

COVER PAGE

Harvest

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~ 3,711 words

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The Nadir tumbles clear and sweet from the gorges of the Mirkash, surges past the farm of Agon Zarvin which lies at the edge of the village of Darovinic, rolls serenely under the Darovinic bridge and glides down the broad Vranik valley to Curi Nage, then goes who knows where, perhaps where those long trains go whose lonely whistles glisten and echo like moonwashed ripples through the shimmering night.

Mili Savaya did not know where they went; she'd never travelled beyond the wooded countryside of Darovinic. But were she able, she would happily accompany them, even to the colorful, sinuous bazaars of Curi Nage. If such a fantastic thing were to happen, she would even dare venture to the edge of the dark sea that borders the earth.

This she dreamt as she drew up the heavy wooden bucket from the well of Agon Zarvin, as she recalled the shadowy stranger who, sitting crosslegged in the waning moonlight that sifted among the willows across the river the night before, and a few nights before that, had played softly on his flute a plaintive little tune whose melody she could not dismiss from her mind and could not help humming with a secret smile while she walked back to the farmhouse of Agon Zarvin, where she prepared to cook their evening meal.

Mili poured some of the water into a chipped porcelain basin and began to wash the turnips and potatoes. She thought of her mother, so weak and frail after nearly three month's illness, who'd struggled every afternoon from the bed where she and Agon slept and helped prepare meals even when she herself could no longer eat. She'd joked that if she stopped helping around the house Agon would probably shoot her.

But even during her last week, when she could no longer raise her head from the pillow, Agon continued to solicit the counsel and services of the tzigane Sara, who

would arrive day or night whenever he summoned her, bringing poultices and draughts of herbs, then shuffling through the house from boiling kettles in the kitchen to the darkened bedroom, muttering, her face half-hidden in the deep shadows of her gray wool babushka, which she never removed, not even on the night when Mili's mother died.

Supper was pretty much the same most late summer working days: a soup of lentils and barley, which Mili augmented with bits of meat if and when opportunity arose, boiled turnips or baked squash, and a musty, beerlike decoction that Agon brewed from rotten barley but which, because of its savage effect on her digestion, Mili seldom drank.

Agon Zarvin strode toward the house with his usual sense of purpose: he'd spent the afternoon mowing early barley on the rich southern slope that bordered the Nadir, and he was hungry. When he reached the door he could smell the soup simmering on the old wood stove. It wouldn't be much good, he knew. Mili didn't have her mother's resolute devotion to household chores; among other things, she refused to groom the soup for a few days before she served it. "Why should I?" she'd asked defiantly. She seemed to regard her continued habitation in his house as some kind of right, irrespective of his convenience, just because her mother had brought her there as an infant.

He was a small, wiry man, grimy with a lifetime spent in commerce with the earth. His close-trimmed beard was flecked with gray like the granite of the steep gorges of the Mirkash, and his hands were as hard. His blue eyes were icy pale, remote as a faraway sky veiled in unseen mists. He held his utensil in his fist, with his thumb along the handle, and he ate quickly, like a feral dog.

"It's simple," he said, looking up at her without raising his head; "that'll appeal to you. After all those visits from Sara, your mother owed me plenty, and now it's your

obligation to pay it. That's the law. And you have a choice, after all. You can marry the Ugly boy like I told you or you can carry on the things your mother used to do before she got sick, until the bloom is off your plum, so to speak."

"Maybe I'll run off to Curi Nage," she ventured timidly, gazing into her soup, half smiling. Agon had grown more than a little deaf and often seemed not to hear her.

The cat Mir, eyeing a meal, gathered herself and leapt up toward the table's edge, but just before she reached the top of her intended arc she met Agon's iron palm and crumpled with a plaint to the floor.

"Sure, run away. I'll find you before you've had a good night's sleep. And after that, you'll be sleeping in my room."

The cat shook herself and walked nonchalantly toward the kitchen, as if she had never wanted to jump on the table in the first place. Mili envied animals their focus on the present moment. The past burdened them little; the future not at all. It seemed to her a sort of higher wisdom.

"You seem mighty sympathetic toward these dumb animals," he said. "You could lavish some of this concern on me, you know. On this soup even. This soup wouldn't attract flies."

"Milos promised me some scraps, but his wife said they'd had to sell everything to some partisans in the hills."

"Fenestra talks too much."

After supper Mili took some scraps out for the chickens and then walked to the barn to take care of the horses. Agon was already there. "I'm going out," he said.

