

FIRE WORSHIPERS

written by

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dedicated to the Carpathian Mountains
which provided safety for peoples
who were able to tame them

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INTRODUCTION

I had several reasons for writing this book. One reason is related to my background of growing up in the heart of the beautiful Carpathian Mountains with fascinating history, involving not only Slavic people, but also other civilizations that lived here and flourished. It was out of my interest in history and love of several locations that played important roles in the past, that I've decided to promote them embodied in a fascinating tale of our first known ruler that we, unfortunately, know so little of.

Over critical times, tribes with similar cultural background used to choose a leader that would help them overcome an adverse situation and in this case they made a wise decision and chose a foreigner, a simple arms trader that rose to become an important player in Europe. My goal was to spread the story of emerging peoples that are to this day somehow overlooked by history and arts.

Even though information about Samo and early development of Slavic peoples are scarce, Samo's accomplishments, taking all the difficulties into account, can be perceived as admirable. Thanks to leaders like Samo, Slavic peoples rose to become an integral part of European space and historical events. Since information regarding Samo are limited with even fewer facts, I had to write the book from a different perspective and therefore the book is indeed fiction with elements of fantasy.

Curious readers will further research the topic and find out what was merely dreamed up, what most probably was possible and what could be possible. I'll be most pleased if this book motivates people to be more interested about this corner of the world and maybe see the beauty of it for themselves.

Title of the book is derived from an ancient connection between humans and fire. From early on it was considered as a gift from gods and its mysticity persisted within and not only Indo-European cultures. Its purpose is to insert the reader into a place and time of bygone ages, where humans were driven not only by reason and emotions, but also beliefs, myths and superstitions. And they couldn't imagine giving up on their gods.

To summarize it up, this book is about the early Slavic people and their paganism and mythology. It's about their achievements in a time when human life could end with just a snap of a finger and people waited for a great individual that would lead them to progress.

I hope you will enjoy it.

PROLOGUE

Due to the declining power of Rome and Constantinople, tribes all over Eurasia saw an opportunity in an expansion into richer European lands, which led into the Migration Period. Everyone wanted to grab a part of Europe's wealth.

Strong Hunnic tribal formations took over a significant part of Europe and spread destruction everywhere they stepped foot. After the death of Attila, the Empire was crushed to the ground by Germanic tribes, which opened the doors for something new to come.

A significant part in history was going to be played by the emerging Slavic people, in that time called Venedi, who survived all turmoils, waited for their chance, expanded into the mainland of central and south-eastern parts of Europe, while pushing Germanic and other tribes away and mixing themselves with the remnants of local natives.

They settled next to rivers, mountains, fertile lands and created several centers ruled by different tribes, which couldn't stay unnoticed from other prospering cultures in Europe. One of the most thriving tribes settled around the river Morava and it was going to dominate the others culturally, commercially and militarily for many years to come.

But a new threat appeared on the horizon. Nomadic Avars coming from Asia crossed the Carpathian Mountains, conquering nearby tribes, pillaging settlements and trade routes along the river Danube. Word of Avar cruelty spread quickly.

Subjugated Venedian tribes had to fight on the side of Avars literally in first rows, so that Avars wouldn't suffer many casualties during their conquests. Late at night Avar warriors lied down with Venedian women, which caused even more hatred towards the new tyrants.

Avars despised everything that was holy to the Venedian people. Gods were not pleased with the destruction of their temples and holy sites. They couldn't look away from this contempt anymore.

PERUN, also addressed by locals as PAROM, highest god of all gods, had to witness his temples to be burned to the ground and thus he was especially furious. He sent deadly thunderstorms towards lands settled by Avars, but this just multiplied their rage and hostilities.

PERUN found a chosen one, who was worthy of restoring respect for the gods and regaining independence for his people. The chosen one was an arms trader from the Frankish lands called Samo.

CHAPTER I - THE SWORD

Our story begins with Samo returning from Bavaria through the land of Carantania* with acquired arms aimed to fuel the proceeding revolt of Venedian people against Avar rule. His mission is to bring weapons and freshly trained units to the western shore of river Vah, where his fellow Venedian warriors established a temporary winter camp. But first he has to arm new recruits waiting at a fortified city on the river Diya.

