

**Vlado Žabot**  
***HOLY BATTLE***

Radovan Podolni could not actually grasp with any certainty what was true about Radovan Podolni and what was not. He had to admit that much of it was made up and much of that was in the process of becoming, of the ongoing passing of the unrecognisable and the uncapturable, and collected from who knows where, and somehow assembled. But also with regard to the world, the present, past and future, he could not be clear. For it seemed to him that the world and time gave birth to themselves and lapsed into themselves; that now, as in the distant past, people generally deluded themselves – divided and unknown to themselves or too difficult – dreaming up some kind of sheltering certainty, and that in his case, too, things did not look so good in this regard. But in spite of that, with the help of the eminent Professor Belov, he had finally managed to convince himself that he was a promising doctoral student of history. Admittedly, a rather mature doctoral student, but still promising, so that he could see the sense of the years that had passed. Of course, with regard to this he had to remain silent in front of Professor Belov and others about what was within himself and within the world, and carefully negate the thought of the cursed gloom and fog between people and the insidious inner paranoia that had long persecuted man and the world. It was somewhat easier to think that the days and years passing and coming in themselves had no particular meaning. That they were given meaning by man... But he had to admit that in reality he had not even decided on his doctoral thesis himself. Regarding that, the most important thing had been the recommendation of his supervisor, Professor Belov – he was the one who had told him to think it over carefully, to decide for himself. But the more he thought about it, the more it seemed that there was an incomprehensible sequence of coincidental factors involved, also in connection with his studying history, and that this sequence of coincidences led to him being assigned Professor Belov as a supervisor, and that the civil war between the National Legion and the People's Guard had been ended a few years earlier by a peace treaty, and that when peace was announced it was necessary, on the basis of the Benedictine archives there that had until recently been thought to be lost, to carry out an in-depth historical study into some never properly searched fortifications on the Roman border known as the *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum*. Actually, the matter became particularly topical when the currently prevailing pro-Guard tendency in the government, with the argument that only heroic and heroically inspired people could defend the border, intended to place commemorative plaques at the sites of these old fortifications – commemorating, of course, their own victorious fallen heroes, as they called

them. The media had reported on this not long before. A heated debate was triggered, in which the members of the somewhat neglected and weakened pro-Legion tendency took the stance that, because of the strategic placement of these fortifications, they were an ideal site for modern military complexes and modern missile systems with which to permanently ensure the security of the north and north-east part of the country. At the same time there had quite unexpectedly spread among the public – from who knows where – the perhaps bitterly scornful and in most eyes completely incomprehensible claim that only ghosts were still crossing the river, and so instead of the fortifications, on the sites of the unforgotten internecine battles and mass killings, which with the awakening and insulting of the offended ghosts of the victims might be repeated, they should start digging mass graves ... Various sceptics added that every peace is only a temporary peace.

Of course, in connection with this or that, troublesome lines of thought kept surfacing about various contradictions, paranoias or fears – or about a wider scratching of the surface of the chain of coincidences on which the world seemed to lean and from which life was supposed to develop, as well as everything around and in connection with him. Each time this happened he convinced himself that as a promising historian it was his duty to search for archive sources and on the basis of these and other unarguable facts to show the chain of cause and effect in time and space... that thinking about various curses, phantoms or ghosts – or for that matter impenetrable webs of coincidence or inescapable fate – was simply pointless and led nowhere.

But the incomprehensibility in the chains of coincidence could not be denied – nor that these coincidences could at any time, of their own accord, twist in an unexpected way.

He, too, could have decided differently and simply told his supervisor, Professor Belov, that he had decided the task was not for him, and that neither the supposed monastery archives nor the remote Roman fortifications interested him in the slightest. But as a promising historian he did not tell Professor Belov this. That was something he simply could not do. For the professor was an eminent scholar and, by coincidence or not, a former senior officer in the People's Guard. And, in spite of everything, by coincidence or not, and of course with the courteous, conciliatory opinion that before the planned interventions the supposed monastery archives as well as the fortifications should be at least to some extent researched and protected, he dared to go against the regime. Moreover, due to the fear that the previously hostile relations between the pro-Guard and pro-Legion tendencies, which in spite of an agreement that had never been completely resolved, would once more flare up when for some reason the highest, most worthy officers began to address their supposed psychological

despondency that often led to suicide and he would be taken for a weakling, he never told anyone from the State Institute for National History. And because he and the teacher of English Erika had ended their relationship some time ago, he did not go to explain this to her. Thus he was able to entrust most of this, at least in his thoughts, only to his dead mother, who of course kept quiet about it. And at home in his small apartment he could also trust his tame crow, birdy as he called her, who with her black head on one side and a clear gaze, always waited for him to tell more. Even when he said, for example, "Birdy, you are stupid," she waited for him to say more... Even the bird was probably coincidental. The fact that he had found her with a broken leg and damaged wings in the park before some cat or dog got a chance to finish her off was probably a coincidence.

Of course, in the light of all these coincidences and times and relations and paranoias that one way or another determine a person, he could also think about the limited human mind and its still not completely discovered, still not completely understood laws – very powerful laws – which is the same, even if you only glimpse and sense a small part of it.

So he thought about things. And drank. And behind this apparent here and now sensed a tremendous current of the past, sometimes paranoia, the great depth of the sequence of past coincidences, which in relation to some factor or another collected, flowed, combined and ran together into what was now, at that very moment, in that very place, called Radovan Podolni. And towards the fact that he, Radovan Podolni, was trying to think something through for himself. Perhaps even about how meandering was that current ... That terribly powerful current. Which was present in a mere drop, that is in Radovan Podolni, and his task and this apartment and the bird and, his deceased mother and, for example, the unexplained suicides of high ranking officers or the old folk tale about the heathen maiden in the Roman fortification known as Sun Fort.

