

# Forsaken

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Jorg knows he is being hunted. He is a man alone, a member of a people who hunt, and he knows he cannot outrun the pack. That night, he makes a fire and eats the day's catch in the knowledge of discovery.

They are twenty or more: men on horseback, both members of his own people and those they have made peace with. They approach warily, mindful of a madman's trap. One of them dismounts, a sergeant, all rustling leather and black chain-mail. His sword is sheathed but his hand does not stray from the pommel. Gashes across a face devoid of expression etch the battles he has lived.

The horses are nervous, and because of that so are the men. The sergeant's questions are short and gruff, but there is no bite to them. He asks Jorg whether he has heard that the villagers speak of a demon that stalks the woods, whether the demon is him, and why Jorg acts and travels the way he does.

Jorg's answers are shorter still. He has little to say to those who do not share his past. Those who do share it are dead, and they are better off. He does not tell the sergeant this. He knows he scares the villagers. He does not mean to and he does not mean any man harm.

The sergeant repeats his last question: why does Jorg act the way he does? Is he not a northman, bound to his lord, whoever that may be?

Jorg ensures the sergeant there is no need to worry. No pacts shall be violated, no mockery made of the frail truce between the northmen and the inhabitants of these lands. His days of plunder are past, and he has far to go.

The sergeant is not content, and neither are his men. A prisoner or a kill, that they can live with, but letting a man go? Their purpose has been thwarted.

Jorg does not care. He is no danger to these soldiers, and they are not so dishonourable yet that they will kill a harmless man. Let them go elsewhere to satisfy their urges. Jorg bids them goodnight, or else — why not? — an invitation to sit with him. The night is harsh and wet, this close to the Rhine, and he can build up the fire. Surely they have brought mead. A few songs to appease the night spirits, perhaps.

There is some muttering, quickly snuffed by the sergeant. There will be no fraternising, no banter.

Jorg is content. Already, he has begun shedding that which binds him to them. Their northern tongue. Their affinity for the woodsman's axe. His is another fight.

A final question, then: whether he intends to cross the river any time soon.

Jorg acquiesces. He understands these riders: they patrol north and west of the water. They wish to be rid of him, and at most warn their brothers in the forts along the far shore.

He assures them they have nothing to fear. He will be gone soon, and the sooner the better. There was a time when he wished it were different, but that, too, is past. He knows his purpose. There are men to be slain.

A farewell, then, if they have no desire to stay. Jorg wishes to sleep, insofar his mind will permit it, for he will need his strength to cross the river tomorrow.

The soldiers do not understand: there are barges. There

is a bridge, rotted and treacherous, but a bridge nonetheless, no more than ten miles upstream. Some say it was built by Roman legions, yet surely such things cannot be?

Jorg will not talk of a bridge, or of ships. If he is to cross, he is to do it on his own terms. The water will want to take him, and he invites it to try. If the world thinks him dead, all are better off. The soldiers do not understand, and he does not try to make them.

A snigger from one of the riders in the shadows beyond the fire's reach. Tension draining away. They have no fear, now. A madman, as expected, soon to join the silts at the bottom of the Rhine.

It does not do well to speak of the dead at night, Jorg tells the sergeant. The river holds many souls, and they are restless.

The sergeant spits, fear and disgust warring in the close-set eyes beneath the rim of his helmet. He turns without a word of farewell and mounts up. The troop rides off, their formation tight. They will have a story to tell, but they will only tell each other, Jorg thinks. Whoever else wants to know will learn that the one they sought has gone and that the stories were nothing but that.

A demon in the forest. If only they knew.

The sound of the horses' hooves is unmade by the woods, and Jorg builds up the fire before lying down to sleep, wrapped in his cloak. Sleep does come, quicker than expected, and Jorg finds that the dead do not dream.

The next day dawns colder than the last. The fire has died in the night and Jorg eats cold some of the rabbit he had

snared for his previous supper. The forest is empty and ill-defined in the fog, and Jorg sets out before the light finds a way through. A thin wind whispers guidance at his ear.

When he walks, Per is with him: Per who could not go on without the guidance of the gods. Jorg does not begrudge him his death. By rights, it should have taken all of his men, himself included, and Per should not have had to take his own life.

