

Other Songs

by Jacek Dukaj

Translated by Stanley S. Bill

(excerpt)

The tinderboxes had ceased to strike, the matches had ceased to light, the keraunets and pyrosiders could no longer be fired – at this we knew that the Warlock had come.

The first suicides among the soldiers occurred in the evening of the following day. It was the second month of the siege and I had close to seven hundred men under my command, not counting the six thousand inhabitants of Kolenica who had remained in their homes. Nobody kept count of the suicides among the townsmen.

At that time, I walked in the morphe of a great strategos: armies swore their loyalty at the mere sight of me, battles were won with barely a glance at the field, my orders were followed before I had finished issuing them. I felt that the keros was yielding beneath my feet, I was more than seven pus tall, not a single bed in Kolenica was large enough for me. I was twenty-four years old and I had never lost a battle; armies, castles, cities, countries, everything was ahead of me, no dream was large enough. And then the Warlock came.

You should know why I had got stuck in Kolenica in the first place. The commander-in-chief of the Vistula army, Marshal Slavski, on the orders of Casimir III, had commanded a counteroffensive along the Carpathian foothills, while the Goths coming from the north were to push the Warlock's forces back to the Moscow line. On the maps it looked like a classic horseshoe: the enemy would either retreat or be forced to fight on two fronts, failure on either being equally catastrophic, or risk striking at our seemingly exposed centre, a certain trap which would close at once into a deadly encirclement. But in order to conduct the southeast counter-offensive Slavski was in need of a larger army and preferably one composed of veterans. So he gathered them together, reducing by two or three times the strength of the units holding the centre of the horseshoe. In Martius, I had had three thousand men; in Aprilis, fewer than a thousand remained. Slavski's reasoning was sound: even after such a weakening of the

defenses the Warlock's strategoi would have had to be almost out of the minds to move against the central Vistula fortifications. The assumption was that they would retreat. As you know, they did not retreat.

Through Aprilis we held out without any great difficulties. Every day I climbed to the top of the Kolenica minaret, from which I had a perfect view of the suburbium and the fields as far as the forest. For a few weeks I sent out regular mounted scouting missions, I set up guard posts in the neighboring villages of the Vistula basin upon a line of three hundred stadia, we remained in constant contact with Cracovia. In effect, I was responsible for a front line of nearly a thousand stadia in length, from Brotta to Cherabuzh, and so the majority of the Mazovian garrisons were under my command. In theory, that is, according to Slavski's strategy, I ought to have received daily reports from them and from headquarters on the movements of the Moscow armies and at the first signs of a retreat I was to mobilize the whole central front after them. Thus I was the commander-in-chief of the Western Army and the defeat went down under my name in the chronicles. But from the very beginning the reports came seldom and late, if at all, and I had to withdraw my own guard posts and sentinels once the enemy had gathered in larger forces. One night they burned three of our villages – this was the limit of reasonable risk. My scouts were also coming back increasingly mauled. From interrogations of captured enemy tongues I knew that Trepiei Sunshine, the grandson of Ivan the Dwarf, was approaching us with his ten-thousand-strong Ural horde. Of course I sent dispatches to Cracovia at once, for this was intelligence indicating that they had decided after all on a strategy of frontal attack. I was reckoning on immediate reinforcements. The reinforcements did not arrive and we found ourselves cut off. Trepiei pushed deep and occupied all the bridges and fords in front of and behind us. We were reduced to relying on pigeons, but by now this was already a lottery. The Muscovites had brought ingeniously morphed up hawks with them and they hunted down nine out of ten of the birds we dispatched in the very skies above Kolenica. We watched as they tore them to shreds. Nevertheless, Slavski ordered us to "hold the town at all costs." Kolenica was a key point and the invader could neither leave it behind him nor go around it – and thus it was entrusted to Hieronymus Berbelek.