She brushed the old horse Toika with long careful strokes. She hadn't told Agon about the swelling in his leg. "I wanted you to fix the door hinge on the oven."

"Why? Are you going to bake a cake?"

"No, but the fire goes out at night."

"So? Relight it."

"It takes a long time."

"So? Get up earlier."

"You're not taking Toika are you?"

"I'm taking Dulka."

"But she's been working all day."

"She can do it. She's used to it. That's her lot. It won't kill her."

Agon was a member of the home brigades. During his youth he'd been an artillery officer and now he sometimes roamed the hills with other men, keeping an eye on things. Near the country's borders, far from Curi Nage, the government found it expedient to promote a certain amount of citizen soldiery.

"The other night . . . when it rained . . . when you had her out before . . ."

"Yes?"

"I thought I heard thunder."

"Yes?"

"But there wasn't any lightning."

"Were you hiding under the covers? I saw lots of lightning."

Agon snuggled up Dulka's harness and as he led her toward the door he paused beside Toika's stall. "If that's not better soon, I'm going to have to get rid of him," he said.

She thought of the little sparrow that had been the first visitor to the wooden birdbath she'd erected in the garden just after her mother had died. Agon had abandoned his threshing and eased up behind her, carrying a stone.

"This is ridiculous," he'd said, surprising her, glaring at the bird splashing in the shallow water. "If the damn birds eat the barley, we won't have a crop now, will we?"

Then he'd flung the stone, almost absently but with deadly intent, and as the little

bird, startled, fluttered up from its ablutions, the missile struck it just between its shoulderblades. The bird froze for a moment in midair. Then, its lifeless wings folded upward like a butterfly's, it fell to earth. Just thinking of it made her wince.

Agon had grinned with satisfaction as he'd turned back to the threshing mill. "Get rid of it," he'd said.

"You can work on the stove instead of going down to the river tonight. The Roma saw you the other night, you know. She said you were down there a long time."

"I was thinking."

"Ha! About what? The old crone said she heard music. Do you play the pipes now?"

"Maybe I was singing a little."

"Thinking and singing, eh? Well, you have plenty of time to work on the stove hinge then, don't you?"

She said nothing.

"You're meeting some boy down there aren't you?"

"No."

"Who is it?"

"Who is what? I haven't met anybody."

"Some Nic, like as not. On the other side of the river in the middle of the night, it must be some damn gypsy Nic. Are you crazy? He'll catch you and carve you up like a hog, or sell you to some Arab slaver. Thieves and murderers they are, the lot of 'em."

It seemed incredible to Mili that a people so given over to evil would long survive, and she knew moreover that among the Conists there were a fair number of equally unsavory individuals, but she worked a dollop of salve into Toika's leg and held her tongue.

Agon had fitted Dulka with a draft harness, but as soon as they were out the door

he nevertheless swung himself up onto her bare back and together they ambled slowly off toward the long-shadowed Darovinician hills.

Mili gave Toika an apple and returned to the house, where she cleaned up the supper dishes as the sun set in the southwest, red with the roiled dust of harvest. She examined the stove hinge one more time, although she knew it was pointless; the old metal had torn around the rivet heads. Agon would have to find and mount another hinge. Then she went to her room.

Agon led Dulka carefully along the narrow trail. The moon was nearly new, and under the trees the darkness was profound. Still, they had trod this path many times before. Dulka knew it almost as well as he did, and on the way home he would lie on her back and sleep. She knew, too, he supposed, what they were up to; she was weary from her day's labors and she seemed to be conserving her strength. But this night's work would be brief. The gun was already in place. They had only to haul a half-dozen rounds to the top of the hill, an easy chore for the big mare, tired as she was. Agon's mind drifted into the past, into other nights like this one and the days that followed.

He heard the crazed, incessant shouts, and shrieks, of men and shells, the maelstrom of chaos, baking heat or bitter cold – battles always take place in awful weather. He saw the blood, spattered everywhere, and the corpses, friends, acquaintances, enemies, animals, strewn upon the innocent earth, whose unseeing eyes spoke with uncanny urgency. "Wait! I was too young, too pathetic, too naive, too stupid, too courageous, too often in the wrong place at the wrong time. Mourn me, avenge me, comfort me, carry me home." But he was always too busy to stop and chat. And they would wait forever.

She brushed her long black hair contemplatively. Perhaps tonight the flute player would come again. No doubt she'd hear a train. "There isn't a train I wouldn't take, no matter where it's going." That's what her poet said. That's how she felt, too.

