

*THE ROAMING ZUBR*



*BY CHRYS ROMEO*

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Zarek the reporter didn't know what to think of the Polski King Hotel when he arrived there, but he knew from the beginning that something unexpected would happen in that place. He had developed a sense for the unexplained, unexpected and uncanny things. And there was definitely something like that, waiting to be revealed.

The building seemed silent and cozy, with walls painted on the outside in soft tones and inside in soft washed yellow, as if time had wiped away the sparkles and had left only the traces of other centuries hanging on the corridors. From the outside, the hotel looked welcoming with its bright sign and the green garden surrounding it, almost hiding the building from the street.

Zarek was greeted by the receptionist, a smiling blonde who gave him the key to his room without any questions. However, by the elevator door that was sliding its silver shiny mirrors, someone else appeared in front of him.

"I'm the hotel administrator", the red haired girl said to him firmly. "Are you a guest here?"

Her inspecting eyes watched him, evaluating quickly who he was. Her glimmering glance seemed restless and cleverly cutting through everything like a blade. She smiled, but beyond her smile there was a steel determination and some sort of hidden knowledge, loads of filed information that she seemed to carry around in her head, organizing and sorting out whatever came her way, somewhere in her mind.

Zarek the reporter felt he had to answer something to her. She was staring at him in a friendly yet inquiring manner.

“I’m a guest, yes,” he said. “I’m a reporter. I came to the hotel to write a story about the woods near the hotel. I must find out what’s going on around here and make a report about it.”

Her eyes did not blink. Instead, she asked while she kept fixing him with the same steady inquiring glance, apparently smiling in a friendly way:

“What is going on here that you have to write about it?”

He shrugged.

“Well, there are some stories about strange events in these woods... tourists noticing unusual sightings of some creatures... or ghosts... or something out of this world anyway. I don’t know. That’s why I came: to find out what it is... to see for myself.”

She still didn’t blink. Her sharp smile had something of a warm welcome, but at the same time, her determination to evaluate and manage whatever came her way was intimidating. After a few seconds of thinking about what he had said, she seemed to let go of her questions.

“Good. Then you can investigate the woods for your report. We hope you enjoy your time at our hotel. If you find out anything, you could tell us about it too, we’d like to know. And if you need to hear some stories about this place, come talk to me whenever you want. I know many stories and legends; maybe you’ll find them useful for your report. I’ll be in the hotel lobby in the evenings. Call me Agnieszka.”

And she went past him, somehow amused by his presence and relieved that he didn’t know much about the hotel.

Zarek took his bag in the elevator, then up to the fourth floor and along the corridor. The walls were slightly lit by soft bulbs. He could

see the painted figures along the silent hall. There were ancient kings and soldiers, holding their swords, loading their rifles, standing in a field, looking to the horizon, in frozen thoughtful stances. They seemed to have been there for centuries, watching the distance through the walls, witnessing the changes of the world and time going by from their immobile poses. Their eyes seemed to have something wise and yet implacable, some knowledge of what they had seen, something deeper than the modern tourists could guess or understand.

The thick carpet on the floor was engulfing the sound of his steps along the corridor. He felt as if he was passing in front of a row of ancient figures that were still alive, yet not to be disturbed. He felt their eyes watching, half asleep, frozen in their painted landscapes, scattered windows open to other centuries. When he got to his room, he found a note on the table, written in shiny golden letters: *Welcome to the castle! Let me know when we can meet again.*

He thought maybe Agnieska, the hotel administrator, had written it as a welcome joke or as a metaphor. He left the note on the table. In the room there was another medieval king, painted in soft brown and yellow, watching silently, with his dignified crown and tired eyes. Zarek went to the window which opened to the woods and a little pond. The last sunset rays were dancing on the ripples of the pond. Frogs were making evening choir sounds in the background. The sky was getting grey and cloudy, as if rain or a storm was approaching. The forest seemed restless and dark. Beyond the whispering foliage of the tall trees there was a shadow of a castle somewhere in the middle of the woods. Its towers, greenish and

brown, could be easily taken for tree tops. Their shadows stood among the oaks and pines, camouflaged in foliage.

Zarek went to have a shower and since it was already getting dark, he decided there wasn't much to do on that evening, except maybe talk to Agnieszka about the stories she could tell him.

So he went down to the lobby.

The silver elevator slid its door silently and descended through the glass cylinder.

Agnieszka was sitting on a double armchair and writing something in a hurry, with her burning dark red hair spread in wavy locks around her face, hiding her piercing eyes. She sensed his presence and looked up, smiling again with her steely friendliness. However, Zarek felt he was beginning to get used to her intimidating restless determination and could see something warm in the deep hazel of her bright eyes.

"Sit down", she invited him. "You came for the stories, right?"