And thus days passed.

And with these days he was further assailed by an annoying, sometimes tortuous feeling that he had to hurry and that for some time, because of this feeling that he must hurry, he was constantly accompanied by a feeling of being watched – which had probably arisen from some senseless dream... If only for a moment he thought beyond himself – which often happened, usually when drinking – then he also felt invisible eyes on him. And of course immediately tried to tell himself that no one was watching him, that it was just a stupid feeling triggered by a dream, like being used to the sky and the sun and the moon above, and of course the limits of one's understanding and senses – and it was precisely this limitation that was sometimes referred to as a god, or perhaps an idol, a demon, a devil... perhaps only

you – or, when drinking, when you simply mutter something simple and random, such as daisy ... Above all, he of course knew that his promise and the task he had been set meant he was heading for the remote, obscure, still dangerous and seemingly cursed location of the Roman fortifications. At the same time he began to believe that by delaying, deferring or even evading the task and at the same time the coincidental sequence – or sequence in line with some hitherto undiscovered law – he was exposing himself to even greater senseless degeneration and danger. In answer to the question what would he do then, where would he go then, he could only shake his head – what to do when you have squandered the trust of the state institutions and of your supervisor, when armed only with faith in yourself you have entered the current pointless paranoia and coincidences...? So he drank. And tried to strengthen his resolve by gathering crumbs from the accessible material in the state archives on these poorly researched or totally unresearched border fortifications. And alongside all this there crept into his head like a persecuting shadow the preserved folk tale from one of these fortifications, which someone for some reason had called Sun Fort – the tale of the heathen maiden, who once, with her few comrades, without hope of victory, resisted a far more powerful invader, in order to preserve an old pagan idol and a priceless treasure ... But things unfolded rather strangely. For when the enemy were scaling the walls from all sides and the heathen maiden's soldiers were frantically defending themselves, it supposedly happened that the sky clouded over, lightning began to flash and the earth shook and buried alive forever the heathen maiden and the idol and the treasure, whilst all the enemy and all the defending soldiers on the walls were without exception transformed into black, screeching birds... "Into crows, then," he said with a nod, which again led him to the thought that his crow really was a strange coincidence.

## II

After all this, with all this, there of course came the time when he awoke from his afternoon nap with the dark, driving thought that he must set off – and that his crow, his bird represented above all an unpleasant, irksome duty, that he could not put off until the evening.

So he immediately opened the window.

And pushed the bird from the window sill.

And saw how it awkwardly toppled over and, frightened, surprised and confused, as it fell into the depth from the apartment block, it flapped its wings a few times. Then nevertheless gracefully, quite appropriately for a crow, it glided on calmly outstretched wings towards the

trees in the nearby park. But from there, as if it had changed its mind, in a wide arc it flew back towards the apartment block.

He quickly closed the window.

And drew the curtains. And mainly to comfort himself muttered: "Have a good time, birdy". Then he sat on the couch. And once again felt that, as if certain dreams had not passed, as if he was again being watched by unseen eyes, and that in truth there had been no need for him to push the bird off the window sill. And that actually he never had to do anything and never had to go anywhere.

Then with his mind in turmoil he began again to tidy up various remaining, superfluous, scattered papers and notes and other things in the Institute's apartment.

He was not indifferent. Various unpleasant thoughts of one kind or another kept forcing their way into his head. He tried to banish these thoughts. Unnecessary, confusing thoughts. What was more, he was now being tormented by reproaches regarding the bird. But he could not imagine how, in addition to an overloaded rucksack, he could cart along an old, cumbersome bird cage – or find a new one at the last minute. Certainly, to those downriver people, perhaps superstitious and mistrustful of strangers, it might seem weird if a promising historian from an institute started acting stupid with an ordinary crow in a cage. At best, he would attract unwanted attention. And very probably mockery. Or even contempt. And above all, of course, the opposition of the management of the home for retired officers, where the Institute had arranged board and lodging for him for the duration of his stay. He also told himself that the bird belonged with other birds.

He was not surprised when there was a fluttering sound at the window and a gentle, as if polite, perhaps also pleading, pecking at the window.

But he decided to pay no attention. That his business with the bird was finished. But during the absentminded search for what had been hitherto an all but forgotten souvenir of his mother's with St Christopher on one side and a snake and a bird of prey on the other, which he only now remembered and wanted to find and take it with him as a holy talisman, he kept looking at the transparent curtain and the bird's head, leaning to the side, which was seemingly marvelling at the glass.

"Live the life destined for you ..." he said irritably, still not wanting to chase the bird away roughly.

"You'll understand it yourself," he added to himself rather than the bird.

What he really wanted was to go around the town and get properly drunk once more by the evening. And then go on drinking. For comfort. Because of time. And paranoia. And

dreams. Because of coincidences, memories, the theory about causes-and-effect sequences, which as a historian he was obliged to prove on the basis of sources, because of Erika, mother ... And the uncertainty before such a journey. And before the invisible eyes rushing him. And maybe because of the lost St Christopher – and the bird ... which as soon as it saw him on the staircase or pavement, would sit on his shoulder, fully trusting.

Of course, after a while he tried to be more decisive with the bird, by waving, shaking the curtain and hitting the window frame, which seemed in the crow's head to appear promising, perhaps even turning into an indulgent understanding of the stupid human game in which the bird's role was nothing but patient waiting.