Perhaps she'd extinguish the candle lantern and shed her clothes – not if the flute player was there, of course – and take a bath in the chilly water. The moon was nearly gone. The dust of the countryside seemed to fill her pores like cement. Never mind she'd grown a bit plump; never mind her skin was as ghastly white under her clothes as it was reddened around her face and arms. Who would care?

She folded a small woolen blanket under her arm and took up her little book and her lantern and made her way down the meadow path to the river's edge. There, beneath a huge old maple tree, she sat on her blanket and tried to read. Her mind kept wandering to the opposite shore.

After awhile, recognizing that her reverie was more insistent than the poets' rhymes, she blew out the candle and waited as gradually her eyes became accustomed to the night, enjoying the soft rushing of the river through the still darkness, a susurrant rhythm she had not noticed earlier. She began slowly unlacing her shoes. The thin sliver of moon cast only a pale light but the stars seemed very brilliant. As she pulled the long leather laces through their eyelets she noticed a little splash in the river not far from the opposite shore. Within a few minutes she could see him swimming, slowly, deliberately, with a bundle of clothes held above his head. He passed close to her.

"I'll be right back," he called out softly. "I have to get dressed." Then he floated downstream, past some bushes and out of sight.

A few minutes later he emerged from the darkness. He introduced himself, and she let him share her blanket. He'd brought a small white rose for her, its curled leaves and long stem nestled in the throat of his flute. It was sweetly fragrant.

"I'm supposed to be in a band, but it's not really a band and I'm not really in it."

"You're a soldier?"

He laughed. "I'm just a flute player. I keep up morale during their hikes. They're peeved with me because I play all the time, even when I'm supposed to be digging

trenches or something. They keep threatening to send me to the stockade but they just move me to another encampment, and when nobody's looking I can sneak out and wander wherever I want. Tomorrow they're going on an expedition of some sort, so they'll need me to play the marching tunes."

"An expedition?"

"I don't know. Some stupid game. Listen, I have a little boat downriver about a mile. I keep it beside a clump of alders below the meadow where my friend Knev Jarol pastures his sheep in the summertime. Sometimes I go fishing, but mostly I just row to some quiet spot and drift around. We could go down there if you'd be willing to swim across the river."

"Oh, and we could float down to the ocean!"

"Sure, to the ocean."

"You've been there?"

"No, people say you can't get past Curi Nage without the authorities' seizing your boat, but I think maybe you could do it at night when there's no moon."

He looked at her. "Want to go see it?"

"I'm not a very good swimmer, and the currents are strong here."

He smiled. "That they are," he agreed.

Frizbi played softly on his flute for the better part of an hour. Some of the melodies she knew; some she'd never heard before. He played a tune he'd devised, he said, just for her. She thought it very beautiful, haunting even.

He asked about the book of poems she'd brought and she wanted to read some of them to him but it was too dark and they were afraid to relight the lantern for fear the tzigane might be watching. So she quoted from memory what she could remember and paraphrased what she could not, and he listened, fascinated. She told him of her romance with the trains, and what they represented to her – a promise of new life, and

happiness, somewhere far away. He told her the trains came mostly from the south, and went mostly to Curi Nage, and then he did not know where.

She asked him to play again the little song he had composed for her, but he shyly declined, saying his poor tune would seem a pauper compared to her bejewelled poetry. He'd stayed longer than he'd meant to; he had to return before he was missed. After he'd swum back across the Nadir, though, and as he made his way through the willow shrubs, he did play it again. It seemed to her to fill the entire valley with its silvery sweetness.

As he walked back toward the camp, Frizbi heard a train whistle, long and tremulous, in the darkness, and he knew she'd heard it too. He wondered why she hadn't simply left the farm of Agon Zarvin and gone to Curi Nage, or anywhere for that matter, as he had once done. But now he was in the army, trading freedom for food as he thought of it, not footloose and carefree as he had been when he'd first departed from the hearth of his parents. Maybe he should ride the train to Curi Nage, to the dark sea at the edge of the world. Maybe she'd go along. Maybe he wasn't any freer than she was. He crept back into his tent, careful not to awaken any of the other men who slept there, and slid noiselessly under his blanket.

When Mili awoke, the eastern sky was pale with the incipient dawn. She felt strangely ill at ease; something was wrong. After a moment, she wrapped herself in her housecoat and stealthily opened her bedroom door. Across the hallway, Agon's door was open. He'd been there; she'd heard him come in. But now he was gone.