He's accompanied by his brother in law Vladislav, a skilled archer and wise military strategist, ten swordsmen on horse-drawn carriages and another brother in law going with the name Drahomir, a dexterous swordsman riding in the back of the caravan.

Vladislav and Drahomir were put by their father, a Venedian chieftain, under Samo's patronage in order to teach them everything and make wise leaders out of them. They both went through an intensive military training going on for years and now they needed to learn to think first and make rational decisions that will be for the benefit of their people.

"Bavaria was exceptionally cold this time," noted Vladislav apparently still freezing from the harsh winter.

"After we deliver these weapons, we need to rest for few days. We fought for a long time, traded lots of gems for weapons and I miss my family" said Samo tiredly.

"I miss Drahoslava as well. I haven't had a good meal for a long time now," replied Vladislav talking about his sister cheerfully.

"Don't be so rude or I will make you eat only bread with water for a week. We should be grateful for what we have. Especially in these difficult times," replied Samo sharply, amazed by Vladislav's poverty of thoughts.

"Forgive me," responded Vladislav a bit ashamed. "What are your next plans in our struggle?" he continued with a question.

* Carantania – land stretching approximately over present Austria

“The key to our success is the city of Nitrava*, center of your tribe, which your family had to leave for Moravia** even before you were born. In order to capture it, we must first secure the hill Zobor, which is overlooking the city. Remember my words, whoever controls Zobor, controls Nitrava and its lands as well. And gods are my witness, we will succeed,” said Samo fully convinced.

“What will happen then?” asked Vladislav.

“Then we will liberate the plains of Pannonia*** where our people must live under Avar rule as well,” replied Samo and they continued their journey thinking of how to achieve their goals.

On their way towards the river Diya, while moving through an oak forest, their caravan got attacked by a group of Avar scouts armed with traditional swords and bows. There were twice as much Avars as there were Samo’s men.

Avars were people that came from distant places of Asia to find themselves a piece of Europe, from where they could loot other tribes and dominate them in all aspects. They had oval shaped faces, long black hair, beards and mustaches, always riding their horses growing up with a bow and sword in their hands.

“Take cover, Avars are attacking!” shouted Drahomir from the back of the caravan. “Form a circle and wait for them to get closer!” he continued and the swordsmen listened to his orders.

The outnumbered group was ready to fight till the bitter end. All the sudden a majestic eagle flew above their heads holding a silver sword in its claws and released it straight into Samo’s hands. “For PERUN and our people!” shouted Samo, he grasped the sword and swung it on an Avar swordsman running towards him. Their blades met and blinding lightnings bursted from the silver sword followed by deafening thunders.

Both the attackers and defenders were in shock due to this never before seen magic. Samo did not hesitate and swung his sword a second time. He hit the surprised Avar swordsman, but no blood was spilled. Instead the Avar got instantly petrified and the remaining attackers, not believing what happened, ran away in horror.

Drahomir and Vladislav inspected the petrified Avar in disbelief, while Samo was looking closely at the magical sword. “Who’s behind this miracle and why am I the one with the privilege to hold this blessed weaponry?” asked Samo confusedly.

* Nitrava – current city of Nitra

** Moravia - land stretching approximately around the river Morava

*** Pannonia - land stretching approximately between the Danube and Sava rivers

The mysterious eagle was watching the whole fight from a nearby oak tree branch. “Kneel before me!” shouted the eagle. “I am your supreme god, PERUN the thunderer, giver and taker of lives. As I overcame VELES, god of the underworld, you will take care of your arch enemy and oust Avars from your lands!” continued PERUN referring to a duel with his counterpart, the god of the underworld, livestock and wealth, VELES.

Samo’s group fell into their knees and lowered their sights. Their almighty god took the form of an eagle and helped them when they needed him the most.

“We the gods have chosen you Samo to lead the campaign against the unbelievers. Hold on to this powerful sword, which was crafted for you by SVAROG, creator of everything, and you will find answers to your questions on a mountain, which was once the center of a long forgotten magnificent culture.“

“Defeat the unbelievers! So I command and so it shall be done!” added the eagle and flew away into the depths of the oak forest.

