suspicion, they agreed to her question with joy and curiosity.

“Please tell me, good fairies, where do your powers come from?”

Just as soon as those words were uttered, the two older fairies sprang to their feet in rage, as if to turn the bride into stone. But the youngest called them back saying,

“May God kill you, older sisters, if you should lay a hand upon our slave bride! How dare you do this? She asked permission and we agreed to her question. She is a person, we are fairies, she lives on earth, and we live in heaven and on earth. What harm can this bring to answer her question? She is our slave and we are her masters.”

The two fairies returned to their seats and sat quietly, as the youngest fairy continued,

“In answer to your question, o’bride, there are three wild she-goats, which graze upon the finest Yellow Trough pastures below us. No-one has ever caught them, for they are faster than lightning and can leap from hill-top to hill-top in one bound. Even the wolves fear their horns, which are razor sharp and can cut through flesh like a sharpened sword. Our powers are connected with these animals and should they ever be caught and held, we would be changed to ordinary women, but, I am pretty sure that they will not happen.”

Ajkuna thanked the youngest fairy for her explanation and sat down to eat with them. After supper the fairies began to dance by moonlight. The stars watched them from high above and Ajkuna watched the stars from earth, then the fairies hand in hand flew to the cave, leaving Ajkuna in silence to clear away the picnic supper.

Soon after Ajkuna returned to the cave, deep in thought. “Surely, they must wonder, why I asked such a secret question, so I am certain they will keep an eye on me from now on.” she thought.

The next morning, while the fairies were deeply sleeping, Ajkuna began her chores, sweeping the cave, clear of rubbish and sprinkling water upon the ground to dampen the dust. This was a good excuse to return to the pool to fetch more water.

As she expected, Muj was there anxiously waiting for her.

“What did you learn from the fairies?” he asked.

“Dearest husband, though you are very strong, their powers are invincible. I will be their bride forever, poor me!” she replied in dismay. “There are three wild she-goats with golden horns as sharp as razors, which have never been captured. They hold the key to the fairies’ strength and graze upon the Yellow Trough pastures. Even the wolves and the bears live in fear of them, but if they are caught, the fairies will become as weak as ordinary women.”

“See here, my love! I will find away to capture them, for you will never need to live in fear again. The snappish fairies will heed my words and turn our wedding guests back into human form and you will ride to my house in splendour.”

Ajkuna listened to him and wiped away a tear that fell from her soft cheek. She believed him and yet she did not believe, it could be possible.

As the sun raised high in the sky, they parted company. Ajkuna turned to the cave and Muj set forth to Jutbina, as fast as his horse could carry him. There he rallied the men of Jutbina, who were anxious to know his news.

“See here, good men of Jutbina!” he cried “He who calls himself a good huntsman, should come with beagles and greyhounds to my home tonight. You must eat and drink as much as you wish, for tomorrow at daybreak we will climb the highlands for hunting!”

The men-folk went away and three hundred men returned that evening, with seven hundred beagles and greyhounds. Against the torchlight, Muj’s silhouette was sight to behold, as he stood upon the steps of his house and cried,

“Welcome, friends! There are three she-goats with golden horns, grazing on the Yellow Through pastures. I want them caught, but caught alive and well. We will surround the hilltop and dog their footsteps, until they have nowhere left to run. Whoever catches one of them, will be handsomely rewarded, but if you should, in your excitements kill one of the goats, you shall be killed yourself, for without them our quest is doomed.”

“We will follow you, wherever you go Gjeto Basho Muj!” they cried.

Just before dawn, when nature had yet to rub the sleep from her eyes, the huntsmen assembled and set for the hills. Muj gathered together his most skilful huntsmen, including Halil, with beagles and greyhounds and led the men together.

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The hunting could be heard through the countryside, as the teams surrounded the mountain. At times the she-goats appeared and disappeared in and out of view. The hunters pressed on over valley and dale, hill-top and mountain for three long days and nights, without stopping, until finally on the eve of the fourth day the she-goats could leap no further. Their eyes were heavy with fear and their limbs weak with exhaustion, for the chase had finally taken all their fight.

They lay down their heads in front of Muj, who gathered them up upon his shoulders and marched triumphantly back to Jutbina. There he locked them in his stable with fresh straw bedding, food and water and posted a guard upon them, just in case.

But what was happening in the snappish fairies’ cave?

As Muj locked the stable door behind him, the fairies began to cough like old women. They flattered their tiny wings, but could not fly, for their bodies began to grow heavier by the minute. In desperation they commanded the wind to whistle through the tree at the mouth of the cave, but no trees were listening to their commands and, when they cried out into the hillside for she-goats to come, their calls remained unanswered.

Said the eldest, as she glared at Ajkuna, who was smiling,

“Fairies my dear sisters, someone has caught our goats and imprisoned them!”

“Yes!” cried the bride in delight “...and his name is Gjeto Basho Muj! He has caught your goats and will exchange them with 300 petrified wedding guests and horses, which you so cruelly turned to stone and tree trunks.”



The fairies burst into rage and anger; they grabbed Ajkuna by the wrists and bound her hands with leather strips. Her deep blue eyes they blindfolded, so she could not see and they abandoned her in darkness and fled out of the cave. They were not used to walking, but without their fairy powers they were forced to set forth to Jutbina barefoot.

Their toes were blood-strained from the sharp rocks, their hands gnarled and deeply scratched from the thorn bushes along the way and their tears of pain fell like rain-drops with every step they took.

It was very late, when they finally arrived in Jutbina. They knew exactly, which house to visit, because they could feel the magical force of the imprisoned she-goats growing stronger, as they shuffled warily through the village. Muj opened the door and invited them inside, but they declined, wishing only to wipe away their tears and rest awhile.

“Our lot is in your hands Gjeto Basho Muj. But you should not harm us or our wild she-goats, for if you do, we will throw ourselves from the highest peak into the abyss and your wedding guests will remain as statues forever.”

Muj eyed them sternly and with suspicion, his huge arms he folded across his chest, as he looked down upon them. The eldest fairy could tell they were making no progress and continued,

“If you let our she-goats free we, will recall to life all your wedding guests and will personally carry your beautiful bride homeward in a golden carriage.”

Muj pretended not to be interested in their offer and replied.

“It does not interest me for those wedding guests you mentioned to be restored to life, nor do I think of my bride, I am happy for her to remain your servant, for I much admire the she-goats I have captured. I shall slaughter them for my new wedding soon, because I shall take a new wife in the morrow. Their meat I shall roast for my friends. Their golden horns I shall hang on the wall...”

The fairies were flabbergasted to hear such cruelty and for those people who were present, his remarks caused great offence. The fairies began to cry aloud, for they were used to always getting their own way.

“Look here,” cried the youngest fairy. “Whenever your wedding guest are on the mountain, whenever you are at war accompanied by your warriors, whenever you are hunting upon the hillside, you may stop and rest at the shady place and drink from our spring. We give you our faith not to touch anyone who is with you. We shall go about our business, as you go about yours.”

After he had thought long and hard, Muj replied sternly, for he was enjoying himself.

“You are fairies and should be fairies forever, but the faith is faith and if you keep it, we shall be friends but, if you break it, I will kill the goats and show no mercy.”

At the moment he called to Halil to open the stable door and allow the she-goats to run free, which they did at great speed high into the mountains again.

At the same time the fairies began to feel their strength return as before. They shook hands with Muj and Halil and flew like beams of light back to the shady place. There they changed all the stones back to wedding guests and the tree trunks to horses. Some of the tree trunks, that had not been horses before, were also changed into horses and there was much chaos trying to catch them all.

“Go!” cried the fairies, “Gjeto Basho Muj is waiting for you.”

They set forth slowly and drowsily, washing their dusty faces in spring water and rubbing their eyes in disbelief, for they had slept solidly seven days and seven nights.

Ajkuna was released and rode upon a golden carriage, carried by the fairies. In Jutbina the whole village celebrated with singing, dancing and making merry, because everyone was relieved to be home once more.

Since then the three snappish fairies have become the three good fairies, because a human outsmarted them. They also got slimmer and prettier. They gave their spring at the shady place to the villagers of Jutbina, and they green wards also. In times of trouble Halil relied upon their help to fight and outwit his enemies. But Muj, if you remember, had two other good fairies, who had given him the power and he never forgot his promise to help them in case of need and for that he was ready to be sacrificed...

*Muj meets Pay Harambash*

On a moonless night Ajkuna lay awake unable to sleep. She turned to Muj, who was sleeping peacefully. Then suddenly, without warning, as if he was conscious of being watched, his eyes opened and he smiled with happiness to see his wife lay beside him.

“Why did you wake, Muj?” she whispered.

“I dreamt our beautiful mare was in foal and she gave birth to a colt with a coat so dazzlingly white, that it lit up the stable with brilliant light. On his forehead it wore a black star. His strong neck was as long as the highland rough and his legs fine boned and as agile as a roebuck deer.”

“Do not move, my love!” cried Ajkuna, as she rose from their bed, dressed quickly and went down to the stables through the thick dark.

It was true. Ajkuna had taken just a few steps across the courtyard, when she heard the mare let out a loud whinny. She froze for a second, like her breath in the freezing night air and then she ran to the stable door as fast as she could. To her delight, the mare had indeed given birth to a magnificent white colt, with a coat that shone like moonbeams in the torchlight, as the proud mother stood nuzzling her new-born.

Ajkuna walked quietly towards the mare and stroked her fine mane, congratulating her on such a beautiful addition to the family. The mare seemed to respond well to such praise, pushing her foal gently towards Ajkuna, in a gesture of acceptance. Ajkuna rushed back to the house with great excitement, where Muj was waiting.

“God bless you, Muj! Your dream was true! Come and see the miracle, which stands in our stable.”

Muj hurriedly dressed and went to the stable to see for himself. He was delighted to see such a beautiful animal, that he spent the rest of the night, sitting in the stable on the straw, admiring the colt and smiling as the curious foal came, which after a short while, allowed Muj to stroke him.

“Please, Ajkuna, take great care of him! You must feed him only on the best corn feed and not barley, give him wine to drink, that it may make him strong and for three years he must not be allowed out into the field, for the sun’s rays will make him weak.”

Time past and after three years and a great deal of love and attention, the colt had grown into a magnificent stallion, but he was annoyed at being cooped up for so long and began to neigh at the top of his magnificent voice.

It was time to bring the stallion into the light at last.

On a bright spring morning, as the trees bent their leaves against the wind and the cherry blossom fluttered like confetti, falling to the ground, Muj led the horse out into the field. He tried to keep him calm and fondled his neck, whispering words of encouragement to soothe him, but the horse kept jumping up and down and would not settle.