The village of Darovinic was in a disputed territory. So far as anyone knew, it had always been a disputed territory. Usually the Conists had kept a firm grip on the area but occasionally the Nictosi had burst in and taken it over. Nomadic by nature, and not adroit at administering anything, they'd usually soon lost it again. When Agon was a boy, they'd overrun the village and managed to hang onto it for two years, causing great

consternation among the Conist merchants and farmers, but during Mili's lifetime they hadn't even attempted another incursion. Now, perhaps, the time had come 'round again.

Mili stood by the river where the night before she had spent those precious hours with the mysterious flutist Frizbi. Where was he now? She was afraid. Agon was not in the fields. Where had he gone? There seemed only one answer. A chill breeze of sadness washed over her, and at that moment a train whistle shrilled across the river, soaring high into the morning air, then faded off slowly toward Curi Nage until at last it died away into silence. She bent down and began unlacing her boots.

She was jostled downstream by the swift current, her skirts billowing in the water then slowly deflating, matting around her legs, making her feel heavy and awkward. Still, she flailed with her arms, somehow keeping herself afloat. Then she saw the bridge, still far off, and the many men upon it, and she knew.

His lips were pursed across the flute as he played the little sequence of notes that meant abandon the marching rhythm. It hardly mattered, he thought; these men could not march in unison even on a parade field. The soldiers began to break step and before long were laughing and joking, sauntering onto the bridge.

"What's that?" the sergeant-major inquired aloud, glancing upstream. Frizbi looked. It was a swimmer – no, a struggling woman, shrieking for assistance.

"It's a woman," Frizbi said. "She's in trouble."

"She's making too much noise," the sergeant-major said as he unslung his rifle. "She'll give us away."

"No," Frizbi cried, pulling the barrel down. "She's drowning!"

Then he clambered up onto the railing, thinking nothing of what he was doing.

"Frizbi, get your ass off there!" the sergeant-major ordered irritably. "You want to go back to the stockade?"

The woman was almost recognizable now, her cries almost decipherable. Her face sank into the Nadir, her dark hair splayed across the surface, raked by her white arms. She reappeared. Frizbi strained to hear her.

The ragtag troop stretched almost across the bridge now, some playfully stomping in exaggerated sidesteps, trying to set the bridge swaying.

Agon Zarvin stood poised beside his cannon, watching the Nictosi soldiers stream onto the bridge. They covered its deck. Those in the vanguard were almost across.

One had climbed onto the bridge railing and crouched precariously there, teetering over the black water, as if considering a refreshing plunge.

"Can't decide, eh? Here, this'll help you." He patted the shoulder of his gunner. "Now," he said. "Send 'em all to hell."

The cannon thumped, then roared, reeling backward into the summer dust. The great shell arced into the Darovinian sky, shearing the reluctant air already pierced by a shrill voice, a familiar voice.

Agon's glasses found her just before she was swept under the bridge, just as the bridge itself erupted into a great fountain of chaos, splinters of wood, timbers, shards of steel, clumps of stone, bodies and parts of men, sprayed into the shuddering morning like a gigantic sneeze, spinning outward, upward, everywhere. A direct hit. A beautiful shot. Birds scattered through the trees as the bridge surged up from the river, spat itself into the torpid atmosphere, then fell slowly, rained, showered back into the black water with myriad white splashes, foam frothed pink with blood, debris, hats, boots, rifles, twisted things, chunks, pebbles, dust, a downpour, a deluge of rubble.

The Nictosi did not enter Darovinic that day, nor any other day that summer. Agon Zarvin soon enough realized the girl in the water must've been Mili, especially after the old tzigane told him she'd noticed the girl that morning, shortly after dawn, walking by the river, her eyes red with crying. He suspected she'd deliberately sacrificed

her own life. "Dumb bitch," he muttered. "Cursed just like her mother."

The flute player Frizbi, like the rest of the Nictosi soldiers who'd been with him that morning, was never seen again. But the shepherd Knev Jarol did notice, later that evening, while he and his neighbors were inspecting the thick swirl of flotsam caught in the weeds along the riverbank a mile or so below the bridge, that the flute player's boat was no longer tied at its usual mooring. He gazed across the river, as if that lush green foliage, now splashed with autumn reds and yellows, were somehow different over there.

"Killers and thieves," he murmured under his breath as he turned away. "The lot of them."

••• THE END •••