“Wait then,” he finally gave in. And instead of the St Christopher medallion he found among the junk in the drawer the forgotten figurines of an ox and a donkey that his mother used to place with special pleasure in the Christmas nativity scene. Thinking that such things should not be just left behind, he put them in his rucksack. And sat down again. And again didn't know what to do with all this waiting or with himself or the heap of superfluous papers, old notes, cuttings and already forgotten student notes – which he wanted to simply throw away, but still lay in the dusty drawers and corners and now, before his departure, imposed themselves on him as something that needed to be dealt with as soon as possible. Even though he didn't really have to care, because time, because days passed in spite of everything ... Then, with the intention of not caring about things, lying on the couch, he tried to think of the still dangerous Roman frontier areas and the various methods of collecting field material and those badly or unresearched fortifications along the water and the Sun Fort, which was talked about as the main one – and which a few centuries before the Romans, before Antiquity, was at the same time a trading post, a military post and a shrine to various gods. Maybe even Jupiter ... And who knows what else. But above all, it was known that all these centuries, more or less until a very short time ago, it had been besieged, attacked, conquered and defended by various tribes, sometimes even whole peoples, and many armies and pillaging hordes.

“And many gods ...” for understanding all those – and all the other battles and massacres and acts of heroism dedicated to this or that deity – it seemed to him sensible, even crucial to add them. “And seven demons,” he agreed with a fairly well pronounced thought that in addition seemed almost said out loud.

When it got dark, he did not put the light on.

“You're simply leaving,” he said to himself, and his two selves turned to the wall. “And you as well, birdy ...” he bitterly tried to mock the desire to talk to the bird before sleep.

Which could be pleasantly sociable – but also make a mess and seemingly deliberately soil the apartment. This was another reason why, since there was obviously nothing wrong with its damaged wing and leg, he had already placed it on the windowsill or left the window open for it. At which the bird, with hilariously long, limping and ostentatious steps and with fluffed up feathers on its head, its neck outstretched, always in the same way and without haste, demonstrated indignation and contempt.

Meanwhile, already dozing, he thought about the Benedictines and the home for retired officers and demons, and about St Christopher – and his mother's words regarding how difficult it is to carry the weight of the world and its creator ... Now it seemed strange that this probably only gilded medallion, resembling a gold coin, with the rough Christopher who with a child on his shoulder wades through the water, and the other side, with the snake and eagle fighting ... He remembered that the snake was wrapped around the eagle's leg, that the eagle held it firmly in its claws, that the snake had its head raised and was baring its teeth at the eagle, that the eagle was aiming its curved beak at the snake's head, and that this struggle lacked only the decisive moment for the last strike and the last bite ... And meanwhile he listened to what were probably cat noises from the park, resembling a child crying. Somewhere a dog barked. And it was raining. A wind picked up from the riverside. And in this distant cattish (and like a child's) and doggish, rainy, windy half-sleep he, simultaneously in thoughts and dreams, perhaps it was the strangely pale heathen maiden who was searching for shelter against the black birds.

He certainly woke up as if from rage.

Maybe paranoia.

And with a feeling that in all this he was being observed by that invisible eye.

And there were thoughts about those birds, those bewitched soldiers and most often only made-up fairy tale treasures. And about various slaughtered, buried or still living pagan idols. And everything was above all rather incomprehensible, stretched out, intertwined and torturous.

Then, rather too rapidly, it was morning – but in his head the thought kept twirling around as if brought by water, that god never in fact appeared to people.

To which later, when looking through the window at the darkness, the rain above the misty rooftops, tired and irritable, he mumbled that in spite of this many saw precisely god.

He hated this late-morning and early-evening autumn darkness. But this time he did not put the light on, mostly because of the bird.



He was trying to shrug with sufficient sincerity, nod approval to his belief that the bird belonged among birds and at the same time believe that he understood the glitter of gods, at least to a certain extent – and the masses of shed blood and many killed soldiers next to all kinds of forts ... and that more or less the whole of history stank of slaughter and blood and death – that is, of wild, rough, crazy and dead people, treacherous demons and bloodthirsty gods.

He wasn't feeling well.

Even as he was once more examining everything that he had folded and squashed into the rucksack, including the two small figurines of the ox and the donkey ... when because of the St Christopher medallion he finally tipped into it all the bits and bobs from the two drawers, in which that souvenir should be, he was gnawed at by a feeling that it didn't matter what day it was, or what time it was, that his dreams were no longer passing as they should be passing – and that in all those many killed soldiers and many killed gods and saints and demons something always quietly survived and that one after the other, with this something still quietly alive, they kept waking up. And concealed themselves in people, perhaps even in birds and in all these dark mists.

And into this annoyance, into this thought about transience, duration and waking up ... he seemed to hear someone at the door.

It confused him.

He was overcome by a strange uncertainty.

True, he could hear nothing special from the corridor beyond the door. This neither calmed him nor convinced him that there was nobody there. This is why with reluctance and discomfort he asked who it was and what they wanted.

No one replied. Nothing could be heard.

He asked again.

Holding his breath and then in the deathly silence trying to pull himself together somehow. And to tell himself that there was no one there, that sometimes you hear things that aren't there ...

“What do you want?” he said, just in case, with a sufficiently firm voice that demanded an answer.

There was no answer – that is, there was silence, but you couldn't really deny its dark meaning ... The thought of this was also becoming strangely pronounced – perhaps as an awoken dream that is still without appearance, but which is certainly not without something dark, something crouching within.

“What do you want?!” he raised his voice. “What are you looking for?!” he repeated. He demanded. And, as someone on his own territory, deciding to check the matter without putting on the light, he took that step and opened the door.

“What is it?!” he asked, not concealing his voice ... into the darkness of the corridor. And in spite of everything, tried to remain perfectly collected. To calm his breathing. And his confusion.

To preserve his rectitude.

For this reason mostly – due rectitude – he left the door open – and returned to the drawers, without turning on the light ... he no longer wanted to doubt that the St Christopher medallion, together with the ox and the donkey and all those bits and bobs from the drawers, was in the rucksack ... and then he slowly and carefully closed the overstuffed rucksack, tied it and calmly tried to persuade himself that really he did not need to do any of this, that he could easily be doing something else or nothing – and that the feelings that confuse and pursue one so usually turn out to be a self-deception. But he could not doubt that this was precisely what can bring serious trouble. This is why, with all the due rectitude of a promising historian, he was hurrying with his luggage and putting on his raincoat with unpleasant haste and trembling.