"Yes indeed", he answered.

She closed the file she had been filling.

"I saw a castle from the window", he said.

She looked at him attentively, as if checking to see how convinced he was about it.

"You did?"

"Yes. Isn't there a castle in the woods?"

Agnieszka didn't answer immediately. She kept smiling.

"I also found your note on the table", he continued.

"What note?"

"The note saying welcome and when can we meet again".

Agnieska was staring at him. Her smile had disappeared and she was serious.

“I didn’t write any note for you”, she said.

“It was written in golden letters...”

“It’s not mine. I didn’t write it.”

She shook her head, very seriously and the locks of her wavy hair scattered like burning leaves on her shoulders.

Zarek felt confused.

“Who wrote it then?”

Agnieska shrugged.

“I don’t know. But it’s not mine.”

They remained in silence for a while. Then she decided to pick up the dialogue again, with the same lively glance that resembled a squirrel’s.

“So, what stories would you like to hear?”

“Tell me about the castle.”

“Very well, I’ll tell you a story about the castle.”

She was concise and direct, getting to the point without wasting much time on anything.

“The castle belongs – actually, belonged – to a *Tzarina*. This *Tzarina* fell in love with a knight. However, the knight was not very civilized, he liked to live in the woods and he wasn’t well seen at the castle. Therefore, her family did not want to let her marry him. And she couldn’t convince him to get a higher rank, to be accepted by her royal relatives. Eventually, the knight went to war. The *Tzarina* waited for him to return from the battles, but the knight didn’t return for many years. Because she thought she would never see him again, she left the castle when a caravan of a migrant village passed by the

woods. She got married to a blacksmith from the caravan and she didn't come back to the castle. She abandoned her royal rights and decided to just look after her family and the children she had with the villager. Her relatives looked for her, but they didn't recognize her, because she was hiding in the village, in peasants' clothes. After many years, the knight returned to the woods, but the *Tzarina* was married and gone with the blacksmith. Now a married woman, she was lost somewhere in the world. The knight was very sad and missing her very much, so he never left the woods again. Some people say he kept roaming around the castle at night, waiting for the *Tzarina*. Some people say the *Tzarina* came back one day but didn't find him there anymore because he was gone roaming through the world, trying to find her. Some say that she gave up everything and went to a monastery to live a religious life. Others say the knight found her and they remained together forever by the pond, apparently they might be seen wandering in the castle on nights with a new moon, or so they say. The ending of the story has different versions. It's not concluded, not elucidated."

Zarek was taking notes in his agenda. Agnieszka was almost scientific about it. He looked at her curiously.

"What was the name of the *Tzarina* and the knight? I must write in my report."

"The *Tzarina* was named Katrin and the knight - Ziven".

"So they never met again?"

Agnieszka wasn't very sure of it.

"I don't know exactly. Some versions of the story mention it as a possibility... As I told you, nobody knows for sure which version is true."

She watched him, smiling somehow satisfied that he was enchanted by her story. She changed the subject:

“Would you like to go for a swim? You can, if you want. You know there’s a swimming pool in the basement of the hotel.”

Zarek finished writing and got up.

“That sounds interesting. I might go and check it out. Thanks. See you tomorrow.”

“See you!”

As he was passing by the halls, he started deciphering the names of the figures on the walls. He tried to find the portrait of Ziven the knight or maybe Katrin the *Tzarina*, but he couldn’t. The long row of soldiers and kings did not include the lovers from the story. *It would have been nice to see them here*, he thought as he went to his room.

The note was still on the table, with golden letters, shining in the night.

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Zarek decided to go for a walk, even if it was already dark outside.

He was eager to see the surroundings and the whispering woods.

When he went to the door, the blonde receptionist seemed to be worried and tried to warn him against going out.

“Are you leaving the hotel tonight?” she asked politely, but with fear in her voice.

“Yes, I thought I’d go for a walk.”

“May I recommend you the tourist ride tomorrow? There’s a coach and a tourist guide and it will be much better than now.”

“Thank you, I’ll think about it.”

And he wanted to step through the sliding doors.

“Could you wait a minute?” she asked him, becoming alarmed.

He stopped in the doorway, more curious than intrigued by her reaction.

“What’s wrong?”

“I would advise you not to try to go too far into the woods at night.”

“Is it dangerous? Are there animals?”

“Yes there are animals”, she said, but he suspected it wasn’t the whole true answer.

She looked as if she was afraid of something worse than just animals. Something she could not tell him about.

“Can you wait a minute until I make a phone call?”

He shrugged and waited. She dialed the numbers and spoke so fast that he couldn’t understand anything she was saying. It was like an ancient language he didn’t have a dictionary for. Then, in just a few seconds, the squirrel-eyed Agnieska appeared in the hall, smiling her steely friendly glance at him.