The saddle and the bridle that Muj had brought out into the field would neither fit nor keep the horse controlled in anyway. So Muj walked him, as fast as he could to the town, where he purchased the finest saddle and bridle, that he could find, all decorated with fancy pearls and garlands. At the blacksmiths yard Muj instructed the farrier to shoe him with golden nails that shone in the sunlight, each time he raised his hoof.

In front of the townsfolk Muj mounted the young stallion, which jumped and bucked, whinnied and reared up in front of a growing crowd of people, who had suddenly appeared from no-where, curious to know of such a com-motion. .

The dust and stones, rising up from the ground, the sparks of metals on cobbled stones and the fire-like temperament of such an uncontrollable beast, was enough to send many of the terrified onlookers scurrying back to their homes.

Finally, after much effort and reassurance, he settled the young stallion, with quiet words and a firm hand on the reins. At a brisk trot they headed for the wide open pastures, where Muj finally set free the young horse into the field, where it could jump and gallop about as high and as fast, as it liked.

For three glorious hours the horse played in the pastures, as the sun warmed his head and filled him with a giddy happiness at being free to move as he pleased. When the sun began to set behind the chimney pots of Jutbina, Muj resaddled his horse and rode it as fast as the wind back home, leaping fences, that were seven foot high and leaping each stream with only two jumps.

All the people were astounded by Muj's horse, but no one dared touch him, except Halil, who whispered soothing words to him, as he stroked his magnificent mane.

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The night, when all the world seemed to be sleeping and the stars drew murky blanket of cloud over their heads and hid themselves from sight, when the crests of the mountains from the highest peaks to the deepest abyss were dark and silent and even the wind hid itself in a cave, there came the sound of the horses from far, far away.

The moon, which was clothed in magenta, rose up from the mountains of the East high into the sky, casting a red glow across the heavens and all that stood below, except in the deepest abyss.

Trot, trot, trot came the sound of the horses' hooves on stony ground, echoing through the far away hills. Yet nothing else seemed to stir. Was this a dead army marching by the light of a bewitching moon? Ore something more sinister?!

This was Pay Harambash, the leader of the Krале people and the sworn enemy of Muj and the people of Jutbina, whose neighbouring lands and lives the Krале envied and coveted with a longing.

His heavy chain mail glistened in the moonlight hue and yet his face half in shadow was full of woeful thoughts and evil designs. Though he had never met Muj, he had heard about his name and fame and was dying of desire to fight and kill him. He had chosen this dreadful night to stroll through the highlands of Jutbina, to memorise every detailed contour and, with greatest hope, to find Muj and slay him, so that the Krале could claim these beautiful lands as their own.

Nevertheless, having fear of Muj, in every case he had brought with him three hundred fighting men, who had taken up position along the tracks to protect their leader against attack and were lying in ambush for their victims.

In the moonlight Harambash was deep in thought. His frisky thoroughbred horse, so full of pride and nervous energy side stepped this way. Muj's reputation had indeed given the Krале army much to fear, as they entered the forbidden lands. Looking warily from side to side, Pay Harambash kept his sword unsheathed and gripped tightly in his

hand. He could hardly restrain his anger, which flashed across his eyes and long his furrowed forehead, as if it were the black cloud that brings the tempest.

After some time his solders came upon a spring, where they invited their leader to first drink from the water. The moonlight seemed to be playing tricks on him, for Pay Harambash was convinced he could see two fairy-like creatures, dancing beside water's edge. Could they have been two brides in white dresses or even pure white flowers wavering in the subtle breeze? He could not be sure. His heart was still so heavy with anger for Muj, that there was no room for fear.

He found himself upon the ground walking towards the frightened fairies, who had never heard such a clattering of metal before and would have run away, had they not found themselves frozen to the spot with fear.

In a harsh, growl-like voice, wich resembled the cries of a jackal rather than a man, he spoke to them saying,

“Who are you that dance and play by the moonlight near the spring?”

“We are the white fairies,” they replied. Their voices were clear and loud with courage.

Their defiant tone sent Pay Harambash into a terrible rage, as he cursed and swore at them, stamping his feet and throwing his arms into the air. After a short while, he regained his composure and inquired,

“Who do you help, o mountain fairies?” and then added, as he had heard that the inhabitants of this country used to saying, when they saw fairies, “May God increase your file!”

The first fairy answered,

“We are the good fairies to the brave Gjeto Basho Muj. When he is in serious peril, we will rush to his side, but we have learnt to ignore the less serious circumstances he sometimes finds himself in. It is better to let him work it out for himself, by trial and error. Similarly, if we feel he has hurt or offended one of his kinsfolk, we also ignore him as a punishment. As mountain fairies we try to do whatever the humans cannot do and to protect their leader against all odds, for whoever opens the grave of Muj, he shall fall into it himself.”

Pay Harambash smiled secretly to himself. The fairies had been very candid.

“And who are you?” asked the second fairy in an inquisitive voice. “You are human, aren't you? But why do you frown so much your brows? What are you looking for on our highlands so late at night? Am I to assume that you are phantoms from the grave, if you are, go back to home in the abyss.” she cried.

At these orders from mere fairies Pay Harambash burst into another fit of rage and shouted at the top of his voice.

“I am a human, can you not tell? My name is Pay Harambash and I am the boldest leader of the Krale people, who have come to the Highlands of Jutbina to fight a victorious battle with Gjeto Basho Muj and to claim this country as our own. All the shepherds and hunters I will make my prisoners and all the girls will be my slaves, who will wait on my daughter, whose name is White Januka” he said angrily.

Never before had the fairies been spoken to in such a way; not even the beasts of the forests could be so rude or so fierce. The first fairy replied indignantly.

“Look here, Pay Harambash or whoever you are! We have never met such a beastly person as yourself and we have in mind to turn you into stone, so that even your daughter, the White Januka, would not recognise you. But I think that I will spare you this, for when you first spoke to us, you wished us a good greeting “May God increase your file”.

The moon was high in the sky and the second fairy shivered against the cold.

“It is time for us to leave, for we have business with Muj in Jutbina this very day. He is our best friend and it is a good occasion to put him to a test... I am pretty sure, that your words will be avenged, one way or the other...”

Pay Harambash burst out laughing, shaking the ground with his ear piecing cackle, as shrill as any noise that the night owl makes upon the wind, echoing to the valley below. He laughed so much that tears began to swell up in his eyes and trickle unashamedly down his evil face, as the fairies looked on in amazement.

“Life could not be better, for with your help, I will yet have the chance to face the cowardly Muj face to face.”

With this Muj’s fairies left Pay Harambash by the clear spring and set their feet towards Jutbina down in the valley below. The moon was beginning to set and grow paler against the early morning sky, so that, when they reached the Linden tree in the centre of Jutbina, it was nearly dawn.

Muj awoke and climbed out of bed. It was cold, but, for no apparent reason, he felt strongly that someone was calling him. In the fireplace he lit the tinder-wood, until it was strong enough to take the larger logs, which soon burnt with a welcoming glow. He placed the coffee-pot upon the embers and went to the window to greet the new day. To his astonishment, beneath the Linden tree he could just make out the images of two fairy-like people, shivering together and at ill temper with their lot and not dancing, as they normally did.

He forgot about the coffee and went immediately to greet them, hugging his cloak around his body to keep warm.

“Good morning, mountain fairies!” he said quietly.

“Good morning, Muj!” they replied

“What is the matter?” he asked, for he could tell by their tones, that something was amiss.

“We have got ourselves into a scrape, Muj and we would like your advice. Late last night, as the moon reached her zenith, we came upon Pay Harambash, the bold leader of the Krale people high in the foothills. He means you harm and will try to destroy the people of Jutbina. He insulted us and, when he discovered that you were our friend and ally, he insulted your good name also.

The first fairy was close to tears and had worked herself up into a state, as she blubbered,

“Muj, we wish to know, will you take revenge for us all face to face, or shall we avenge ourselves as fairies?”

With these words Muj felt the blood course through his veins in anger, but he kept his counsel.

“Were there men with him, or was he alone?” Muj asked them.

“Alone, we believe.” they answered.

“All right, then!” he replied, “He will soon know, what it is like to be avenged by Gjeto Basho Muj, for myself and for my sisters.”

The two fairies were delighted to hear his reaction and vanished into thin air, no doubt to take rest for their night’s adventures. Muj turned quickly homeward and headed directly for the stables. He bridled his white stallion, mounted him and said in a loud voice to the highlands ahead of him.

“Wait for me, Pay Harambash, for I am coming!”

Inside Halil was woken by his brother’s voice, rebounding around the cobbled courtyard. As quick as lightening he dressed and raced into the courtyard before his brother could leave.

“Where are you going so early, brother?”

Muj told him all that the mountain fairies had said.

“Do not go alone, brother, I shall come with you.” said Halil.

But Muj, full of confidence, felt that he was more than a match for Pay Harambash and scoffed at his brother’s keenness to help saying,

“Aren’t you a bit young to be fighting warriors from another land? You had better go and graze the sheep herd, instead, for where I go, there will be a great fight and much blood will be spilt and I will beat Pay Harambash, as if he were a child.”

Muj’s words wounded Halil’s pride, but he said not a word and left his brother to go on his journey alone.

High on the hillside the ground began to shake with the stampede of horses hooves and the clank, clank, of sheathed swords against chain-mail. In a clearing, had you been a solitary eagle on the wing, you could not have been better placed to see the spectacle of two great warriors at arms against each other.

In strength they were almost matched, but in swords-manship Muj was more skilful on horseback, as he swung his great swords this way and that and charged at Pay Harambash’s flank at any opportunity. Nothing gave the two warriors more pleasure, than to fight face to face, as the ambush lay in hiding. Eventually, when it seemed that neither warrior could be defeated, their swords clashed for the very last time and both shattered in two above their heads.

Neither men could reach one another, so they dismounted and fought hand to hand, punching and beating each other about his head. Pay Harambash was sly and allowed Muj to beat him backwards towards a corpse of trees, where three hundred jeering soldiers suddenly appeared and encircled the unsuspecting Muj.

As hard as he could, there was no way for him to break through such an ambush and even his faithful white stallion, who had knocked down Pay Harambash’s own horse, could not stamp and trample his way through to his master, though they both fought with all their hearts.

Some of the soldiers tried hard to slay the white stallion, for he was causing quite a commotion amidst the skirmishing ranks, but even as Muj was being held down, Pay’s harsh words screamed aloud,

“God kill you, fools! I want that horse alive.”