In the corridor, he managed to calm down somewhat. To curb his step in fairly convincing self-confidence. But it still suited him that he did not meet any resident of the building – who maybe did not know such pronounced thoughts ... and probably did not leave the doors of their apartments, albeit rented, unlocked and open when they went somewhere.

He met no one in the entrance either. This is why, without being hindered by anyone, he was able to hurry – his head bent beneath his hood mostly because of the bird – along the shortcut, a narrow path across the lawn and between the bushes to the garages and the old steps behind them that led to one of the lower lying streets.

But by the thick yew bush on the edge of the overgrown slope above the street he caught with the corner of his eye a prone wing. A crow's. He shivered at the sight – a bitter peck at his soul ... But he was able to observe that it was washed out, probably having been discarded a long time ago, certainly no longer bloody ... And anyway, there were no other feathers nearby. Which could mean that the wing, which without a shadow of a doubt was a crow's, could have been dragged there from who knows where by a stray dog or cat.

This was, of course, accompanied by an ugly, bitter pain of premonition and remorse and doubt. At the same time he had to think that such wings on risky paths were once seen by people as bad omens. And that his unsuccessful search for the St Christopher medallion

before such a journey was also a bad omen ... But at that moment, he could do nothing else but, with his head between his shoulders, and in fear that any moment now he would hear above him the familiar flutter of the bird, hurry down the old steps and cross the road and turn along the street where a few other people were also rushing, not paying any attention to him.

The raincoat that he had bought precisely for this journey soon proved to be permeable, hood and all. And the shoes. At which all he could do while avoiding puddles along the pavements and bumping into people that were in that weather similarly gloomy and irritable was to curse. And hurry. Even though he didn't have to hurry yet because of the riverboat's departure ... On purpose, as in a pointless overtaking of himself, he crossed the busy street wherever he felt like it. And also on purpose, as if away from himself, he now and again ran across a pedestrian crossing with a red light. And jumped onto a tram at the last minute. Others, with their collars turned up and under hoods, headgear and umbrellas, were also rushing. And bumping into him. And they all probably cursed each other in a similar mood of irritation. When there were more and more of them along the streets and in passageways and junctions. And he had a feeling that they couldn't see him and that in their rushing here and there, overtaking and meeting, they were inexplicable coincidences as individuals and all together. Cars and trams – nothing saw him ... and all seemed moody, dangerous, squashed, with beads of perspiration, grey and gloomy and rushing everywhere, late. Of course, he could say that there, too, the hours and days did not matter ... It was difficult for him to make his way. With an awkward rucksack. Sweating. And soaked. He did know shortcuts. He was used to such crowds and moods and impatience and irritable people in the town centre. But this time at least, because of the heavy rucksack, he expected a little more consideration. Which, however, could not be there in all that hither-and-thither lateness and pushing, the hither-and-thither impatience, overtaking, humming, breaking and splashing.

In the face of all this, of course, he could not know, could not notice either when or where or how there appeared in front of him a rather noticeable, rather striking blonde in an elegantly belted light grey coat – perhaps still a girl because of the thick, loosely braided plait that she had across her shoulder ... Umbrella in hand, she walked in front of him. Looking nowhere, at no one. He would hold her umbrella for her. In his head thoughts swirled about how such conceited women often only seemed to be self-sufficient. She was walking erect and swaying her hips ... He certainly wanted to overtake her. And to look at her face, as you do, without any reason, just like that, by coincidence, look back at any passer by ... But she had already turned away, among people, among the pillars by the pavement and disappeared round the corner ... He thought that's how you notice someone – and off they go, usually for

ever ... He, of course, had to turn another way. His own way – and at the same time, as in an irrational hurrying away from himself, that is away from that something which for a moment thought that the two of them did not have to go anywhere, even less hurry anywhere, i.e. from their own gloomy tetchiness – which cannot be confounded by a simple change of direction ... If he quickened his step, so did the tetchiness. Of course, he tried to walk with rectitude even in the eye of his own tetchiness. Like someone who is undoubtedly very promising and who is firmly decided about the chosen task and direction. Confidently. As with a firm conviction in himself and in all the varied but provable cause-and-effect sequences which, of course, are the pre-condition for such a conviction ... He did not succeed. That tetchiness consistently gnawed at him unpleasantly. So, thinking that he would not be able to shake this nuisance anyway, he finally slowed down. And tried to think other thoughts – the bird, the St Christopher medallion with the eagle and the snake on the other side, the crow's wing ...

And, astonished, he noticed among the people in front of him the same blonde.

She had emerged from a side street.

Again, she was walking erect and swaying, with her plait braided across her shoulder.

This time, he didn't want to overtake her.

Above all, he tried to convince himself that this happened sometimes – and this wasn't the first time that he had lost someone from sight and then unexpectedly spotted them again here or there ...

In the streets inclining towards the riverbank, the wind was strengthening.

The blonde's umbrella was bending and pulling – but she took no notice of this or of anyone who walked past, she did not slow down or look down on account of the unpleasantly cold, unpleasantly rainy squalls striking her face.

She walked – she seemed like a victor.

He tried it himself – irrespective of everything else – and his own sense of feeling torn ... when the grey gloominess at the end of the street that increasingly signified the river bank, seemed somehow as a warning, as the unpleasantly persistent dark invisible entity inside him, of course, grimaced and sneered in complaint.