“So, you’re going out into the woods?”

“Yes... what seems to be the problem?”

“No problem. I thought you were going to the swimming pool.”

“I changed my mind. I’m going to the swimming pool later. I thought I’d take a look around the hotel first.”

“You should be careful. It’s not recommended for tourists to go out into the woods this late in the night. We are worried for your safety.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. Is there anything I should be aware of out there?”

Agnieska held her file tightly to her chest and kept silent for a few seconds. Then, her fast clever mind got another answer in a flash:

”The only dangerous thing is if you go too deep into the woods”, she concluded.

“Okay, I won’t go too deep. Don’t worry.”

He turned around to leave. Agnieska was still standing there, as if she wanted to stop him, but she couldn’t. And somehow it was bothering her that he went beyond the boundaries she had decided for the guests. But she couldn’t do anything about it, so she just watched him go, while she was holding her file tightly, like an insurance.

Zarek stepped out into the night. The cool air smelled of moving foliage and wild water, probably from the pond. He started walking along the path that the moon would show from time to time, throwing rays from beyond the grey thick clouds. There was a restless atmosphere, leaves whispering, wind ruffling the trees and changing the temperature, birds secretly whistling in the dark, the water splashing on the shores, somewhere nearby. Zarek felt a sudden rush of doubt as he went deeper into the shadows of the forest. The moonlight wasn’t enough to show the way and the path was gradually covered by tall grass and weeds. He felt he was slowly getting lost. However, he looked back from time to time, to see the glimmering sign from the name of the hotel. Suddenly, the moon went completely behind the clouds. Darkness enveloped the forest and the shadows of the trees became barely visible. There was a strange silence and the name of the hotel had disappeared somewhere in the mist. He looked around. He felt lost. He tried not to panic. He heard a sound of horses galloping and he tried to distinguish in the night what was happening. Something was moving towards him. Something was moving fast. He

hid behind a tree that he touched with his hand, just to make sure of it. In the next second, a rider went past him. It was a knight riding a very tall horse, holding a long spear in his fist and a helmet on his head. He looked threatening and magnificently dignified. He was covered in metal armor and the pieces of his equipment were rattling rhythmically in the night. Zarek held his breath.

“Run!” the knight shouted at him in a coarse voice, as he passed him by like a ghost, disappearing in the night.

Next, something else was coming very close. Drumming hooves on the ground were approaching fast, so the woods seemed shaken by an earthquake. Zarek started running back in the direction from where he felt he had come. Something was after him, approaching. The sound was deafening. He hid behind a tree in the last moment and saw many aurochs, ancient European bisons rushing by, galloping and stomping on everything that stood in their way, in a whirl of dust, fur, instinctive power and scattered weeds.

Zarek waited until the herd disappeared into inexistent distance. Because of the dark, he could not see where it had come from and where it went. He was glad when he could see the hotel lights again.

He entered the hotel with his clothes in disarray, aware of the fact that he had been running and catching his breath, looking completely different than the way he had left. He tried to seem calm.

The blonde receptionist with a ponytail looked happy to see him safe. She did not appear in any way surprised by his troubled appearance. She smiled.

“Welcome back. You can go to the swimming pool now. It closes in an hour.”

The reporter felt somehow embarrassed, somehow relieved that he was safe inside the hotel. He wondered about the metal knight he had seen. Was it Ziven? Was it a ghost? A tourist show? An illusion? He could not tell for sure. He wanted to believe it was the legend, but he didn't have any proof.

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The swimming pool was almost deserted when Zarek went there. The room was large and silent. Splashing clear blue water reflected the lights on the ceiling. On the side of the walls there were ancient columns, resembling an ancient roman temple. On the front and back walls the paintings showed green hills and ancient buildings, roman gods and light bulbs that made the atmosphere mystical. The swimming pool was lit from the floor and painted in light blue, so the chlorine water seemed like a paradise basin. The sauna and Jacuzzi nearby made it look like a relaxing spot, but there was still something magical about the swimming pool area that Zarek felt from the beginning. He dived into the water. It wasn't very cold, not too hot either. At that time of night people had already disappeared. He was the last one swimming. The cleaning girl came sweeping the floor just to remind him that there wasn't much time left. But he enjoyed the ancient landscape painted on the walls, and the mysterious light bulbs under the broken columns.