Many men raced to catch him, but the stallion was faster than the wind. He gave a loud neigh and fled like lightening to Jutbina.

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Halil stood at the door to the farmhouse, straining his eyes to see as far up the hillside as he could, then his head of short blond hair sank down to his heavy heart. His mother had been watching him from the stable door, where she had been looking for Muj and the stallion and said,

“Why do you feel so sad, my son?”

Halil lifted his head and replied,

“Muj has never been as hard on me, as he was today, mother. He said I was too young and only good enough to herd goats and sheep. He went alone to fight Pay Harambash, without thinking of the consequences.”

“Do not worry, my son, nor carry a grudge for your brother, for he loves you very much, but sometimes he acts a little rashly.”

Suddenly in the distance, high on the hillside, where the dusty track first meandered towards Jutbina, Halil could just make out a cloud of white dust thundering towards him. It wasn't long before the creature became distinguishable and, to his horror, Halil recognised the white stallion without Muj upon his back. No sooner had Halil run to gather arms, than the stallion was beside him in the courtyard, neighing angrily and covered in a river of sweat.

His mother cried,

“Where are you going, my son?”

“To the highlands, mother, Muj is dead, I am certain of it!”

“No!” she said calmly. “Had your brother died in the highlands, I have a hunch the white stallion would have brought him back.”

“Then I must go to him for he is in danger.” cried Halil panic gripping his vocal cords.

His mother held the reins of the white stallion, as if he were a gentle donkey instead of a mighty horse.

“My son, you must go to your brother, but I suspect you will find him not upon the hillside, but in the city of Krale itself, for they will have imprisoned him there to teach us a lesson and to mock him.

Halil was surprised by his mother's words and wisdom and obeyed her every command. She continued,

“In Krale you will find your brother, I am sure of this and don't ride the white stallion, but your father's horse, for he knows the way and will lead you to your father's bosom friend, who lives in Krale and is known as Beg. He will show you what to do and how to rescue you brother.

The sun had not reached the tops of the fir trees upon the hillside and the morning was still in her youth, as Halil mounted his father's horse, and Muj's stallion trotted along side him, as he headed for the land of Krale people, two mountains away.

Their pace was swift and purposeful and it wasn't long after noon that Halil first saw the city of Krale people shimmering in the sunlight, in the valley below. On the outskirts he gave his father's horse reign and allowed it to guide him to Beg's house.

At Beg's house, he tied his horses fast in the court-yard and accepted his father's bosom friend's hospitality.



“Have you ever been to this country before?” asked Beg inquisitively.

“Never” replied Halil

“It is a beautiful country...”

“Maybe” replied Halil indifferently, “...but I am not here to enjoy myself. I am in trouble and I need your help. Pay Harambash has kidnapped Muj and I mean to kill him and to rescue my brother. Tell me where he keeps the prisoners, so that I may raze his dungeons to the ground.”

Beg looked very afraid and shook his head in disbelief.

“This is too heavy a burden for one as young as you, Halil and besides, Pay Harambash is too evil and strong for even the likes of me. He opposes everyone and if they stand in his way he kills them, chopping them into small pieces for all to see, as an example for his power and cruelty.

“But Beg, sir, you were my father’s best bosom friend, you must help me!” cried Halil in exasperation.

Beg shook his long grey hair, once more.

“For nine years, young man, I was imprisoned in the dungeons you seem so eager to enter. Three weeks ago I was finally released. If Pay Harambash knew that you were a guest in my house, he would lock up me again and this time throw away the key, so that I would rot in jail forever.”

Halil was beside himself with anger and desperate to change the old man’s mind. “If you were truly my father’s bosom friend, you would disguise yourself and take me to the dungeons, otherwise take up your sword and let our fighting be the judge, as to whether you will help me.”

Beg was between two stools and could refuse neither one nor the other. His fear prevented him from going with Halil, but his loyalty was never in question. As he looked at Halil’s angry gaze, he turned away, pointed eastwards and muttered low,

“The dungeons are that way, but I cannot come with you.”

He could not meet Halil’s scornful glare. The young man turned on his heels and left the room, collected his two horses and went.

At his feet and barely touching the ground, a white handkerchief seemed to follow Halil, as he slowly walked away from Beg’s house, but this was no fancy cambric fluttering in the breeze, but Halil’s fairy protector, standing in front of him carrying a blade of grass.

“Sir” she cried in a sweet tinkling voice. “I know why you are here and I have come to help you. Take this blade of grass and do as I say.” she demanded in an almost precocious manner. “When you see Pay’s mighty tower do not lose heart, for it was first built upon a hill and it is not all that big. Though the entrance is securely fastened with a large bolt, touch the door with this blade of grass and it will open to you; go inside and lock it behind you. Do not be afraid, because Pay and his followers are high in the mountain returning with your brother as their captive.”

The wind seemed to have subsided in the stillness of the air enveloped them as the fairy continued,

“Your brother, Muj has sometimes been hard on you and pushed you away, for he is the oldest and sometimes scornful of your good reason. Nevertheless, he is your brother and you must avenge this deed, which finds him a prisoner. In the tower you will

find Pay's elderly father, Trash of Marian. You must take him prisoner to equal the score."

She had said her piece, but muttered a silent whisper into Halil's ear, just before disappearing into the sunlight.

Halil decided to heed the good fairy's words and hid his two horses safely in the woods. On foot he brazenly marched up to the tower and lightly touched the door with the grass blade. Instantly the door flew open, knocking him to the ground unexpectedly, as he stood up and dusted himself down, the dark, stone corridor inside beckoned him.

Indeed, the tower walls of Pay were so thick and impenetrable, that Halil's first instinct was to stay out of its clutches, for he feared, once he was inside, there would be no escape. Slowly he overcame his doubts and walked silently through the door and along a single dimly lit corridor, which opened out into a vast atrium. High above his head an intense beam of natural light radiated down through a gigantic glass dome. It was so bright, it was blinding. He crossed the atrium quickly and entered another much smaller room, where the old man, described by the good fairy, sat motionless in his armchair.

Halil had never seen such a man before. He was extremely thin, with long white hair and long white dense brows that did not let his eyes to be seen. He was covered by something white, that you wouldn't be able to determine whether it was a white gown or just a white sheet.

Trash of Marian was surprised to find this intruder and demanded an explanation from Halil, in a course voice.

"Who are you and how did you get inside my house?"

"What does it matter, old man? You should get up and come with me." demanded Halil in a contemptible voice.

"I cannot move!" lied the old man.

"If you cannot move, I will carry you myself." cried Halil, stretching out his arms and lifting Trash of Marian, as if he were a child.

Halil studied the old man's ashen face in details, as he marched back to the woods. There was a little time for pity, but it was clear, that beneath this thick and white body, the old man was terrified. Halil bounded him firmly but gently, and returned to the tower to wait Pay Harambash's return.

He did not have long to wait. Presently loud, rough voices shouting from the hillside reverberated across the courtyard. Many of his followers had dispersed homeward and Pay was keen to return to his father.

"Open the door and see what I have brought you." he shouted at the top of his voice.

But there was no answer and again he shouted even louder.

"Open the door father or I will break it down."

And still no answer. Pay Harambash was tired from travelling and his temper spent. The armour he wore was thrown to the ground and he hurled himself against the door with such ferocity, that the door imploded taking the lintel with it. Dust, splinters and wood flew into the air, but, before the commotion had a chance to settle, Halil sprang

from behind, where the door had been and hit Pay Harambash straight across his massive forehead. He dropped to the ground like a lead weight.

Halil stepped out into the sunshine, while the dust suspended around his head. He saw his brother in the courtyard and was astonished to find him laden with rocks like a packhorse.

“Tell me, brother, since when did you decide to become a packhorse?” he teased.

Muj was too astounded by his brother’s appearance and subsequent bravery to say a single word, for a whole minute. Halil smiled and continued proudly,

“After you left, I grazed the herd, but decided to try to find you, in the hope of seeing you fight Pay Harambash.

“But, my dear brother, I never expected to see you in such an awkward situation!”

After he untied his brother the saddlebags filled with stones, he helped him silently to his feet. Muj stood sorrowful and full of humility to find his younger brother coming to his rescue, but still he said not a word. Then suddenly two fairies, which Muj recognised as his friends, appeared. They were singing and dancing together, delighted to find their trusted friend unharmed.

“And you are singing now!” cried Muj angrily. “Why did you not come to my assistance, when I was surrounded by a brigade three hundred enemy soldiers?”

“Because, brother, we wanted to teach you a lesson” cried the first fairy. “You showed yourself to be a brave warrior, but you were nearly killed in your arrogance. Your brother took revenge for Harambash’s cruelty, when you were powerless and this itself is a valuable lesson.”

“It is time now, Muj to return to Jutbina and banish the anger you feel.” cried the second fairy as the two of them began to sing.

Brothers you are, brothers may you be,  
Everywhere may you go together,  
Poor that heart that has no brother...

And so it was that the brothers returned to Jutbina, thankful of the outcome. The brave men’s Tsheta killed many Krale enemies in the years that followed, as they became stronger and united in their desire to keep their lands free from the tyranny. The Krale king and his army, weakened by their continual assault on the coveted highlands, decided that it was time to make a truce with the people of Jutbina.

The king pledged his faith to Muj, that he would no longer attack their lands and, though Muj viewed this change of heart with great suspicion, he knew that peace was ultimately their only solution in the long term. Muj and Halil were invited to the Krale King’s castle, where many feasts were held in their honour. At one such feast the King turned to Muj and said,

“During many years we have been at war over those highlands and pastures.”

“Do you mean the highlands and pastures of Jutbina?” replied Muj

“Yes, I suppose, I do.” replied the king, “For your pastures many brave men of Krale have lost their lives, including my brother, Pay Harambash. With his memory in our thoughts, let us make peace and bind our sincerest friendship.”

“Good King,” replied Muj, “You wish peace with us, and then we shall have peace, for no evil has come to you from our part. We will keep to our lands and you to yours and everyone will be satisfied. Do you agree, Halil?”

Halil shook his head in approval, but his eyes and his thoughts were directed elsewhere, to a beautiful maiden, sitting on the left side of the king. He could not take his eyes away from her, as she smiled and returned his gaze with deep intensity.

Her name, Halil was to discover, was Tanusha and she was the King's beloved daughter.

Peace and harmony were restored to the borders between Jutbina and Krale that very evening, as Halil and Muj bid their hosts good evening, but a part of Halil's heart was left a long way from Jutbina, there in the King's palace...