Her step was definitely not faltering. She did not seek shelter. As if nothing was whispering to her that she must hurry, but that nonetheless she could still turn anywhere else ... Perhaps because of this, because of this unknown blonde, who was one moment closer and the next further in front of him, he was able to whisper to himself “you must when you must” – and to resist in an upright, erect manner stand up to everything making him hurry or go back. Added to this, there was a premonition that all the paths, necessary or unnecessary in

one way or another, that he had walked until then, all the trials he'd had to endure, had led him precisely there ... Although at the same time he still wanted to believe that in spite of this, in spite of control of one type or another, in spite of the various eyes that pursued and all the being observed, he could still turn anywhere else.

The river and its banks were concealed by fog.

But he still saw the blonde – and the crowd of people on the pier.

She was aimed at the crowd, to the long, low-lying riverboat the Beregina ... And it seemed as if the people standing there were expecting her.

With the thought that he should slowly and with dignity ... and as if he could still change his mind, as if he could still turn a different way, he also approached the crowd of predominantly older, mostly rural-looking people from downriver. And with a confused feeling, as if he had stepped into an unpleasant gloom, he stood among them. They watched him surreptitiously and with mistrust. Some of them looked like unpleasant sneaks, others lay in wait irritably, here and there he noticed someone he would not like to meet in a dark alley, whilst the odd person looked as if their expression showed the invisible burden on their shoulders. Admittedly, some seemed more cheerful, but even they strove to conceal this from the others ... A few aged, noticeably arrogant hunters with greyish green hats, greyish green coats and boots, who seemed to have set off for the downriver hunting grounds, were keeping themselves to themselves. And at least apparently were paying no attention to the others. The blonde had meanwhile disappeared who knows where. But he didn't like to look around for her too obviously. With regard to this stuck-up woman, he definitely wanted to make sure that it was all a coincidence and that he couldn't care less ... And he found the unfashionably dressed men and women on the pier somewhat poorly and pale, as if they had just been released from various hospital. But as a representative of a reputable national institute, he tried to remain nonchalant even about this ... Someone said to a person next to them that perhaps the riverboat would not sail "in this". The hunters silently, grumpily looked at the sky and the muddy, swollen river, which was sullenly carrying with it heaps of vegetation. The odd log or even whole tree could be seen on the surface. Squalls blew rain sideways across the river, creating a spray. And a few crows, individually or in twos or threes, persistently tested themselves in the gusts of wind with take-offs, swerves and uncertain landings in the tops of the trees lining the banks.

Even after embarkation, the blonde was nowhere to be seen ... Without looking for her, as nonchalantly as possible, he pushed through the passengers and, almost happy, almost with relief, settled himself on a window seat.

Meanwhile, an engine came on below decks.

There was a smell of fuel.

Neither among the passengers nor anywhere else on the covered, semi-dark deck did he notice anyone whom he could count as the riverboat's crew either by a uniform or at least a cap or a chevron. Mainly pale looking people. But it seemed quite possible that he had missed something. Judging by the behaviour of the passengers, nothing special was happening. They sat down as if they owned the place. Some of them, because of the dripping from the ceiling or a conversation and whiling away the time, sat closer together. Others, apart. Even on the floor. A bottle circulated among the hunters. Some women seemed deep in thought, seriously withdrawn and self-sufficient. Some were chatting ... In the seat opposite him, a stocky, large, middle-aged woman, who didn't remove her red raincoat, with fish-like bulging eyes and a round face, elongated into a warning, seemed to be trying to control an old-looking, short, almost midget-like figure, who in his coat resembling a monk's habit clearly didn't want to sit next to her.

Unwittingly he begrudged her those bulging eyes. But he intended to remain as uninterested in his fellow passengers as possible – including the gloomy looking, grey-haired man next to him and even more the strange, sulky and at the same time inquisitive figure, not mature enough for a monk's habit, who only after a hissed argument, a great deal of grimacing and disobedient arm-waving, with an offended, sulky expression on his excessively wide face under the hood, finally sat next to his fish-eyed companion.

The riverboat sailed without problems and on time.

The engine hummed steadily and smoothly. Like new. Later the riverboat did rock or lean now and again – as the fairly strong currents pushed or pulled it this way or that. When this happened, the windows were sometimes splashed and water ran down the glass in opaque rivulets. But the passengers, clearly used to sailing on the river, were not bothered.

The edge of the window was, of course, dripping. Even trickling. Through the drops and stains on the window, which sometimes hastily and then again lazily ran down, merged, separated, hung or disappeared into their own traces, he could see clumps of fog and the puffed up, faceless clouds lying on the surface of the water, and here and there a glimpse of the trees growing on the sometimes steep and then again gently sloping riverbank. The window was repeatedly hit by drizzle. Or an ampler splash. And the water came in through

the badly sealed window frame and ran onto the seat. In vain, he tried to find a better position – his rain coat, crumpled against the window, had little effect, as some of the moisture somehow persistently oozed under his backside. No other seats were free. And it seemed that this would last until midnight when they reached their destination and when, in the port of Limes, a clerk from the town was supposed to meet him and take him to the home for retired officers. Of course, he was trying to act like someone who was not worried about this business of his fellow passengers and about the odd creature, perhaps even an imbecile, sitting opposite him in his monk's habit, and his unkempt companion ... or even about this unimportant journey, in fact, like someone who is not worried about anything at all. He tried to convince himself of the importance of the fact that he was being sent there by a distinguished institute, a distinguished historian, Professor Belov – who was also an honorary reserve officer ... With all this in mind – including the possibility that out there somewhere, in the smugglers' areas along the border, it was always dangerous to a certain degree – he wanted to shrug sufficiently sensibly and puff himself up in the face of that invisible shady menace inside him, to the conviction that a person is not completely safe anywhere and that something could happen to him anywhere – in short, that he knew what he was getting into and that he was not completely reckless. Although he did not feel himself to be particularly convincing in this regard. But this was something that could be called an important task, an important obligation, which makes you try to adopt a suitable exterior, a different appearance to the real one. In fact, he could have been horrified at the thought of what was concealed and being smuggled behind all that was visible to a view from the outside ... in addition, he had the silly thought that he could observe all those people with his eyes closed – and he would see better and more that way. He chased this nuisance from his head – but it kept sneaking in, pecking at him in this way or that about what was hidden, suppressed, light and dark, and all the shades in between, within people. Some were perhaps hiding claws, or fangs or snake venom, others birdsong and sunshine and meadow flowers, but most of them probably a foggy moodiness resembling the weather outside, and waiting for it all to pass.