As he was surfacing, he saw the cleaning girl had left. Instead, he heard a splashing sound and he saw a long figure swimming in the water. It was a girl in a red bathing suit. She looked like a mermaid, flowing with the water and her long brownish hair glimmering in the

pale light of the room. He wondered if she was one of the guests. He paused at the edge of the pool, breathing and hanging on to the metal bar by the side of the wall, watching her. She surfaced from under the water and her enticing light blue eyes flashed in his direction for a second. He felt a shiver go along his spine. Her eyes had the same color as the swimming pool. Her eyes had the same color as the intense summer sky on an ethereal day when everything would evaporate. Her eyes had the same color as the deepest infinite ocean at the end of the world and beyond. Her eyes had the same color as the immense warmth above a wheat field on a hot drowsy afternoon... He was mesmerized. Her wet hair spreading in the water made her look like a mermaid. She stared at him and smiled. Her eyes were the kindest blue possible under the bluest sky, in the most magical swimming pool on earth. And then she got out and left the room. And he remained by the broken columns and the light bulbs, with water splashing around, the same blue that reminded him of a mermaid, water suddenly getting colder.

When he got out of the pool, he felt as if he was coming from somewhere very far away.

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“Come to our banquet tonight”, Agnieszka said.

She was still holding her file in her arms.

“What banquet?” he asked, wiping his head with a towel.

He had just come from the showers of the swimming pool and his mind was filled with the blue of the girl’s eyes, while his hair was wet from the chlorine water.

“There’s a banquet at midnight. There will be dancing and singing.”

“Okay, I’ll come.”

“Good”, Agnieszka said.

And then she left.

Zarek went again through the painted corridor, with the *kanonier* and soldier and kings within their landscapes, staring at him silently while he walked.

He got dressed in a suit for the banquet.

There was already animation in the hall and voices rising up to the other floors from the lobby, when he descended to the reception desk. Agnieszka was waving to the guests to come into a larger room, where he immediately noticed a stage and many chairs surrounding an oval table.

Zarek sat next to a moustache grey haired local citizen.

“Have some of our *najlepsze vodka?*” the man said to him. “This is *Zubrowka*. Bison Grass. The best.”

Zarek took the small glass.

“Okay’, he said and he sipped it at once.

He felt too tired to think about it anymore. The vodka went immediately to his head, making the room sway a little and troubling questions became lighter. He relaxed. The man poured some more. It had a certain plant aroma reminding of no other strong drink he had ever tasted.

“This is the authentic Bison Grass Drink”, the man said. “By the way, I’m Bazyl. *Ze* one and only.”

The man's accent was authentically rough, as if from another time when people would speak in harsh consonants, but his conversation skill made up for it.

"Nice to meet you. Bazyl. What's going on tonight?" Zarek asked.

"There's going to be a show. Listen. It's a one-night one-lifetime opportunity to see *ze* best of this area. I mean *ze* castle and *ze* woods that belong to *Mistress Tzarina*. You're just lucky to be here."

Zarek sipped the second glass and looked around. People were talking and moving through the room.

Suddenly, the crowd got seated and Agnieszka appeared on the stage. She was wearing a shiny robe, a sparkling silver dress like an unusual festive costume.

"I must present to you the main guest of our show tonight, Katrin and the Caravan!"

And she disappeared. On the stage Zarek saw a girl in a long red dress, with wavy long brownish hair that reflected the lights. She was accompanied by an orchestra of instruments. But when she started to sing and he could see her eyes, he drowned in the blue of the swimming pool. It was like an infinite sky. He remembered the mermaid looking swimmer he had seen that night in the water. It was her. On the stage, she had a certain grace and charm, dancing and singing in a heavenly voice that was out of the world, her movements like the ripples of soft water. There was a kindness about her that resembled the promise of an endless sky on a dreamy miraculous day. It was a conquering, enveloping light that erased everything bad... and only a feeling of love remained.

When he could recollect his mind, Zarek asked Bazyl that was still there:

“Who is she?”

“She’s our *Tzarina*. Our treasure...”

And Bazyl went on:

“Long ago, when I was young, I used to go pick up strawberries just so that I could afford to attend an event like this. Can you imagine? Just pick up strawberries for a month or so, no chemicals... strawberries in *ze* sunlight... to pick from *ze* bugs and everything, just so I could afford this. Unique, right?”

The grey haired moustache man seemed to enjoy talking, but Zarek was staring at the stage absolutely oblivious and hypnotized. And when the show was over he stood up and tried to get to the back door as quickly as he could. He found Agnieska in the hall, holding her file in her silver sparkling dress.

“Can I talk to the singer?” he asked her. “I really want to meet her.”

“I don’t know if that can be arranged... we’ll see. Do you want to meet Katrin - for sure?”

“Yes, I do. Very much. Does she have any connection to the *Tzarina*? Because one man in the room said...”

Agnieska stared at him blankly.

“No. No connection to the *Tzarina*. She’s just a local singer.”

Zarek looked behind Agnieska’s shoulder. The sparkling red dressed girl with long wavy hair had flashed by, going into a room. He felt lost. He had to get to her, no matter what. An invisible string was tearing him apart in her absence. He felt so much emotion, that images of her were running through his mind.

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