## *Omer*

In the months that passed the King honoured his pledge to stay away from Jutbina. The highest hilltops and mountain passes, once prized for their strategic positions, were for the first time in living memory abandoned by the brave Tsheta soldiers, to the wildness.

Muj ordered his men to spend more time hunting, fishing, singing and, at last, enjoying themselves after the years of fighting and vigilance. The men took to their new duties with added vigour.

The soldiers were not the only men to take advantage of better times and the brothers Muj and Halil could often be found hunting together, high in the highlands from dawn until nightfall. Such time together unhurried and undisturbed by crisis, made them close, as brothers should be.

Then one day they bickered over nothing more important than a fox and it served them both right, for their minds were full of indulgences. They had been hunting and were having lunch with Ajkuna, who placed before them a marvellous spread of home cooked food.

"In the woods today, Ajkuna, we saw a fox the likes I had never seen before." cried Halil, popping a dark green olive into his mouth, as he spoke. "It had the most beautiful

pelt of long, fair fur, that I had ever seen and I wanted so much to kill it for you, so that I could make a fox hat for you to keep warm in winter. But, alas, dear sister. It drank beside the spring and for that moment I was filled with pity. I was waiting to shoot it, just after it had finished at the water's edge, but the rascal raised its head, as if it had caught my thoughts. I took aim, but before I had a chance to strike, it washed its bushy tail and darted away."

"Darted away, indeed!" scoffed Muj. "I have seen tortoises run faster!" he continued his tease.

"Do not tease, brother, for the fox raced like the wind, after it wet its tail and drank its fill." cried Halil.

"I saw very well, Halil and I say to you it did not wet its tail.

"It did!"

"It didn't!"

"Yes it did, Muj, don't argue!"

"No, Halil, it didn't!" came Muj's reply and so it continued, until their words became a serious quarrel, loud and with hurtful recriminations.

Eventually their mother came between them to return the peace.

"Well, well my sons, has your bravery amounted too little, more than a vanity. Honest and brave you are, these qualities are not in question, but if you really want to know who is the best, I will set you a trial and then it will be settled." said lady mother as she placed her crooked hands upon their shoulders, where they were seated. "Take your horses and ride to the Dry Highlands of the East. You will find precious little to eat, for the hunting is poor and water to drink is scarce beyond belief. Whichever of you last the longest without food, water or rest; he shall be the bravest between you."

The brothers looked at each other with knowing smiles, for they were equal sure of their own success and twice as willing to prove their worth. This was sibling rivalry at its worst.

They shook hands, feasted, until they thought they would explode, then climbed upon their horses and left for the Dry Highland far away. All night long they rode, guided by the stars, which shone clear above their heads. Over hills and through deep valley gullies they rode, heading as far to the East, as the high terrain would allow. Just before dawn, when the night wore her darkest cloak and the shadowy forests were as black as coal, the two men climbed an escarpment one thousand feet high.

It was bitterly cold, when they drew their robes tightly around their shivering bodies and yet in the still blankness of night not a sound could be heard. Then slowly, so very slowly the sun began to rise across the desert horizon, far below them and the shadows gave way to the rocks, to boulders and all living from that could be found in the desert. A scattering of acacia bushes began to appear out of the darkness and the light brought forth a multitude of natural delight, of which the brothers had never seen before, as the sun painted her vast horizon fire, red at first, then magenta and finally gold.

"Brother" cried Halil, "If I die in this desert, it would have worth every second to see such sunrise."

"Let us descend onto the plain." said Muj quietly.

For three days and nights they wandered with their horses, foraging for food and water, they knew could not exist in such harsh surroundings. Another three days past and then another, until at dawn on the tenth day Halil cried out a loud,

“It is too much for me, brother, and the heat has stolen my spirit to live. If we cannot find water today, I will slaughter my horse and drink its blood.”

Muj was as desperate to give up as his brother, but held out for a few minutes more. Breathlessly he cried out with joy to the hollow sands around him,

“Who is the strongest of us then, brother?”

“You are Muj,” replied Halil too tired to care. “So hurry up, for I am dying of thirst.”

“We shall raise now Halil and make haste to the Yellow Troughs. For I am parched, also.”

In a second they mounted their horses, weakened with thirst and trotted back to the safety and abundance of the lands they knew as home. In the Yellow Troughs the grass grew tall and luscious, the springs erupted from the rocks, in such numbers that you could barely travel a mile or two, before arriving to another one.

At last they reached the first spring and they drank non-stop for three hours, until it was dry... So full of water they became and quite contented that they found a shady place, lay down upon the ground and fell soundly asleep.

They were like rocks still and silent and unaware of the dangers that lay around them. For the Krake king, whose name was Vuk Harambash, who had become stronger and bold during the time of established peace, broke his faithfully promise to the people of Jutbina and came hunting in their highlands, uninvited with many soldiers to accompany him.

To his delight, he discovered his enemies asleep and in an instant they were bound with chains and taken back to the Krake, where they were thrown into the deepest dungeon, far beneath the ground. There was no natural light to be found anywhere, only torches, made of birch, soaked in bee-wax, which flickered and smoked outside their cell.

The two brothers were distressed by the stupidity and folly, but thankful that they had each other for company. One night Halil said to his brother,

“No matter that the king has broken his faith, for these heathen people know nothing of its true meaning and importance. No matter, brother, that we languish in jail suffering this way, but my heart hurts, for there are no men-folk at home to take care of Ajkuna and our lady mother.”

Even in the squalid darkness of their cell, Halil stared at his brother’s face and saw through in the shiny glint of his eyes a deepening sorrow.

“I pray to God, Halil, that soon we will be reunited with them. For Ajkuna carries my first child and she needs me beside her to care and to protect her. I have dreamt of a son these past nights and, if we are blessed, his name shall be Omer. When he is seven years old, he will learn to be a man and rescue us from this hell. For it is his destiny, I can feel it in my soul.” said Muj quietly.

The months passed and indeed Ajkuna gave birth to a strong and handsome baby boy. He flourished and grew so quickly, that many village folk believed him to be the son of a giant and not a mere mortal. Ajkuna just smiled and watched him through proud eyes, as he grew stronger day by day.

The seasons passed and, as the years flew by, no word was ever heard of the two brothers, imprisoned in the Krale castle. Many had long given up hope of ever seeing their leader again and went about their lives as usual.

When Omer was seven years old, you would have been surprised to find him so big, for he could easily have been mistaken for a child of fourteen years or more. Not just in size, but in thoughts as well, for his mind was clever, agile and incessantly questioning of all the wonders of this world.

His mother, Ajkuna taught him many good things and entrusted him with shepherding their flocks of sheep and goats, high on the Yellow Trough pastures. One day he returned triumphantly.

“Look, mother!” he cried. “I chased and caught you a hare for our supper tonight, now that I am the man of the house.”

Looking at her son Ajkuna smiled, for he was brave and strong just like his father and she loved him more deeply for it. He was getting to an age however, when he knew, that he was different from the other children in Jutbina, for they had fathers to teach them how to hunt, to fight and learn the ways of men. One day, tired after herding the family goats, he returned to his house and asked his mother,

“For the sake of our Lord, did I have a father and an uncle also or maybe, I was abandoned as a baby in the brier brushes, where you found me?”

Ajkuna stroked his head, for she had anticipated this question and spoke softly to him.

“Yes, my son, you had a good father and an uncle, too. Your father was called Muj and your uncle Halil; they were the bravest men of Jutbina. But they died in the year you were born and having you grown up in your father’s likeness, is the greatest comfort I could ask for.”

She did not wish to tell her son the truth, for she felt, he was much too young to understand.

“Look here, Omer.” she continued. “I have your uncle’s spyglass in his old trunk which you are sitting upon.”

Immediately Omer leapt to his feet and effortlessly lifted up the heavy lid above his head, as his mother retrieved the glass stored securely in its travel box. Omer drew his spyglass first to his left eye and then to his right, as he scanned the mountains and the green pastures that encircled the courtyard.

“Mother!” he cried excitedly. “What is that white thing up on the hillside? Could it be an avalanche or maybe white stones, dislodged by the mountain streams, or perhaps a flock of white sheep that have strayed from their master?”

“No my son, they are the brave men’s Tsheta, warriors of Jutbina, protecting our lands from the Krale people. Your father was the leader and Halil one of the most respected soldiers amongst them.”

Omer was suddenly gripped with courage and conviction and without a word he ran to the stable to saddle the horse.

“What are you doing?” cried Ajkuna.

“Mother, I must meet with these warriors immediately, for I am my father’s son. I will take father’s horse and his sword also to protect me, and these brave men of Jutbina will teach me to fight and I will become one of them.”

Ajkuna held her counsel, because the Tsheta's warriors had offended her. They had done nothing to free her husband and brother-in-law during the last seven long years and rightly so she felt her son worthy of better and more courageous mentors. But she, too, had misled her son and could not persuade him otherwise.

Seeing that he was so insistent, Ajkuna gave her son Halil's suit of armour. Halil, though strong, was not a big man and, to their astonishment, it fitted Omer perfectly. She gave him Muj's sword and the white horse, which had been her husband's pride and joy.

Spirited and strong, Ajkuna was afraid that the beast would be too wilful for such a young protégé, but the horse stood perfectly still, its head proudly arched and its bride eyes glistening in the short milky rays of the winter sunlight. Once the horse was saddled, Omer tried very hard to jump up upon its back, but the horse stood sixteen hands high and was far too tall.

"If you are my father's horse," cried Omer, "You must kneel, so that I can mount your back."

The horse looked defiantly at the boy, whose head barely reached its shoulder blades. Omer glared at him and, for a second, nothing happened, then suddenly, as if they had read each other's mind, the horse knelt on the cobblestones and Omer jumped on to its back with ease and trotted out of the courtyard towards the highlands.

Up in the highlands the horse's great hooves could be heard echoing across the mountain cliffs, towards the Tsheta warriors. Finally, after a time, Omer and the great white stallion appeared before them and the men were astounded to see this young rider with such control.

He dismounted and greeted them. There was no answer. In their silence, Zook stood up to make room for Omer to sit amongst them. Omer bent a glance to each and every face around him, and then he spoke in bold voice, his breath captured in the frozen mist.

"Is it anger or envy, which prevents you from greeting me? You may know who I am, but if you do not, I tell you that I am Omer, Gjeto Basho Muj's son, who is neither, frightened of you nor our enemies, the Krale people."