“Excuse me,” a polite woman's voice roused him from his thoughts and irritation with all these silly things going through his head. “Excuse me,” she repeated.

It was the blonde.

Close up.

He tried really hard to conceal his dumb expression and embarrassment.

It was evident from her dangling plait and the large eyes with a slightly distant look that she directed at him, that she wanted something from him.

“Just a moment,” he mumbled. And, with the thought that if for no other reason because of her large eyes and the shape of her nose that she reminded him slightly of a doe, he looked her up and down. In the confused, uncertain assumption that perhaps she was a member of the crew, he quickly reached in the inside pocket of his jacket for his ticket. She noticed his confusion and embarrassment.

“You can put your luggage in the locker room,” she said with a smile on her soft, kind lips. His ticket didn’t interest her. “Please,” she added a little more kindly encouraging relentlessness. “It’s in everyone’s way here.”

The looks around him told him that they had noticed his embarrassment ... Partly because he immediately got up and with his rucksack followed the undoubtedly shapely blonde. Outside, to the uncovered part of the deck. Into the wind and rain. The rain was rather heavy. The foaming waves were splashing. He thought of his raincoat. But the blonde carried on walking, paying no attention to the splashing water and the rain.

“I didn’t know,” he tried to alleviate the awkward situation with polite confidentiality. But it was obvious she wasn’t interested in listening to such all too common excuses. Silently and without looking at him, she unlocked the cabin by the stern of the covered deck and waited for him to push past her and quickly shove his rucksack in the inadequate space below one of the shelves. Immediately after he had straightened up from the dark but surprisingly large space, overfilled with all sorts of things, she relocked the door. And, her hips swaying, walked off towards the bow.

Soaking wet once more and with an unpleasant restlessness in his stomach, he looked after her and also glanced towards the cockpit, where he thought that behind the wet, streaked glass he saw someone with a hood over his head and a messy beard ... But he pretended not to have seen anyone and returned to his seat – and was then unable to either confirm or deny even the fact whether in the darkness of the overfilled cabin he really had seen coffins ... and whether those long bundles on the shelves could have been guns. Maybe even other weapons. Definitely not only hunting guns belonging to the hunters, who by now were presumptuously pouring brandy into their mouths. There were also larger and smaller box-like shapes, resembling ammunition cases ... At the same time, he was trying to convince himself that none of this was any of his business.

And he tried to remain indifferent to the rushing and passing of the hours and the feeling of being looked at ... Nor did he want to pay any attention to the probable imbecile in the monk’s habit in the seat opposite, who was cheekily aiming at him with his index and middle fingers, obviously having chosen him as a target for his imaginary gun.



It seemed best to simply stare at the window again.

And to think that one can imagine this and that, including the strange imbecile opposite and the helmsman, and the feeling of an unpleasantly mysterious, unpleasantly persistent look that was driving him somewhere and which was lasting unusually long, and that he had perhaps listened to the undoubtedly attractive but, perhaps only because of embarrassment, also disturbingly haughty girl ... who undoubtedly resembled a doe and whom he could now again see among the hunters. Even among the hunters, she stood clearly erect, with her head raised, at the same time arousing considerable favourable attention, in some of them even a little sugary idiocy. He had to admit, she was attracting his eyes, too ... Which probably did not escape the fishy matron sitting opposite and her imbecile, who at times gave him a suspicious look. But he found it rather stupid to run his eyes over a strange woman who, of course, as a crew member thought that she had to walk with her back straight, with a stiff neck and who, perhaps in her conceit, wanted to seem attractive to everyone at the same time – but most probably she did not actually care about anyone in particular. He was familiar with such vain women ... This is why he chose to turn to the window and tried to convince himself that he didn't want to think about and should not think about their arduously slow progress, or of what was hidden in that cabin and under the deck and for mere appearances ... or of the presumed imbecile, that he either did not want to and should not attract any special attention or the suspicion of his fellow passengers, who had their eyes on him anyway – since in this sort of situation you cannot know whether the monk-like misfit opposite was only a random misfit, whether the apparent hunters were really just random hunters, whether the ordinary downriver people really were what they seemed. And because in this or that you cannot rely on any kind of certainty.

You're simply leaving – and at the same time arriving somewhere ... he tried to think about the long journey ahead. In fact, it seemed to him that he was sinking among the drops, the spray and spurts of water, and through the mists, together with the window. And that this was exactly what had happened to him once before.