We were well prepared for a siege. Earlier I had assembled the ge demiurgoi to repair the city walls. I gathered supplies, I deepened the wells. Kolenica had also been inhabited for years by a half-wild technites of soma and until Martius no one had even fallen ill. Then the exchange of fire began and the pyrosiders thundered day and night – casualties were unavoidable. And yet I am certain that Trepiei suffered many more than we did; I had good soldiers, good men in the morph of ares, and skilled gunners. Our range was always greater, we fired more accurately, and we demolished the Muscovites' pyrosiders and gunpowder magazines. Once they attempted a frontal assault and we repulsed them almost without losses. Morale was high; in my army morale was always high. I led two night-time forays; we burnt a part of their supply train. It was only a question of time as to when Slavski would strengthen us with reinforcements or close the encirclement from the south. Admittedly they had the meteo demiurgos with them and so not a single drop of rain had fallen in weeks and everything was as dry as a bone. They were counting on a fire, but I had given the townsmen solid training and the damage was minimal. We were holding on.

With the beginning of Maius, the reinforcements did indeed begin to arrive – reinforcements for Trepiei. I watched from the minaret as they set up their camp on the plain surrounding Kolenica in rows of identical tents of the same color along the very line of the horizon. No good would come from counting them and more terrifying in any case were the invisible ranks hidden behind the horizon. These new arrivals brought behemoths with them, as well as various kinds of Ural kakomorphs, a dark brood of the Warlock's creation – a certain sign that Ivan the Dwarf himself was approaching with the main strength of his forces. Ghouls, kravens, magnans: morphed up from animals into men or, even more monstrously, from men into animals. They unchained them at dusk and the creatures came up to the walls and climbed them as high as the battlements. Some of them could talk and so they whispered in black tongues out of the moonless darkness. The soldiers lost their nerve and fired blindly into the night, squandering the pyros. Catapults hurled kravens over the walls in surprise attacks – they were already dead. Trepiei's aim was to spread all the plagues they carried in their abdominal sacs, stretched tight like drums with seething pestilence. We knew it would be a lengthy siege if they wanted to take us by kakomorphy. Perhaps they had crazed technitai among them who

would purposefully spread sick anthoi over Kolenica – coronas of the disintegration of Form. But I doubt it. This is always a great risk for an army – to drag people like that along with it – for as a rule there is no way to control lunatics and discipline always deteriorates first. Or perhaps our technites of body simply held us tightly in his aura. Either way, the epidemic did not break out.

I'd had an escape plan prepared from the beginning: to break through fast in a wedge at an unexpected moment and gallop towards the west. But the civilians obviously posed a problem – I could not save them that way. But my centurion raised purely military arguments: sitting here in confinement I was simply wasting the army, while the gods knew what was happening in the wider world, whether the Vistula was not even now falling under the Dwarf's whip, Svetovid under the Warlock's spell – and, who knew, we might be able to tip the scales to the other side. I might be able to do it.

In the fourth week of Maius, a rumor began to circulate about the defeat of Slavski's main forces, that King Casimir had fled from Cracovia and that Svetovid was making off for the western forests. It was not possible to feel it yet, but the men believed in this rumor so strongly that it was all one whether it was truth or fiction – their spirits began to fall. I delivered a few speeches; they helped for a short while.

With the beginning of Iunius, I myself felt that a change was taking place. It was not possible to hide this from the men; it was enough to throw a handful of sticks onto the earth and half of them would always fall into various geometric patterns, squares, octagons, pentagrams, stars – you know the Warlock's seal. A handful of sticks or sand, stir up the water, let off the smoke... He was coming. Public denials were useless: he must have come down from the Urals at the beginning of the spring, he had surely passed Moscow by now, and he was heading west, straight towards us.

At least in his corona I was not threatened by rebellions and the hysteria of a terrified populace. With each passing day discipline and obedience were growing; before long the Kolenicans were falling on their faces at my feet, almost licking my boots. At first I was outraged by this, but the Warlock's anthos was eating into me too and a week later I was ordering the whipping of a quarrelsome merchant when he did not bow his head to the ground before me.