The brave men of Jutbina looked at each other, then down at the ground, so that it was hard for Omer to read their faces. They were amazed, but in their pride they would not allow a young boy to see such emotion, for Omer's words were those of a man and not of a child. He was, indeed, the portrait of his father in words, as well as looks and it was impossible for each and every warrior not to feel kindness to someone who so closely resembled their brave leader.

One of them, tapping his stick upon the frozen ground to gather their attention, spoke,

"If you are as brave as you say you are, Omer and are willing to fight our enemies, should you not go to the Krale castle and free your father and uncle from the dungeons, where they have languished these past seven years? During this time they have lived in the same clothes they were captured in, their beards have grown long enough to drag along the floor and neither man has seen the precious sun that gives us life. What existence they must have, I shudder to imagine."



On hearing these words Omer was shocked and surprised at his mother's deceit. He stood up and, without another word to the assembled group, he jumped upon his horse and galloped back home, where his mother was feeding the livestock in the stables.

"Tell me, my son, how did the brave men Tsheta receive you?" Ajkuna enquired.

"You tell me, mother, for I am a child not a man and as such, you should breast feed me at once."

Anger erupted across his young face, as his mother tried to calm him, but he would have none of this, as he pushed her away and turned to attend to his horse. Ajkuna placed the poultry-meal upon the cobblestones and walked quietly around the horse's mighty quarters, so that she could stand face to face with him. Omer unbuckled the girth and, stretching up, he gently pulled his heavy saddle into his outstretched arms. It was immensely heavy and for a moment he stumbled backwards beneath its weight, before placing it upon a bale of straw inside the tack store.

"Come on mother, why do you not take me to your breast as a child, for if I was a man, you could have told me the truth about my father and uncle Halil. It is plain to see that the brave men of Jutbina have discovered I did not know the truth." he shouted at her with frustration and wounded pride.

"Come, come, my son, for I love you more than the words I could ever say. You are a man now and with everyday that passes, I grow more proud at your accomplishments. It is right I held the truth from you, for it was better that you did not know whilst a child and not yet full of understanding. But you are a man now and all that the brave men told is true and I am ashamed that I deceived you in such a way. Twice they tried to rescue your father and uncle, but they were beaten back and now consider the protection of the highlands their greatest priority. It is their wish."

Omer looked at his mother and then at the far away hills. He said not a word, but turned on his heels and went to his house alone. For two days and nights he ate nothing, nor slept or drank, so deep was he in his thoughts.

Just after midnight on the second eve, he dressed himself in winter robes and went outside, where the shadow-less mantle of nightfall filled his lungs with a cool expectation. The stars had exploded across the sky and were suspended in time now, filling heaven and earth with a sense of infinite freedom and wonderment. Was God trying to tell him something he pondered, for this night was like no other he could remember. He was free and this thought filled his heart with bitter anguish for his father, who had no such luxury. It was time to settle the score.

High in the mountains he listened to the wolf cry echoing through the Yellow Trough pastures and stared out from the courtyard to this nightly call. In the distance two lights, no larger than a pinhead, seemed to float above the ground. He rubbed his eyes, but when he looked again, to his astonishment they had drawn closer to him. He was not frightened, but filled with curiosity, as they continued towards his home. Out in the courtyard stood a linden-tree. The two lights suddenly stopped and seemed to rest upon one of the branches.

Without concern for his safety Omer walked straight to the tree and peered up at the lights, which he soon discovered were two fairies, immersed in deep conversation with each another.

He cleared his voice and offered them a courteous bow of his head. They smiled at him and gestured for him to come closer to where they were seated. To this day nobody knows what was discussed between the three of them, but next morning Omer knew exactly what he had to do.

Just before dawn he crept into his mother's room and gently awoke her.

"Mother!" he whispered. "I need your help, for this time is of the essence. Please, help me to dress as a pauper gypsy beggar, in ragged clothes and with filthy hands and face. I will need my pipe, my lute and a bag full of food."

Ajkuna without another word rose from her bed and prepared everything he asked for. She would not try to stop him, though she knew all too well of the dangers that lay ahead. She kissed his forehead and gave him a final hug that was so tight he could barely breathe. Then she walked back to the doorway, her elegant steps full of pride pausing only to wave her son farewell, as he took swiftly to his father's horse, turned his nose to the East and galloped away. The only sound to be heard was the clatter of hooves, trailing defiantly into the distance.

Omer had many miles to ride and his journey would take every second that the day would allow. His horse was swift and sure-footed, taking the streams with a single leap and the mountain passes at a brisk canter.

By nightfall with the last rays of winter sunlight, caressing his aching and dust-beaten back, Omer guided his horse into a forest, only a mile or so from the Krale city. The horse was securely tied and hidden beside a sparkling stream with luscious pasture nearby.

Though Omer was exhausted, he took his pipe out of his heavy nap-sack and headed towards the city gates in search of an audience. As he entered the busy streets, he hovered like a fragile butterfly outside each and every door that he passed. He played his sweet music so beautifully, that people from every corner peered out from their balconies and shop-doorways to listen and marvel, praising him with coins, with food, with wine and kind words. His music filled their hearts with joy and a peaceful feeling, as they took to their beds for the night and told their friends of the beautiful sound they had heard.

Omer returned to the forest to spend the night in hiding with the horse. The following day he headed back to the city and made such an impression with his growing audience, that he was brought before the king, Vuk Harambash, at the palace high on the hill. In the great hall of the castle Omer sang his gypsy songs to the King with all his heart. The King was mesmerised by the richness and range of his voice, one moment it was light and as spring-like as birdsong and another moment it was deep and intensely melancholy, lamenting each word of a sentimental ballad.

On the second day he returned and sang once more to Vuk Harambash, whose affectionate admiration he had won with his remarkable talent. On the third day the king invited his two sons, the same age as Omer, to join them in the great hall. They were twins and identical in every way, from the rich, fine clothes that they wore, to their faces, which were fair skinned and open. They both had blue eyes and a mop of curly blond hair, tied back behind their necks, such was the custom.

"Come to our courtyard, gypsy boy and sing to us." they told him.

“No, I am but a poor beggar and I cannot go into such a beautiful part of palace, for I fear that someone might see and beat me with sticks or their fists, then boot me out onto the street.” Omer replied.

The twins looked at each other. Disappointment was plainly visible on their young faces.

“This is the King’s palace and we are his sons. Come into the courtyard, boy, for we would all like to play and no one will dare to beat you without our permission.” insisted the first son.

“What kind young men you are!” Omer flattered them. “But, please, bring me a little food and water to drink, for I have not eaten since yesterday. I will sing songs for you and tell you wonderful tales you have never dreamt of. I will teach you gypsy games and magic tricks, that will make your friends envious, but all of these things we would enjoy much more in the forest, were my words will have truer meaning to you both”

The brothers looked at each other. The confines of the palace had always been the only problem for the royal heirs. Living such a life of ease and luxury had its downfalls. Omer suggested that they change into the oldest and the most worn-out clothes they could find, disgusting themselves as street children and then to meet him at the palace gate. Away ran the twins in their excitement and enthusiasm and very shortly afterwards they met Omer outside the palace. Breathlessly they smiled, for it felt good to be part of this great adventure.

Omer began to tell them “gypsy” fairytales that he made up as he went along. The boys hung on every word he spoke, listened with great earnest to his singing.

“What is this song you sing, gypsy beggar?” they asked him. “It seems so sad.”

“I journey from place to place around the world, for gypsies are travellers, as you know, sons of the King. But this song I learnt from a place on the other side of the highlands, called Jutbina. Have you heard of this place?”

“Yes.” replied one of them. “My father is proud to announce that Jutbina’s two bravest men he has captured and they have been his prisoners here for seven long years.”

With these words Omer went scarlet with rage, but he kept his counsel for fear of causing suspicion amongst his new and trusting friends. They continued to walk, as Omer spun a fairytale of magical stories together, that his mother had taught him, when he was a baby...

Neither twin brother took much notice of time or the distance that they had drifted away from the palace gates, as they stared at Omer and conjured in their own imaginations, a vision of all that their host spoke of.

Omer gave them freedom that they had never before experienced and it made them drunk with delight. Everything before this time had been predetermined in their short lives. What to say, what to do, where to play, what to wear, how to live. There had been no room for childish fantasy and yet it seemed perverse, that a mere gipsy boy should be given such a natural talent and opportunity to use his imagination, to sing, to story tale and to laugh without restriction and in doing so, to share it with others.

Suddenly as they stood in the wooden glade, a chill descended upon the first brother and he shuddered.

“It goes cold, brother, we should return to the palace.”

“Yes for sure.” replied Omer, “But we have played hard today and you should refresh yourselves at the spring nearby, before returning to the castle. If your mother saw that you were tired, she would not permit you to play with me again, tomorrow.”

The brothers were contended with Omer’s proposal and ran to the spring with eagerness, but to their horror, they discovered that Omer had tricked them and bound them tightly to a tree, so that they could not move. Aloud they cried, until the tops of the trees shuddered with their anguish. Omer tried desperately to calm and console them, but they would not listen, so he threatened them, which soon did the trick.

“I tell you, sons of Harambash, if you will not be silent, I shall throw you both to the abyss and you will cry no more.” He united their feet and keeping their hands bound together, he tied them upon the stallion’s saddle and the three of them rode at lightening speed back to Jutbina.

There the terrified brothers were held prisoners, as his father and uncle had been in Krale. With Ajkuna’s help Omer drafted a letter to the King, which was dispatched that very night and this was what it said.

*Oh Krale King,*

*No doubt that the disappearance of your sons has caused you grave concern. I beg you, do not trouble yourself. They are well cared for, fed and watered in far better conditions than Muj and Halil can expect from your hospitality. If you love your sons, you will do as I instruct and swallow your pride, that their lives may be spared. Release the brave prisoners Muj and Halil within the next three days, or I will have no other choice, but to send what is left of your young heirs back to you in a bag.*

*As you have made your bed, so must you lie in it.*

*Signed*

*Omer*

Meanwhile back in Krale every last man, woman and child was out searching for the king’s precious sons. They looked in the woods, in the caves, in the abyss, on the pastures and anyway else they could think of, but still there was no sign of them.

The King had taken himself to his chamber, where prying eyes could not see his distress, as he cried out aloud and tore the hair roots from his head. He was full of a foreboding sense of disaster at the thought of losing his sons and heirs.

His daughter Tanusha he loved with all his heart, but she was merely a maiden and as such was not thought so highly to govern the Krale Kingdom. (How things have changed!)