The group stepped closer to Samo while Drahomir picked up his courage to speak: “Well, every great sword needs a name.” Drahomir tried to grab the sword to see for himself but it shocked him and he pulled his hand back. “Oh, that hurts so much,” he added.

“It looks like it was meant just for me,” said Samo.

“So then we should call it after you,” replied Vladislav. “What about The sword of Samo the Great?” he asked cheerfully.

“We’re not there yet,” replied Samo laughingly.

“What about Samo the Venedian? You know that we consider you ours,” said Drahomir.

“So be it. From now on, it will be called The Sword of Samo the Venedian!” replied Samo and pointed the sword towards the sky.

The group got on their horses and continued their journey towards the land of Moravia. After a while Samo asked Vladislav: “Why so thoughtful? What are you thinking of?”

“What did PERUN, the highest god of all gods, mean with the center of a long forgotten magnificent culture?” replied Vladislav with another question.

“Elders in Moravia use to tell the story of people that lived in these lands even before all the tribes that we know by name. It was a time when there were no steel swords or tools and people moved into uplands to seek protection of hills and mountains. In this period of time, good hunting grounds and fertile lands were not the most important benefit anymore. Only people who settled the highest could survive and a culture evolved around the mountain range with the name Tribech. This must be it! This must be the place our god intended us to go!” said Samo.

“Isn’t that mountain close to Nitrava?” asked Vladislav.

“It’s a pity that you were never able to see your homeland. Once I wanted to see the Tribech Mountain for myself, how it looked like, so I went to the top and I was amazed by its breathtaking view. But it wasn’t possible to see Nitrava from there, because the hills Zobor and Zubritsa blocked the view” replied Samo. “Now we must hurry to Moravia to get these weapons to new recruits. We will stay with Drahoslava for a short time and then we will escort the armed recruits to our winter camp near the river Vah,” he concluded.

After several hours of riding they finally arrived to the shores of river Diya and crossed its branches through a series of narrow fords and found themselves at the gates of a huge city called Diyagrad,* entrance to the fertile region of Moravia.

* Diyagrad - fictional name of the fortress Pohansko near Břeclav

CHAPTER II - MORAVIA

“Welcome home, honorable Samo!” shouted a guard overlooking the palisades. “Open the gates!” he continued.

The main square was filled with people, because news of their arrival spread quickly. People were cheering. Samo jumped off his horse and ran towards his house. Drahoslava was waiting in front of the door.

“Draha, I missed you so much,” whispered Samo gently while Drahoslava smiled. Then they both kissed. It was a while when they were the last time together. Samo was fighting with his armies in the Vah valley and during the siege of Preslav* for a long time and Drahoslava was waiting for him, taking care of their small children and even some city affairs.

“It’s been so long, my darling,” replied Drahoslava. “All of our girls are walking by now,” she explained with a glow in her eyes. They had three daughters altogether.

In the evening Samo noticed that Drahoslava is deep in her thoughts. “Draha, what’s on your mind?” he asked.

“Samko, you can have as many wives as you please. Why are you only with me? Am I really enough for you?” asked Drahoslava referring to the traditional Venedian polygamy.

“As you know, I’m different than all the other Venedian men. I could never be with another woman,” answered Samo. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t here for the start of the fasting season,” he continued.

“It was magical as usual,” said Drahoslava. “As you know, I like animal masks representing bulls, horses, bears, goats and so on,” she continued talking about a holiday where men dressed in costumes and masks performing a ritual aimed at protecting against negative forces and ensuring a fruitful year.

“And you don’t like the masks of ghost,” said Samo with a smile.

“Oh, you know me so well,” replied Drahoslava and smiled at Samo.

* Preslav - current city of Bratislava

After having a late dinner, Samo went to a meeting of the chieftains. He was made responsible for leading the rebellion some time ago, because the old Venedian chieftains were unable to unite themselves and fight the common enemy. Someone from the outside had to come and help them and the one was Samo.