The sky was bright and cloudless in the warm azure of the Vistulan summer, but we all knew this was only the foul deception of Matter.

Ivan the Dwarf's camp was swelling around the town like an ulcer about an open wound. At night there were fires and music – they were celebrating. They stopped shooting at us and this was even more disquieting. I thought about another foray, at least to catch an enemy tongue so that we could find out what their plans were and what was transpiring. The last pigeon had reached us six weeks earlier – we were cut off. The world beyond the tower's sight lines did not exist.

Then the tinderboxes ceased to strike, the matches ceased to light, the pyros no longer ignited. The sentries on the night-time watches began to throw themselves from the battlements, straight into the arms of the sniggering ghouls and kravens. Sunshine – that is, the Dwarf – was pulling his armies back to the very edge of the forest; now the siege depended on something else entirely. At dusk a herald stood beneath the gates: "Lay down your weapons and open the gates and he will reward you with your lives. One way or another you will fall at his feet, dead or alive. He has come. He is waiting. Open the gates. There is but one order in the world, one ruler. Behold his shadow. Open the gates. The kratistos Maxim Rog has come!" I ordered my crossbowmen to shoot the herald and to shoot down any that might follow, whatever colors they displayed.

Maxim Rog, the Warlock, the Giant of the Urals, the Eternal Widower, the kratistos-suzerain of Moscow, the black legend of Europe, the hero of hundreds of romantic dramas, the worm of history, the invincible terror of a thousand names – I beheld him for the first time at dawn on the fourth of Quintilis. From the minaret through the spyglass. He was riding alone through the midst of the no man's land between the trenches of Ivan the Dwarf's army and the walls of Kolenica, circumnavigating the town. He was mounted on some kind of horned zoomorph with fur as black as coal and a high, curved spine, probably descended from camels or humias. The true proportions of the figure only became apparent to me after several minutes: mounted upon such a great steed, the man that I saw must have been himself at least eight pus tall. But he gave the impression more of being a thickset, broad-shouldered brute than a bony scrag. It was hot, he wore only a white tunic and breeches. I did not see his face, only a mane of dark

hair and a black beard. Once he turned his head towards me and I was sure that he had caught sight of me. This was impossible, but I was sure of it – I barely managed not to drop the spyglass. You must understand this: by now it was enough for him to look at me. Descending from the tower I counted the steps like the minutes before an execution. I knew that he would win. I knew that we had no chance. We would have to open the gates. It was the Warlock.

The soldiers saw him too. This was a part of his plan: after all, it was already a pure struggle for the imposition of will, Form against Form. I delivered another speech: “I shall not allow the propagation of this terror. Attempts at flight will be punished by death. They will not enter here if we do not let them in ourselves. Patience! Help is on the way!”

The Warlock circled around the town like a wolf around a fire, day after day, night after night, a lone silhouette on an empty field, constant as a black star, a sundial of defeat. With each passing hour we were falling deeper into his anthos. I do not know whether he had always possessed this corona, or whether he chose precisely this morphe for us; in any case, that thing which the keros of Kolenica was moving towards, the final Form... We were being pulled towards nothingness, the void, inertia, lifelessness, silence, and the perfect order of death. Have you ever sensed how unnatural, strange and terrifying it is that you are alive at all, that you breathe, move, speak, eat, excrete? What absurdities, what perversions, the hideousness of the warm body, spit, blood, bile, all circulating inside you, turning around your soft organs, when it has no right to be so, when it ought not to be so! Lay your hand upon your breast – what is it that beats there? – by the gods it is unbearable, the horror and disgust, tear it out, destroy it, stop it, return to the earth.

He was devouring us.

I went out into the empty streets, probably I alone had the strength to ascend the tower by now, to walk around the walls, to inspect the guard posts; in truth there was nothing to inspect, those who had remained there had done so not from duty or fear of me, but simply because it required no movement, no decision, no impulse of the will – they were almost dead already. Often I could not tell the sleeping from the dead. They did not eat, they did not drink, they fell asleep in piss and shit. One evening, when I returned to my quarters, I came across my deputy

and three centurions asleep in the briefing room. I sniffed their glasses: they were not sleeping, they had taken almond poison with their wine.