Omer’s letter arrived the very next morning. The King, who had not slept one moment’s peace that night was filled with temporary relief. His sons were safe but for how long, in the ruthless hands of these Albanians?

He racked his brains for several hours, wondering desperately what to do with Omer’s ultimatum. In the end, he had rubbed his sore eyes and scratched his head so

much, that it began to bleed and he knew that he would resist himself to the only option available. He had to release his prisoners and within the day.

Down into the dungeons he marched. The rank smell of decay all around him, the filthy walls, the gloomy darkness, the stench of death and finally his captives, Muj and Halil, still alive and to remind his wickedness.

Bewildered by this unexpected royal arrival, the jailer trembled in his boots and fumbled clumsily with the key to their cell. The king was so wound up, that he shouted and scolded the poor man's stupidity and incompetence.

"Get away from the door, you imbecile!" he barked.

The king opened the door and walked straight into the cell, where he found his prisoners, Muj and Halil sitting quite contentedly upon the floor. They turned their heads towards him, but showed him no courtesy by rising to their feet. Their faces were covered with thick dark whiskers, cascading down to the ground. The hair had grown long and matted and hung from their necks like a willow tree. They were filthy dirty, but the clearest spirit in their eyes could not be hidden, for they soon realised, that Vuk Harambash was in trouble.

The king cleared his throat, bent a glance towards them and said abruptly.

"I want your faith."

The brothers looked at each other and with utter contempt at the king, standing before them in the shadowy darkness.

"Can a leopard change its spots?" asked Muj to his brother.

"Surely it cannot." answered Halil

"I say to you again, prisoners, I want your faith!" commanded the king, having no other words to use.

"Krale King." replied Muj calmly, "We gave you our faith once before, but, because you are without decency, you never understand its importance and now it is lost to you. You had better tell us, what the matter is."

The king sighed.

"A certain mister Omer has kidnapped my sons and will kill them, if I do not meet his demands. I need your faith that you will not allow him to murder them, if I allow you to return to Jutbina."

The brothers smiled at each other, it was hard not to laugh, for this was a serious matter for the poor King.

"Krale King, we cannot give you our faith, because this matter belongs in Omer's pocket, not ours. I am sorry to say, that it is up to you to decide, how to save your sons from this dreadful tyrant. I am pretty sure, that his appetite for revenge is so great, that he would eat you from house and home." replied Halil, trying not to smile.

"Who is this Omer and where did he spring from? Until this day I have never heard of him."

Muj fixed his eyes upon the King sternly and replied,

"You must never think that Jutbina would be put down by your cruelty to my brother and me. Always there will be born a man, who will grow up to be braver and stronger than Muj and Halil. It is none of our business now, o' King. Very soon he will storm your castle and raze it to the ground, leaving nothing but ashes."

The King had hoped too much for their faith and he was powerless to their refusal. For a moment he paused surveying the filth and degradation around him. He had treated these men far worse than any animal and for a moment, he was filled with dread now, that his enemies had turned the tables upon him. In a low voice and with great reluctance he said.

“Muj and Halil, you are free now to return to your homeland. I will not stop you.”

“How shall we get out of this terrible place with our beards and hair so long, we would scare the small children away?” Muj enquired. He could not resist his quest to upset the King further.

Vuk Harambash rubbed his hands across his face in an exasperated manner.

“Bring here the court barbers to cut off their pitiful hair and make them respectful in front of the townsfolk. Feed them and send them out, as soon as possible.”

The barbers scurried into the grim dungeon cell as fast as all the equipment they were carrying, would carry them. With sharp scissors and razors they swiftly and expertly cut away seven years of grown and built a fire in the corridor to destroy the hair, which filled the air with rancid smell almost, as dreadful as the clothes Muj and Halil had lived in all this time. The prisoners were escorted to the court-bathing chamber and, for the very first time in many years, they washed and scrubbed themselves, until their new skin glowed with colour and vitality once more.

They sang heartily, as their hosts begrudgingly gave them fresh clothes to wear and burnt what pieces of cloth they had existing in, down by the stream. When they were ready, Vuk Harambash, who had become as meek as a lamb, said in a humble voice to the brothers.

“I have kept my side of the bargain; have the kindness to send home my sons safe and sound.”

Neither Muj nor Halil replied, but turned on their heels and walked away.

The morning was fresh and clear; the air tasted and frosted alpine woodlands, freeze dried by the previous nightly plummet, leaving everything in its path petrified by frost. On their journey the brothers could barely contain their excitement and overwhelming joy.

As brave Albanian warriors, nothing matter more to them than freedom. The sight of the buzzards, soaring above their heads, white foxes, darting through the undergrowth, their bushy brush tails sweeping through the bracken and pine corns, suspended from their branches, filled their hearts with incalculable happiness.

As they walked, Halil laughed out loud, trying to picture the “dreadful Omer” in his mind. Muj, too, was thinking of his brave son and longed to set his eyes upon him for the first time. Eventually they arrived back at their home and were filled with such a motion, that for a moment they stood silently looking down at the house from the mountain path.

“Before we go in, brother, I want to set my son a task.” whispered Muj, his words billowing mist as he spoke.

Ajkuna saw them first in the courtyard and ran to them, her arms flung up to embrace them as tight as she could, for she was overcome with joy. Muj stepped across the threshold and placing his index finger to his mouth, he gestured for the puzzled

Ajkuna to keep silent. He took up the sword, lying close to the door and climbed the stairs to Omer's room, where he was playing with the young princes of Krale.

Without another word he burst the door open and rushed at the princes, brandishing his sword. In a twinkling, Omer was up on his feet and pulling the sword from his father's hand.

"How dare you, stranger, attack my guests. If you try to attack them again, I will be forced to kill you." shouted Omer defiantly, his blue eyes blazing with anger.

"Do you not know me, my son?" laughed Muj. "I am the host of this house and if I am not mistaken, your father also. And these are not your guests but prisoners."

"So much the worse, if you are my father." replied Omer. "They are my guests, for our bread lines their stomachs, as I speak."

Muj took the sword from his son's hand, placed it in the sheath, smiled and threw his arms around his neck. In his father's smile and beneath his mighty shadow Omer was overcome with his own realisation and the tenderness of his father's love for him. Maybe, for the first time in his life, a tear fell from Muj's face and splattered proudly against the stone floor.

...The princes were returned to their homelands and peace was once again returned to the people of Jutbina. They say that Omer loved his father very, very much, but more often he took his counsel with his uncle Halil.

## *Halil's Marriage*

Winter. Too much the sun shines, but too little it warms...

A biting wind howls through the Jutbina's trees. From the lowest to the highest peaks the mountains are clothed in deep, impenetrable snow. The top layer of melt-water, repeatedly frozen after each new snowfall, becomes layered like trunk of a majestic tree. The slightest noise can cause an avalanche to sweep down its precarious nest to flatten everything in its path, without prejudice to animal, tree or human life. Icicles hover like sleeping bats in their caves.

All the rivers have frozen, too. The springs the waterfalls are suspended in a lattice of unbelievable beauty curved by nature and preserved by the season. Neither has

the seashore escaped the grip of winter, nor the pebbles upon the beach, which have shuttered, because the frost has prized them open like a chisel.

As the brave men Tsheta return from their patrol, they, too, are covered in a thick blanketed of fresh snowflakes, until one man cannot be distinguished from the other. The icy wind beats upon their faces and their heads are held low against the bitter storm. Finally they reach Jutbina and with good heart Muj invites them into his home to refresh themselves with Ajkuna's excellent hospitality.

In the hearth Omer builds the finest log fire, the smell of burning alpine fills the men's lungs with familiar contentment. Jugs of wine and bottles of raki (strong alcoholic drink) are brought to the table, which groans contentedly beneath the weight of countless food bowls. The house soon fills with laughter and singing beneath Ajkuna's smile.

Later that night one of the warriors asked to speak with Muj in confidence.

"Please, Muj, do not misunderstand me, when I say my truth, for it is with concern that I speak. We are your friends and our loyalty to you and Halil is not in question."

"Say what it is in your heart, for I would not hold that against you." Muj replied.

The man cleared his throat for, it was full of nervousness.

"Why is Halil still not married? His friends are all married of old and blessed with many children who play with him and love him as much as we do."

"This is true!" came another voice. "Halil should be married. It is said that he spends much of his free time in the Krale City, but I fear that he is playing with a wrong card and it won't be long before someone discovers his identity and kills him. Can he not find a wife amongst the pretty maidens of Jutbina?"

"God bless, men!" replied Muj. "For it is just my sorrow also. I look forward to it, for I would arrange such a wedding that has never been seen before. I have heard many times of his visits to Krale. I know my brother well enough to believe he is neither disloyal or of bad blood, but to move as secretly as he does, is not good for moral and it is dishonest to hide his wishes from us, especially to abide with our sworn enemies. If he is to disgrace us, let a thunderbolt strike him down and may the grave throw him out on the first night he is buried."

Halil sat quietly beside the fire and in earshot of Muj's words. At first he hung his head in shame, and then he raised it, meeting Muj's gaze and saying,

"Brothers! As the good men of the Tsheta think of me only in generous heart, for I am full of sorrow. All the fair ladies of Jutbina I love, but as sisters only, for I love another and would rather die than not be married to the Krale King's daughter, Tanusha."

His eyes were full of sadness and a sense of relief that at last, he did not have to lie.

"I met her many years ago, when we were first at peace with the Krale King. To me no girl beneath the sun is more beautiful and everything about her fills me with love. Her eyebrows are like willows sweeping towards the water's edge, as they part at the forehead. Her eyes are like shiny cherries, rich in the colour of ochre. Her eyelashes are like swallows wings soaring away to the setting sun, her face is the blushing autumn apple ripening in late September and her beautiful mouth is a spring snowdrop bursting into flower. How can I live without her?"

Halil wanted to continue his narration, but Muj thought it was better to interrupt him, for he was making the men uncomfortable with his blatant display of an emotion, but Basho Jona, an elder and respected warrior, said calmly.



“Let Halil continue, Muj. I am an old yet single man, who never married. I had friends, I had money, I knew many girls and, for the first time in my life, I am opening up my heart to you, so, please, listen. I was a young man. I, too, had loved a pretty maiden more beautiful than words can say. But her parents disapproved of our union and she was wed against her will to another. Very soon after that she died and, from the heartache this brought me, I have never thought to find a wife again.”

“This is not the time to tell us old stories, Basho Jona.” scolded the grumpy old man Dizdar Aga and, turning to Halil, he continued, “The heart is heart and the head is head, Halil. Be mindful not to lose it. Change your mind, young warrior, for Vuk Harambash is our sworn enemy and if he caught you in Krale, once more you would find yourself in jail and he would have an excuse to attack our lands. Chose a pretty Jutbina girl and all will be well.”