But above all, as if in a floorless swaying and sliding, it went on and on. And into his thoughts the incomprehensible coincidence of the blonde elbowed its way. And the bird came back into his thoughts. Maybe also the lost St Christopher medallion with the snake and eagle on the back – which could, of course, also be the front ... And the feeling of the mysterious look, which was driving him. And that wing, perhaps discarded by dogs. And some present soldiers and some ancient soldiers sworn to heroism. All of this combining, merging and separating, and the dreamy sliding along the choppy water – which in the remotely foggy

thought and the river and the drops and the fog signified one and the same presence and one and the same past ... Every time he looked away from the window, he looked at the monk and the fish-eyed matron ... and quickly shifted his eyes to look for the riverboat blonde, perhaps still a girl – or for something that could be hidden behind her appearance. And every time, at least for a moment, the place seemed darker. And his eyes found her, the woman who fancied herself ... And the glumly pale faces on the seats and the floor were even glummer and paler than before, on the pier. Some of them suspiciously devious, like smugglers. But also like refugees. But mostly despondent one way or another, and resigned to waiting for the end of the journey. He had immediately noticed that on the seat beside him there sat an aged, grey-haired man, dressed in black and grey who, with a squashed nose that had perhaps been broken at some time and with narrow eyes and a bluish scar along his left cheek, at least to some degree resembled a fairly elegantly dressed, but nonetheless secretly, insidiously wild Avar. However, he didn't want to pay attention to anyone specific. Even to the strange riverboat woman – or perhaps still a girl. Or to the monk. Or to this Avar – even though from time to time their eyes met. But every time it was as if they looked through each other or past each other, and without any need for some kind of fellow-passenger niceties. But the journey went on and on. And finally, who knows why, they nodded to each other. To which Radovan added, with a slight smile, that this time it would “be a long one”.

“A long one, yes,” the man nodded indifferently and withdrew again. This made Radovan feel that he had unnecessarily addressed a stranger that happened to resemble an Avar and a crow, perhaps even a priest or an undertaker, and who had every right to be engrossed in whatever, to which nothing could be added from the seat next to his. But in spite of this, Radovan's fellow passenger added with a sigh: “Until midnight or so.” Radovan knew it – just like the man, of course, knew that it was raining and the weather was not really suitable for this journey – and therefore there was no point in talking about it or brandishing clichéd phrases.

“It passes quicker,” the gloomy man perhaps guessed Radovan's thoughts about empty talk and with the expression on his face, which was pulled slightly sideways by the scar, confirmed that he actually did not find this kind of talk unpleasant.

In spite of this, Radovan didn't feel like replying. He was overcome by something uncomfortable – in vain he tried to conceal it by shifting in his seat and squashing his raincoat beneath the window frame with a mumbled explanation that the window was leaking.

“It isn’t exactly new. For a while now,” he heard the man – clearly hinting at the worn condition of the riverboat – who had apparently decided to continue the conversation ... So, mainly out of politeness, Radovan asked him if he often travelled this way.

“Well ...” he replied. And as if after reflection, as a sign of trust, he brought his head closer and added: “We’re each caught in our own.”

This made Radovan fleetingly think of the blonde, the coincidences and the still present invisible eyes ... He definitely wanted to hide from this random stranger any worries or uncertainties. Also perhaps a completely unnecessary prejudice ... This is why, as a sign of being unhappy about the rather decrepit riverboat, he looked towards the ceiling and around them, and commented that it wasn’t exactly new and that it had quite an unusually old-fashioned name.

“Well ...” the man seemed to be unable to fully agree with this statement. “Many people see it differently.”

“An unusual name,” insisted Radovan – and thought that some old-fashioned words occasionally simply lost their meaning because people have forgotten them or replaced them.

“These things are preserved here,” said the man knowingly ... above all, Radovan felt as if he had once more read his thoughts ... “And the people living by the river also believe in water spirits.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Radovan doubtfully, “all those spirits and demons, as well as gods, aren’t for everyone ...”

“They die and rise from the dead. That’s what they’re like. They’re trapped in this.”

“Some yes, some no, I’d say.”

“Have you been to Limes before?” The stranger changed the topic of conversation.

“No. I have some errands there,” Radovan said with a shrug, implying that this was something he was used to.

“Errands, yes. They’re always pressing. What can you do,” said the man understandingly – while at the same time doubting these errands at least slightly. “First we look for them. And then they control us.” He fell silent for a moment. Then, with a sigh, as if to a fellow sufferer, he offered Radovan his hand and said: “Babil.” A hand proffered like that could not be rejected.

So Radovan mumbled his name.

“Ah, Radovan,” without a reason, the stranger repeated the name too loudly, which at least in the monk-like misfit and the fish-eyed matron, and perhaps in some other passengers nearby, aroused attention. Radovan was overcome by the unpleasant thought that he had not

noticed this rather striking man earlier, in the port – and that his somewhat priestly, perhaps undertaker-like, and definitely crow-like grey and black garments were at least slightly unusual.

“I knew someone ...” Probably because of the name in his memory, he thought a little. “Radovan, yes ...” He even smiled at the memory and added that he, that is his Radovan, was a folk musician and singer. Then he asked seriously and with a furrowed brow: “Do they call you ...?” And without waiting for an answer, he was already nodding, he already knew the only answer possible.

“No one calls me,” Radovan interrupted the man irritably and with fake irony, as if something like that would be completely impossible. And he couldn’t get rid of the unpleasant feeling of the constantly present eyes, pressuring him, and the almost fitting thought that he was talking to someone who had an unusual foreign name and may be an undertaker.

“You know, that nickname is because they don’t have any young people who would still want to die for them and their old-people’s dreams, no side has them, because young people ...” Perhaps because of the monk and the matron who may be eavesdropping, the stranger began talking even more confidentially – and then changed his mind because of a grey-haired man, who approached them as if without any special purpose – and he immediately changed the subject again, this time to property prices in Limes, which were going up and that was in fact good. Very good.

The hunter stopped next to them and looked at the window.

Meanwhile, Babil persisted slightly nervously in the casual talk about selling small plots of land, small properties, which were the most reliable – until, as if he had decided that he wasn’t really interested in looking through the window, the hunter moved away and returned to his people.

“You never know,” Babil again lowered his voice with a slight gesture towards the hunter.

“What?” Radovan said with an indifferent grimace, partly because of the people around them.

“You just don’t know,” shrugged Babil.

“So, you are in real estate,” Radovan tried to turn the conversation to the less delicate matter, as if this subject interested him more than the rest. “Are you from Limes?”

“In a way,” the other man said.

“I’m actually interested in the whole area,” Radovan added in a more business-like manner.