Quintilis gave way to Sextilis and I no longer had anything to wear: all of my clothes had become far too large for me. I rolled up my trouser legs, tightened my belt, cut my shirt sleeves, and stole some boots from a corpse. Others had the same problem, they had complained of it even earlier. But the majority of them did not bother themselves with this, they went around naked, their armour had long before been discarded. I tried to maintain discipline, at least among the officers. None of my threats had any effect. I got into the habit of taking nightly walks; I could not fall asleep in that enormous bed. I went on these walks in order to eavesdrop, to listen to the mood of the soldiers and the Kolenicans, to hear what they were talking about. But by then there was no longer anything to overhear; free converse had become as much of a rarity as laughter. The Form of Kolenica had become Silence.

I could not understand why they were not attacking; they would take the walls in the first assault – nobody would stand against them. Did they not know this? Did the Warlock not know? Instead of this, days, weeks, months in his corona, the town and the men, was he killing us, no, were we killing ourselves, no, the affinity with death had simply prevailed over the affinity with life. It was the same with the trees, the grass, the animals – stunted, pale, dry, if alive then perishing. In such an aura only a kratistos was able to keep his Form.

In truth, I barely remember this time; it has been burnt out of my memory. Of course it was not a matter of not surrendering; do not believe the chronicles. By then it was not a matter of anything. Probably if somebody had picked them up and shouted at them to open the gates... But no one was capable of it any longer. I counted the beats of my heart to convince myself that some kind of “I” still existed, some kind of Hieronymus Berbelek, anything. Much later I discovered that in the last days I had become the only living person in Kolenica or at least the only conscious one – and you can imagine just how conscious I was when I possess no memories of those days. Only this: the great ghastly Sun in the bright azure of the sky.

Yes, and of course the final memory, when he had already entered the town. Now I think that he was actually searching for me. After all, he knew who I was – that is, they had told him who was in charge there. You must understand that this alone constitutes victory for the

kratistoi: not the destruction, exhaustion or flight of the enemy, but his voluntary obeisance. As much as any of our deeds in this world can be called voluntary. That is their triumph.

He entered alone, in accordance with the legend: he always enters alone and takes possession. I am not certain if I sensed it and came out to face him or if he found me on that street. Midday, heat, no shade. I caught sight of him looming from behind a street corner, he was on foot, in his left hand he held a martinet, he beat it rhythmically against his thigh. Slowly, step by step, it was the walk of a victor, and every space he crossed, every house he passed, everything he looked at – it truly appeared to me that I saw the ripple of the morphe flowing through the keros – thenceforth everything was more akin to the Warlock. He found me lying on the ground and as he walked towards me I tried to hoist myself up onto my feet. I had not eaten anything for a long time, food was unthinkable, I would willingly have remained on all fours, I knew that I ought to remain on all fours, on my knees, face in the dust, to kiss his feet, when he drew near I would have to do this, it was natural, everything was tending towards this – try to understand, although these are only words – when I raised my eyes he was covering half the sky, a giant, he had surpassed humankind, we would not reach even to his shoulders, his chest, he is above and we are below, earth, dust, dirt, on our knees, on our knees – try to understand – he did not have to say anything, he stood above me, the martinet against his thigh, slap-slap, I mumbled something, perhaps I moaned imploringly, spittle in my beard, head hung low, but still I would raise myself, legs, arms, lurching forward and trembling, he stands, he waits, I sensed his odour, something like the almonds of the suicides, and perhaps the scent of his corona – try to understand, I myself do not understand – I stood up, I lifted my eyes, half-blinded, I looked him in the eye, blue pupils, tanned skin, he smiled through his moustache, what was that smile supposed to signify, to this day I dream about it, the smile of a triumphant kratistos. Can you understand? He could have uttered the word and I would have torn out my own heart to please him.

I spat in his face.