“Now we have just one key goal, liberation of the ancient town of Nitrava,” said Samo, while discussing his next steps with the summoned Venedian chieftains that formed a rebellion council. “Vishegrad on Dunay* and Pannonia will have to wait,” he added.

Venedian people used to name their most important fortresses, lying on edges of a tribe’s territory, Vishegrad. These were well protected key fortresses on higher ground that had to be protected at all cost.

By the time they were finished a guard came to inform him that a messenger from the Kingdom of the Franks has arrived. Samo was surprised. He excused himself from the council and went outside to the main square which was surrounded by burning embers.

Indeed a Frankish messenger was standing in the middle of the main square, holding his horse’s reins in one hand and a written message in the other. “I’m looking for the one who goes with the name Samo, leader of the rebellion against Avars,” said the messenger sharply.

“I’m the one you’re looking for. Whose message are you bringing me?” asked Samo.

“Honorable Samo, I have a message for you from the great King of the Franks, Clothar the second, son of Chilperic,” continued the messenger more decently and passed him the written message.

A fair-haired young woman approached the messenger holding a basket with bread and Samo spoke: “Please have some bread with salt.”

“Strange traditions you have here,” murmured the messenger. “Thank you for your kindness,” he replied shortly after.

Samo looked at him reproachfully and then he broke the seal and started reading the message in the light of burning fires.

* Dunay - Venedian name for the river Danube

“So the King of the Franks wants to support us in our effort against Avars and he’s willing to donate ten carriages full of Frankish swords and pikes of the finest quality and one hundred elite swordsmen from his royal guard. That’s interesting,” Samo mumbled and continued with a question: “Why would he do that?”

“Honorable Samo, the soldiers are protecting the carriages outside the fortress. They will serve you well, fulfill all your orders and when their time comes they will die for you. What is your response towards our king?” asked the messenger.

“Share with the great king Clothar my words of gratitude. I will never forget his generosity!” replied Samo.

The messenger bowed his head, jumped on his horse and galloped away towards the main gate.

“Bring me Drahomir and Vladislav! I need to speak with them right away.” Samo ordered a nearby servant.

“You called us, Samo?” asked Drahomir barely awake, disturbed from his nap. Vladislav was standing right next to him holding a mug of tasty bright mead.

“King Clothar is seeking tighter friendship between our lands. He sent us piles of high quality swords and a hundred specially trained swordsmen to help us in our efforts. Drahomir, you will go outside the gates and bring the weapons into the fortress. Invite their commander into my house. I need to talk to him. His men must stay outside the fortress for now. We have to be cautious, it can be a trap, hence disarm him first. And you, Vladislav, go to the council meeting and tell them, that the meeting is suspended until I deal with these issues,” Samo gave out orders and went to his house.

“When will we have finally some time to rest?” asked Vladislav.

“You’ll rest when you’re dead!” replied his older brother, Drahomir, with a smile and started walking towards the gates.

He was expecting to see a bunch of lounging soldiers, tired from all the marching, but instead they were standing in perfect arrays waiting for orders.

“Well I’ll be damned,” thought Drahomir to himself. “Who’s your commander?” he asked the soldiers.

A giant soldier approached Drahomir and said: “I am Ragnahar the Fearless and these are my Alemannian* brothers. We are ready to serve your cause and die for Samo!”

“He must be by a head taller than me,” thought Drahomir to himself.

Drahomir let Ragnahar inside the fortress while his soldiers were waiting in front of the main gates and he concluded: “Samo is waiting for you in his house.” Drahomir was a bit nervous, because he did not trust Germanic people. His distrust was based on stories from the past when there were lots of tensions and problems between the two neighboring peoples.

“Leave your weapons with me,” he ordered Ragnahar who gave him his huge two-handed hammer.

Samo stepped out of his house and said to Drahomir: “Thank you Drahomir, I’ll take it from now on.” And Samo let Ragnahar inside his house where Drahoslava served them a delicious pea soup.

“Thank you, it tastes like it was made by my mother,” said Ragnahar.

“I’m glad to hear that,” said Drahoslava.

“Why does Clothar want to support our cause?” asked Samo.