“What, in the area?” Babil seemed resigned to the change of subject, with a hint of irritation and slight twitching in the stretched corner of his mouth.

“Fortifications,” Radovan said directly because he really did want to hear more about it. At the same time he decided not to mention the former Benedictine monastery that was now the home for retired officers, and the alleged monastery archives.

“Fortifications ... Well, there are seven of them. Walls, some of them are called,” Babil nodded seriously. “They’re not for sale. I’ve heard that they’re going to be turned into monuments.”

“Monuments to heroism,” nodded Radovan, knowingly.

Babil looked carefully at the hunters. And then confirmed as if this conversation was of no interest to him anymore. “Into monuments, yes.”

Then they fell silent. And it seemed they would stay that way. Which could suit Radovan. Above all, at least in appearances, he tried to be his own way. To shake off the discomfort. And the stalking thoughts about the blonde, about what lay behind appearances, and about the misfit dressed as a monk, which may only be a cover ... about the invisible eyes above all this, about the armies, heroes, demons and gods and massacres, dedicated to this and that, rising from the dead ... And about the bird, of course. And the weight of the world. He wanted to position himself as comfortably as possible. Once more he rearranged the raincoat under the window. And stuffed more of it under his backside. And then, leaning slightly against the window, with his legs outstretched and his arms crossed, he wanted to relax into a doze. But he could not manage the relaxation and dozing. Neither deep breathing nor closed eyes did the trick. He regretted that because of the stupid confusion in front of the blonde he had not taken out of his rucksack the bottle of brandy he had saved for the journey, or his telephone, maybe his laptop or at least a book. Although the stranger, perhaps a priest, perhaps an undertaker or whatever, seemed suspicious, he had to admit that throughout the time he would spend in Limes, he would have to deal with his sort and who knows what doubts and strangers. And that he would not be able to avoid them. In spite of all their appearances and names, possible hidden aims, tricks and empty stories they might spin. In spite of all sorts of deviousness and, of course, risks – which on an assignment like his had to be accepted. He had to admit that these kinds of reservations, prejudices and fears should not burden him or even disable him.

But quite some time and journey went by before he once more looked at his neighbour. Who, as if again seeing into his mind, nodded.

“Dragging,” Radovan said with a sigh in reply to the nod.

“Dragging, yes,” said the stranger, straightening up. “Limes is still a long way off ...”

“You said sometime just before midnight,” smiled Radovan.

“Yes, round about then,” said the man in a manner implying that agreeing with this was all he could still do. Then he fell silent, deep in thought. Of course, Radovan had no intention of prompting him. “You know,” the stranger went on after long consideration, “I’m coming back ... because I haven’t accomplished everything there that I have to do. Not by a long chalk ... My leg stayed there, too. Yes ...” As proof he knocked on something hard, probably plastic – obviously a false leg. And Radovan made the effort to not to sound pitying when, with some genuine sympathy, he said that this thing with the leg – and generally “all that along this frontier” – must be difficult and that he had read about it ...

“My arm, too,” the man, who it now transpired was an invalid, perhaps even a war invalid, knocked on more plastic, this time where his arm should be. Above all, he clearly wasn’t interested in listening to belated opinions and sympathies – and even less in everything that had been written and read about all that afterwards. And so, thinking that he really did not have to talk or share his opinion with random strangers about the pointless violence both from a few years ago and from centuries ago – and that it was the other man, that is the veteran and invalid, who had started the conversation, all Radovan could do was shrug.

“I’d like to find,” said the stranger with a sigh, probably because of his leg and arm ... “Many stayed there,” he went on. “Unburied ... But most were thrown into the river anyway,” he said, shaking his head as if over the unforgettable savagery. And then he added: “But the spirit remains.” Radovan decided to listen. And, of course, remembered his morning thoughts about the not completely dead soldiers ... “They should be forgotten ...” The invalid nodded again with a glaring, almost searching look. “But that is impossible. Impossible ...” Radovan kept looking at him. “In fact,” said Babil, “all of us from that story keep going back there.” Then, with a furrowed brow and, as if in mockery, with his lopsided mouth he seemed to be deep in the forgotten ... Radovan became watchful. Through his head went thoughts about archives and history, which time and again fought forgetfulness ... Also with the sequences of coincidences and times it tries to change into cause-and-effect sequences ... But the stranger, who evidently didn’t feel like silence, in a careful low voice was already talking about the Limes ruins “if you want, as you’re interested” and about “those” who call, which is immediately known down there, and that that which had awoken from the dead and the water there, had always had a name. “The Spectre.” It had always been like that. Because there had been so much slaughter there. Because there, too many corpses ended up in the water, too many of them gape in the mud or soil, and that the Spectre should not be divested of its power

over them ... because it was a demon, which was evil whenever anything awakened it. “People start looking delusional, I’m telling you, yes, as if something was pursuing them, as if they were dreaming strange dreams ...” and then they no longer saw or heard anything as they had seen or heard it before.

Meanwhile, the riverboat shook a few times and then it swayed and moved with the current.

The engine went quiet.

And then the next moment roared again.

And, seemingly, shifted into reverse.

A few passengers got up.

But most, with the presumed monk and his shabby companion, remained in their seats. And were not perturbed by any of this. Even the rather loud conversation among the hunters did not halt. This is why Radovan tried to stay calm while wondering whether they had or soon would turn into one of the ports. He also thought about all the flotsam and washed up trees that could get stuck in the propeller. Through the steamed-up window he could see that the bank on that side was at a roughly the same distance as before.

“They transfer things like this, including refugees, yes ...” the invalid explained with a smile, “sometimes also from the boats going across the river.”

Radovan understood from this he was talking about smuggling. At the same time a few passengers went to the outside deck.

But soon, they were moving as before.

*excerpt from the novel translated by David Limon*