Many of the assembled warriors agreed shaking their heads in approval, but Halil insisted.

“Yes, Dizdar Aga, you speak the truth and the head is indeed the head, but the heart is not made of stone. Once I have sworn for the sake of God, who reigns in the sky, sea and earth and there is no going back. I will not marry another, only Tanusha. If she cannot be my wife, I will marry the ground and the stones, this is my secret and you can think what you like.”

The room was silent with only the sound of wood crackling in the hearth. Halil turned his head to the highlands and flung open the door.

“Damn you o highlands!” he cried aloud. “You are worn so deep with snow, that to leave me no footpath to guide me to my love. If I were powerful, I would command the sea to come here and melt away the snow, so that I may pass. As for you, men, I leave you with your gossiping, for it is time to return to Krale, where my love waits for me.”

The highlands heard every word that Halil shouted to them and they began to rumble and shake.

The sea heard Halil’s cries and sent a warm coastal wind to melt the mountain peaks and shake the snow caps from their nests, as avalanche after avalanche tumbled down the mountainsides into the abyss.

After three thunderous days all the snow melted away and flowed through the mountain streams and rivers to the sea, where it was drowned and forgotten. It seemed that spring had come unexpectedly soon to the people, as the children played along the tree-lined streets and listened to the continual drip-drop of melt water, splattering from the branches onto the cobblestones below.

The trees had burst into leaf, the children had taken to the streets to play and Halil announced to his brother that he would be returning to Krale immediately.

“Give me your horse, Muj, for it is time to fetch Tanusha” Halil said firmly.

“No, brother, I won’t give it and I won’t let you go.”

Halil was so moved with sorry and anger at his brother’s refusal that he took another horse anyway and fled to the mountains. Ajkuna reproached Muj for allowing him to go alone saying,

“Did you not give him your horse? I will haunt you to the day you die, if something should happen to him and you would deserve such punishment.”

Muj immediately gathered up his favourite white stallion, which could easily pace out Halil's mount, turned its proud head to the mountains and galloped away. Very soon he caught up with Halil and cried to him to stop at once.

"Wait Halil! Take my horse and be blessed, but most importantly be careful."

In such a moment as this Halil was stunned by his brother's kindness and trust for he had expected a most fierce rapprochement. Without a word the two men dismounted, embraced each other and set their new horses to their respective destinations.

For Halil this was easy. There was nowhere else he wanted to be than at Tanusha side in Krale, but for Muj, his heart was in turmoil, for his instincts told him to protect his brother at all costs, but his family also.

The heels of his great stallion splattered through the mud, painting the ground with rich, brown splashes far into the distance and Muj was left alone to consider the fate of his beloved brother.

By the day the sun promised to protect Halil from danger and by the night the moon pledged his protection also.

"We shall protect him, we shall protect him!" whispered strange voices, as Halil continued his journey.

"Who are you, identify yourselves at once!" he cried out into the wind, but there was no answer.

So he continued his journey through lowland fields and pastures, until finally he came upon a river, fast flowing and crystal clear, where he watered his, great stallion and sat beside its treacherous, steep-sloping banks. The sun shone, casting long ebony fingers across the barren field of winter stubble, camouflaging Halil from prying eyes. As he surveyed his bleak surrounding, he tried to imagine it in springtime and he concluded that, dressed in the precious colours of lilac, daffodil, snowdrop and riotous flurry of pansies, this place could not be equalled in beauty.

Suddenly he spied a young woman, no more than a few hundred feet away from his own place. Feeling brave and not wishing to appear ill-mannered, he rose to his feet and approached the woman, but on closer inspection, he discovered she was a fairy.

"Where are you going, Halil?" she whispered.

"To Krale." he replied unable to prevent himself for saying these words. "But how did you know my name?"

"Many times I have watched you high upon the Yellow Trough pastures, as the summer breeze gathers up my dearest wishes into the air and along the tops of the high grass towards you, though you would never know it. When the sea of pasture rolls like the ocean waves around your feet, that it me bathing you with my love. And when you hear the boom of eagle's wings beating the sky above your head, as she flies to her eerie high in the treetops, that is me watching over you at all times. For, Halil, there is no human I hold in higher esteem. But I do know that a fairy cannot marry a human and that is that."

Halil looked with astonishment at the beautiful yet somehow fragile young fairy-maiden, standing so proudly in front of him. Not for a moment taking his eyes from her glowing face, she continued.

"Halil, see the large fields across the river."

He nodded.

“You must lead your horse through it and out into the pastures behind. Lo you will find a wood and in a clearing, not so far from here, you will discover two large white tents, where three hundred maidens are enjoying camp together. Behind the white tents you will find the biggest tent, which is red and decorated in the royal standard and coat of arm of the Krale King. There you will find the one you are looking for, but be careful, Halil, for the King’s soldiers guard her day and night.”

Suddenly the fairy-maiden vanished, her light disappearing into the mountains, fading away as quickly as she had bravely appeared.

Halil looked up towards the mountains and gave a silent thanks to his fairy friend, for he knew her courage came at a price. Slowly he gathered up his stallion’s bridal reins and they forded the river together. Within seconds of stepping into the icy glacial water, Halil’s boots filled with melt-water and his legs went numb with cold.

Each step they took was more treacherous than the first, as the shiny pebbles beneath their feet were clothed in a thick coat of green, slippery algae. They stumbled and Halil tumbled into the water up to his waist, as he slipped and fell to his knees. The brave stallion however held his head so proudly and strong, that Halil was able to pull himself up, holding tightly to the reins, so that he could not be swept away. Finally horse and rider staggered up the steep bank on the far side and were so exhausted, they nearly collapsed to the ground. Breathlessly Halil stood in front of his horse and gave him a hearty slap of thanks along his magnificent neck and the stallion whinnied his reply.

They crossed the field together and made camp on the outskirts of the forest Halil desperately needed to dry his clothes and feel his senses return to his limbs. Later that afternoon Halil left the white stallion and crossed the forest, until he came to the camp. It was a magnificent sight with hundreds of maidens dancing, singing and playing fine music to each other, as the grumpy guards looked on. He returned to his own camp, ate supper with his loyal stallion and waited for nightfall.

Darkness fell around him, as thick as treacle, for the forest absorbed each precious ray of light like blotting paper. The mountain nightingales, whose sweet voices filled the night air with a magical sound, paused and asked one other, where the moon had gone.

The wild she-goats replied.

“You should wait for a while, sweet nightingales, though it is no business of yours to know, but continue your singing and do not concern yourselves with the moon. Tonight the moon is busy escorting someone on his way.”

Now that it was night and the moon well hidden from the view, Halil ventured once more to the camp. It was easy to creep secretly passed the guards, as he stepped silently from one tent to the next. The red tent was more than twenty paces away, but there were three guards present and he knew, his only chance to enter the tent undetected, was at midnight, when the guards changed watch. The minutes crept by like hours, as he sat on the dry forest tinder watching them about their business.

Finally his chance appeared, as the guards walked away and the voices of their replacement could be heard coming from the guard tent. Swift as an eagle, Halil crept beneath the base of the tent and stood in front of sleeping Tanusha, his face full of love and devotion.

“Sweet Tanusha,” he whispered, “If I have but one moment alone with you this night before my capture, it will have been worth it.”

With these words Tanusha stirred, and then slowly her beautiful eyes began to blink open and focus upon this stranger before her.

At first she did not recognise him, for he wore a thick winter robe about his body, then he smiled and she leapt to her feet and threw her arms around him, holding him so tight with all her strength.

“Halil is really you?” she cried in a low voice, her body trembling in his arms.

“Yes it is I, my sweet love and never again shall we be parted.” he said stroking her hair.

He pulled the sword from its sheath and cast a look outside the tent. The night owl called his lugubrious cry across the treetops, but the camp slept on soundly around him and even the guards could not be found.

Tanusha took Halil’s hand and lead him into her dressing chamber, where rows upon rows of pretty dresses were lined up in front of them. She scratched her temple and eyed Halil with a thoughtful gaze.

“This should fit you, my brave Halil, it’s your colour as well!” she smiled handing him a beautiful velvet blue dress, embroidered with gold. Halil blushed.

“You see, my love, if my father finds you here, he will kill us both. But if I disguise you as my lady-in-waiting, we can spend as much as we like together.”

The next morning a most beautiful and haunting melody rose up from the river’s edge, as the sun crested the treetops and scattered the camp with long fingers of light and shade. Tanusha and Halil, dressed as woman, walked hand in hand towards three hundred maidens washing wool and singing beside the water’s torrent. The sounds of nature, the babble of the brook and the fierce flow of the river, cascading towards the far-away lowlands was a most fitting accompaniment to their voices, as their faces turned to see the young princess, walking towards them.

“Who is this fair face that the princess brings to greet us?” they inquired.

“This, my dear friends, is a poor orphan with no dowry or trimmings, who has made me smile and whose friendship I treasure. She has come to ask my father for help, but, you had better continue with washing wool and keep mum.” she smiled raising her finger to her mouth.

In the King’s palace, the Queen had had a fitful and distressing night’s sleep. She cried aloud to her husband, as he slumbered beside her, dreaming of better things.

“Get up my Lord, and go to the maiden’s camp, for I have dreamt a most terrible dream.”

Vuk Harambash suddenly shuddered, coming to his senses with a shocked and bewildered expression across his weary face.

“What is it, dear wife, for you are as pale as alabaster?”

“I dreamt,” she replied breathlessly, “that a black wolf was in the midst of a flock of three hundred white sheep. This can only mean one thing, Vuk; our precious daughter is in danger.”

The king wasted no time trying to reassure the queen, but dressed himself, mounted his fastest thoroughbred mare and rode as fast as he could to the camp. The maidens were singing and washing wool beside the river, when he arrived unexpectedly. There was a flurry of excitement and unease, as he ordered the maidens to line up row by row to count the one and all.

“...298,299,300,301? How can this be, Tanusha, there is one too many of you?” enquired the King.

“Father,” she replied in a meek voice, “I have made a new friend, she is an orphan, and is soon to be married, but came to me last evening to plead for your help. We have become good friends and I know that you will look favourably upon her.”