“I’m just a simple soldier and I don’t see into politics,” replied Ragnahar.

“Tell me what do you think,” Samo made it more clear.

“Well, Avars can be easily bought for a military campaign by any side and even in times of peace they’re a spiteful neighbor,” replied Ragnahar.

“And no one wants someone like this as his neighbor,” added Samo.

After they had a meal, Samo let Ragnahar’s men inside the city and they all swore fealty to him and the Venedian cause. Nevertheless, Samo was still not convinced that it is safe to trust his new military unit. So he went to the shrine dedicated to PERUN, drew his sight towards the sky and asked the gods in his mind to send him a sign.

* Alemanni – Germanic people from the Upper Rhine

Ragnahar entered the shrine. “Honorable Samo, I am hungry for war. When will we join the battlefield so that we will be able to prove ourselves worthy?” asked Ragnahar.

Samo stepped away from PERUN’s idol and approached Ragnahar. “Winter is nearing its end. We will start an offensive after the Great Night*. But if you and your men want to join our frontline positions then I can arrange that.” explained Samo.

“Nothing would please me more than to soak my sword in our enemy’s blood,” said Ragnahar.

“You’ve got the right attitude,” replied Samo laughingly. “I will send a messenger with you that will hand over my orders to the commander stationed in the winter camp near the river Vah. You and your men will be allowed to perform marauding actions in enemy territory, but you will be prohibited to harm our Venedian people and settle inside the winter camp. You and your men will stay right next to it. The commander will specify a suitable place,” ordered Samo.

“As you wish. Thank you for this opportunity,” replied Ragnahar, bowed himself and left the shrine. Right after Samo prepared the note with orders, Ragnahar sat on his horse, prepared his men and they went east.

With the end of the fasting season, Great Night was coming. The whole city was preparing itself for the celebration. The tradition was to say goodbye to winter and welcome spring.

Vladislav and Drahomir were standing in the main square.

“This fasting season is killing me,” said Vladislav unhappily.

“You’re too picky for someone who ate what the forests provided for several months,” replied Drahomir with a smile.

The celebration was going to start. Young girls were in the forefront of the line of people and the first ones were holding a huge female figure dressed in a traditional local costume. It represented no one other than the goddess of winter and death, the beautiful and sometimes even ugly MORENA.

The goddess of death was feared by the people because sooner or later she would get each and everyone of them. But this was the time and place where people could avenge the harsh winter and be rude to their god under the cover of euphoria so that spring can replace winter. At least they thought they could.

* Great Night - celebration of the spring equinox

People went on towards the river Diya while singing folk songs. Crows were watching them from the nearby trees. Samo was walking side by side with Drahoslava in the back of the line. Vladislav and Drahomir were as usual right behind the young girls.

“Well, beauty wherever you look,” said Drahomir holding a burning torch.

“I love being at home,” replied Vladislav and they both laughed.

People gathered around the edge of the river Diya, Drahomir stood in front of them and started to speak: “Oh, beautiful goddess MORENA, your winter was unusually harsh and even though we look forward to spring, we would like to say one thing to you. Your time has come to... die!” Drahomir started to laugh and people cheered.

Young girls undressed the female figure, Drahomir lit her on fire with its cleansing effect and then the figure was thrown into the river Diya. But someone else was witnessing the ceremony every year besides the participating people. MORENA raged in fury.

“Not only do they condemn me every year, they started mocking me?!” screamed the goddess. “I will teach them to make fun of me! Unfortunately, this boy’s time hasn’t come yet. I cannot just take his soul, but there are always other ways,” she added and went to the depths of the underworld to see its keeper, the god with a bull’s head, VELES.

“Almighty VELES, lord of these vast pastures, those ungrateful people ridiculed me...” began the goddess but VELES interrupted her.

“And you would like to take revenge on that young boy who the mortals call Drahomir? My dearest sister, I cannot deny you your wish. So it shall be done!” said the god. MORENA thanked him and left delighted while awaiting satisfaction.

VELES went down to his stables and opened the gate to a wide cell.

“Come to me my dearest,” said VELES and a white wolf walked up to him. “I’ve got some work for you,” he added and released the best to fulfill its mission.