She was indeed a most beautiful maiden and the king felt pity for her. He decided that the camp should move on and head to a new place beside the sea. The town was called Kotorr and for three days and three nights the caravan of three hundred and one maidens, plus their escorts and guards journeyed through the countryside further away from the river bank. Halil’s horse waited riderless in the woods for his master. Any chance of escape was swiftly forgotten, for their caravan was guarded most heavily. Vuk Harambash was not stupid.

After their long journey the sight of the azure waters, lapping against the shore, the sight of powder white sands, stretching to infinity and the sun, caressing the cliff face was more than the maidens could have dreamt of, as they rushed laughing and singing to the water’s edge. Tanusha and Halil were taken to a proud, beautiful tower, made of marble and surrounded by gardens full of wondrous plants and animals. They were in heaven.

For another three days and nights the couple were inseparable and no one was aloud to join them. They feasted, they drank and amused themselves to their heart’s content, but still they could not escape.

The white stallion had seen the caravan pass by and had known instinctively, that his master was amidst them. He broke free from the reins of his bridle and followed the caravan day and night at some distance, so as not to be caught. Finally he stood waiting not far from Tanusha’s tower, behind the garden wall and out of sight of the guards.

The night was full of storm clouds and in the mountains an electric storm had already begun to pepper the sky with fluorescent spears of lightening. Tanusha was growing restless.

“I can stand it no longer!” she cried. “We must escape or I will grow crazy.”

“What shall we do?” asked Halil earnestly.

“We will steal a fishing boat and sail to the shores of Albania across the sea. Call your horse, Halil and tell him to journey home again and to wait for us on the shore line, safe and sound.”

That very night Halil whistled the night cry of the tawny owl to call the white stallion to the tower. As he approached, the brave horse was surrounded by guards, but made his escape to the shoreline and tried in vain to swim away, but the waves were too big.

The queen perchance was walking along the cliffs with the King, when she spied something white, splashing in the midnight surf. Though she could not make out its identity, she took it immediately to be another omen.

“Make haste to the tower!” she cried and, without another word, she climbed into the carriage and sped away, leaving Vuk Harambash most bewildered.

The queen did not hesitate, but banged on the door with her fists, as hard as she could, but it was locked from inside.

“Tanusha, my daughter, open this door immediately, for your mother is longing to see you.”

Tanusha had no heart to open the door, for she feared her mother’s wrath.

“I am sorry, mother, I cannot. I have been unwell these past three days and would not wish you to catch my flu.”

“But I am your mother and I will make you well again. I swear it and will help you in anyway I can.”

Tanusha heard these comforting words and opened the door, as her mother had asked. But the sight of Halil sent her into a frenzied rage, shouting and cursing her daughter for her betrayal.

“Do you have any idea, who this Jutbina rascal is? How could you do such a thing?” cried the Queen, as she shouted to the guards to assist his arrest.

They bound Halil, who had no weapons to fight with, as Tanusha cried out her sorrow and undying love for him. The King arrived and in his face she saw fury and anguish, she never thought could exist in one man, as he raised his hand to strike young Halil with all the hatred of a warrior’s revenge.

“I would do the same to you, evil daughter, if I should ever set my eyes upon you again. Go now and never return to Krale. From this day forward I have no daughter. As for you, Halil, I will not be so lenient as to spare you your life. Take him to the dungeon, guards, until a day is arranged for his execution.”

Tanusha fled into the streets of Kotorr, where she wandered aimlessly, for she was lost, frightened and alone. No one dared to take pity upon her for they knew the consequences of such charity and so she continued her search, growing weaker and hungrier day after day.

Winter had not quite left the coast and the bitter nights seemed to drag endless by, as she scratched a meagre existence from the berries and melt-water she found in the forest. Her bed she made from moss and bracken ferns, as the bitter winter nights knitted the frost around her fragile body. Eventually she could take it no longer and wandered back towards the outskirts of the village, where she collapsed unconscious upon the doorstep of an old lady’s house.

The woman, hearing the commotion, opened the door immediately and dragged Tanusha into the warmth of her living room.

“Dear child, what has happened to you?” she cried.

Tanusha fixed her gaze upon this gentle lady and said quietly barely able to speak.

“I am Tanusha, the King’s daughter. He has banished me from his lands and will put to death the man I love more than life itself.”

The gentle old lady soon filled Tanusha’s withered hands with a large bowl of broth and listened in silence to her story. Her eyes shining with every word Tanusha whispered.

“Poor and lucky you, Tanusha!” she said. “Poor you for wandering the streets for many days and nights, but lucky you for having chosen such a good man to be your husband.”

Very surprised by the old lady’s words, Tanusha fixed her gaze upon her and shook her head in disbelief and confusion. The gentle lady continued.

“Twenty years I am married here, but I am a Jutbina woman. You must stay with me, until you are fully recovered. No one will know, no one will betray us and then I will take you to Halil.”

“But this is impossible” cried Tanusha. “He is in jail and soon would be executed.”

“Keep a good heart, my child, because if Muj is still in life, very soon you will be returned to Halil and married within the year. But first you must stay here and rest, that is all I ask of you.”

The old lady gathered up her winter cloak, took her horse from the stable and set its nose towards the West Mountains and over the secret passes to Jutbina. She knew the danger of travelling alone, she knew how treacherous the weather could be and she was not as strong as she once had been as a young woman, but still she fought on.

A day and a night passed before the gentle old lady finally arrived at Muj’s house half dead with exhaustion. When she had found at last the strength to say the truth, Muj was furious with Halil for his foolish behaviour and then worried beyond reason for both of them. The white stallion had escaped the guards upon the beach and made his courageous journey back to Jutbina, where his stable and comforts were waiting for him. He, too, had arrived the very same night from mountains.

Ajkuna cared very much for the lady and Omer carried her gently to the spare room, where at last she could rest. Muj sounded the clarion call, which rang through the cobbled streets and echoed across the silent night into the valley.

All of the warriors, the men-folk and their families, too, rallied together in the courtyard. Their ashen faces illuminated by the moonlight, which really should have set along time ago, for it was nearly dawn and time for the sun to take to the heavens, but the curious moon wanted to stay and listen to what Muj had to say.

Meanwhile in the Kotorr town a great many people had gathered in the market square to witness with curious excitement Halil’s imminent execution, for it was a rare sight to take the head of a Jutbina man. He had but one night and one day left, but the news of his execution had drawn Krale people from many miles away, who did not mind the wait.

His last day he spent thinking of Tanusha. He had no idea, what had happened to her since his capture and for all he knew, she could be dead. His heart was heavy with wild and dreadful imaginings, but still hold on to the faith. That night Halil heard the night cry of the tawny Owl and smiled.

“What omen of fortune do you carry, great bird.”

But the owl ter-wit, ter-wooded and flew off into the forest looking for a meal. The next morning Halil was pushed and jeered at, as the ass’s cart which carried him through the cobble streets, trundled towards the platform. He was not afraid, but carried himself with dignity, his back straighter than an oak tree. He mounted the stairs ignoring the rotten fruit, which cascaded around him and fixed his eyes, the colour of green emeralds, upon the riotous crowd of uncouth Krale peasants. The crowd fell silent, as Vuk Harambash, their revered King, mounted the podium and called to them.

“See here, people of Krale, the scoundrel Halil, who tried to steal and dishonour my daughter, Tanusha. It is time for him to die.”

The King turned to the bound Halil and grabbed his throat. In a menacing voice he enquired.

“You wanted to take my only daughter I have and to be my son-in-law, but you must be crazy, for we are sworn enemies and never shall there be peace between us. And now, in your last moment, I would like to know, have you ever been in a more awkward situation than this and is there anything worse than death in this world?”

“Oh, yes, Vuk Harambash, there are many things.” smiled Halil. “Perhaps, when you betray your friends, when you break faith or maybe when you have nothing at home to give your guest, when he arrives unexpectedly. These are far worse than death.”

The crowd stared in astonishment at Halil’s words. The King could not answer, for the prisoner had shamed him. He released his hand from Halil’s throat, turned his heels and walked away.

“Will you permit me my last request?” cried Halil behind him.

The King nodded.

“Than I shall sing you to my final farewell.”

Halil was handed a lute from the crowd and, as the sun began to rise into the heavens, he raised his head to the crowd and sang with all his heart the sweetest, yet the strangest song, the Krale people had ever heard:

My last day has come, has come...

Covered are the peaks, covered from the sun,

Where is your faith, o fairy who loved me?

Are you not there your lover to see?

Are you not sleeping, so silent, so still

Who shall I give to, my own last will?

All the people were astounded and the King turned to an old man beside him, who knew the Albanian language and asked him for a translation. The old man, dressed in his tired old robes, turned to the King, flashing eyes so pale; they were the colour of amber stone.

“Sire, he chides you and invites the sun and fairies to give him strength and help. It is an Albanian custom.”

The King burst out laughing.

“Fairies do not exist and the sun is ours, as well as the waters of the sea and the earth, too.”

Whilst the king laughed to himself, a tiny sparrow flew to the branches of a tree, where Halil could see her and where he silently gave her his will, the most secret wishes he had for Muj.

Suddenly Gjeto Basho Muj, who had all this time been hiding in the crowd, let out a furious battle cry to his men, sending terror and confusion into the hearts of every Krale citizen. The mountains began to rumble their displeasure and the sky was filled with dark storm clouds, which sent bolts and lightening down upon the people. They tried to run, they tried to hide, but everywhere they turned, the fierce faces and ready swords of the Tsheta warriors surrounded them with blood and revenge in their hearts. To the left and right the people fled, but were slaughtered and left upon the ground, until there was noone left to kill. Fighting like a lioness protecting her pride, Muj forced his way through the Krale soldiers, who surrounded the platform, cut his brother free and lifted him to his feet. Within a moment Halil was armed and face to face with the King.



“What have you done with Tanusha?” he spat, but the King shook his head in defiance, mocking Halil. The next moment Halil with cool indifference thrust his sword into the King’s breast and cried.

“This is for you, my love, wherever you may be!”

So furious was the battle between the Tsheta and the Krале warriors, that in living memory and through the ages no one can remember a more decisive nor a more bloody battle being fought between two armies. The town of Kotorr was razed to the ground and the tower destroyed, until there was nothing left.

As the Jutbina warriors returned to their lands, Tanusha waited beside the forest for Halil’s return; for she knew the way his army would travel. The good fairy had not deserted them and soon they were reunited forever. Halil turned back one more time to the razed and burning ruins of Kotorr and said,

*“Look here, o ruined city. Everyone who asks you why the King left you so undefended, you should say: Because the mother betrayed her own daughter, because the father banished his daughter, because Muj saved his brother and Halil took with him the maiden he loved.”*

## The end