Great Night came and with it also the tradition of pouring water on all the women together with whipping them with knitted willow twigs so that they stay healthy and pretty all year long.

“Beautiful tradition! And they even have to be thankful for this,” said Vladislav and started to laugh.

“Why?!” a girl was screaming while trying to run away from three boys that were chasing her with buckets full of water. Vladislav and Drahomir were watching the spectacle. As soon as the girl got hers, she had to thank the boys that splashed her with water and give them nicely painted eggs.

“Yeah, I love it too,” replied Drahomir with a smile. “Now that we threw all the young girls into the Diya river and poured water on all the remaining women, we should go to one of the northern cities and try our luck there as well,” he continued. They jumped on their horses and left Diyagrad.

Vladislav and Drahomir were successful. They got something to eat and drink and met beautiful women. It was getting dark so on their way back to Diyagrad they went through a wide oak forest and suddenly they heard a noise. Drahomir saw two red eyes in the distance. It was a white wolf with shining red eyes who stared at them without moving.

“Look at it,” said Drahomir. “Don’t make any sudden movements,” he added.

Then the wolf started running and he went straight for Drahomir. Drahomir’s and Vladislav’s horses were stunned. Drahomir had only time to take his sword out, the wolf jumped high into the air and bit his hand.

The wolf let go right away, bounced on the horse’s back even higher into the air and as he was falling down to the ground a hole opened itself in the ground and the wolf disappeared without a trace.

“That beast, it was so quick!” shouted Vladislav. “Did it harm you?” he asked.

“The wound is tremendously deep, but I’m not bleeding,” and as Drahomir finished saying it, the bite prints disappeared. “It’s a miracle!” shouted Drahomir.

As Vladislav and Drahomir were coming back home, the army was preparing for departure. Thousands of soldiers with spears, swords, shields and bows were marching out of the main gate precisely as the two arrived.

“You’re late as usual!” said Samo accusingly. “As a reward, you will ride in the back of the convoy!” he ordered.

“Step out with your right foot!” shouted Drahoslava.

“Thank you, Draha. I’ll be back in no time!” replied Samo and went away.

The convoy was moving slowly, because most of the soldiers were footmen and they also transported rations, spare weapons and other useful tools and materials. After one day of marching, the convoy came to the fortress Branch where the army wanted to stay the night.

Branch was a small fortress used by Venedians to protect one of the routes between Moravia and Nitrava. Lying at the edge of the Carpathian Mountains, you could get a taste of a mountainous area.

Right after sunset the moon came up in the sky. Unluckily it was a full moon. Drahomir started to feel uncomfortable, itching with increasing intensity.

"I'll have to go for a walk." said Drahomir and walked away into the forest. There his body started to grow. Enormous hairs bursted out of his skin and large fangs grew out of his canine teeth.

He became a creature, severely bloodthirsty creature that was willing to slaughter everything that would stand in its way. Luckily for the people in the Branch fortress, the beast found a deer first, attacked it and ate its raw flesh within moments. Then it made a move towards the fortress, because it has overheard noises coming from that direction.

PERUN couldn't stand the sight, so he summoned a storm. Clouds covered the full moon and the beast fell to its knees squealing, so that the whole nearby fortress froze in fear. Samo ran up to the creature and addressed it as: "Drahomir!"

This caused Drahomir to change back into a human form. Soldiers were sent to the area in question and they brought a passed out Drahomir with remnants of his ruptured clothing. Simple clouds changed into a thunderstorm.

PERUN was outrageously angry. MORENA went behind his back to harm people that protected the gods and VELES helped her. Even though he couldn't change the will of a god, he decided to help Drahomir by modifying his curse.

The thunderstorm intensified. PERUN was unleashing a lightning apocalypse onto VELES hiding underground and thus weakening him. Drahomir, who was carried away to the fortress, opened his eyes. They were glowing in green colour. People around him were astounded. He stood up.

"I can hear what they hear," said Drahomir quietly while looking around.

"I can see what they see," continued Drahomir drawing his eyes on Samo and he went silent for a while.

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