The river takes long to appear. First there is mist, then mudflats, the splintered stems of trees leaning this way and that. Finally wide, slick boulders, moss swirling over stone like wet wool, and the roiling water. The current's tug is strong but constant, and Jorg does not for one moment doubt he will make the crossing. He does not mind being swept downstream. He undresses, surprised at his own ragged white flesh. His clothes and axe he ties in a ball he straps to his torso.

The undertow sweeps him off his feet by the time he is shin-deep, but he does not fight it. He drifts, floating on his back, kicking out firmly but in a slow rhythm. It would not do to tire. For a while, the rush of the water and the mist, its ashen hue the river's twin, are all. When the sound sharpens, Jorg knows the eastern bank is near and he twists round. Pointed shapes that in their repetitiveness suggest more forest. Something scrapes his shins — gravel, then viscous mud. His feet lash out, find purchase, and he splashes on land.

Jorg makes for the trees, racked by shivers yet cleansed. It is early still, but he does not wish to be seen on the bank. The land slopes steeply, wide wooded folds that overlap as if by

design, and the climb warms him. A mile in, Jorg halts. There is sufficient deadfall in the forest, and he gathers up kindling. Not a fire for him alone: his clothes need to dry out. He will not survive naked.

Even with his skills, the fire takes a long time to catch. Jorg builds it carefully, then constructs a lean-to over which he drapes all his belongings. He huddles close to the fire, grateful not to have to provide the heat he requires.

Per's wispy form has followed him across the river, silent and watchful. Jorg wonders whether the wraith's presence signifies a blessing or a warning and hopes he can live up to its demands. Death, Jorg can guarantee — the death of men, of the cult, but not that of the thing which lurks beneath. Time will tell.

It is noon by the time his clothes and boots are dry. Smoke has seeped into everything. Jorg dresses, kills the fire and sets out east. The mist lingers and the sun is lightless, but he needs no guidance. The land is largely empty and for now he lives on walnuts he keeps an eye out for, and on his reserves. He is not a small man and he can stand to lose some weight.

When villages and towns appear, he begs. His are a raiding people, but a man alone does not raid. It serves him well, this air of desperation, his cloak a wasted thing the colour of mouldy earth, his hair and beard unchecked, yet he knows he must be careful. The people of these lands are poor and wary, and to some, Jorg's looks will mark him as a northman still.

One day, Jorg notes he has not seen Per in some time. He worries about the wraith's absence. He asks the gods, but they

are silent and he realises he has not spoken to them since setting out. Their anger is justified.

When he wakes with salt runnels on his cheeks, he knows his shame has not yet washed away. Part of him remembers still. That day, the gods do speak to him, but Jorg does not understand their words. He tries to recall the gods' names, their virtues and their wiles, but he fails and concludes that he will soon be done with them. Their will no longer binds or guides him. Still, his path is not yet his own: Jorg does not recognise the land, its people or its guttural language, yet he is never in doubt and walks the roads like one who has lived there from birth. What, then, of the help he receives?

He reaches the great wall of the Alps when the fresh snow reaches knee height in the valleys. The mountain-folk are free with their advice, and he is not so far removed from his life at the fjords that he throws caution to the wind. In his weathered appearance, thinner than he remembers yet strong enough, people recognise a wanderer who brings good fortune — if they treat him with respect. Jorg indulges them. To unravel their illusions would gain him nothing. He is vague enough in his talk not to create undue expectations, and the folk seem happy to feed and accommodate him.

His dreams are plagued by the *mære*. One night, Jorg wakes to find a shepherd's daughter under the blankets with him, her eyes wide and fearful, making soothing noises as she strokes his chest. He understands some of what she says, vows that she need not fear, that his dreams do not make sense, and he does not object when next she mounts him. It is the first

time he lies with a woman other than his wife, but Jorg knows she thinks him dead and he scarcely remembers her name or her body.

The mountain-folk advise against it, yet Jorg forges a path through the Alps in winter. His presence, materialising from a blizzard or from sheets of ice-rain, is that of a rugged ghost. None dare refuse his right to spend the night. He lies with more daughters, sometimes with wives, and finds that the act gains him a measure of calm.

Jorg learns to remember and control his dreams and finds that he has long left the domain of the northern gods. Whatever speaks to him in the unguarded hours of the night, setting down his next steps in words beyond language, is something else entirely. To accede to its wishes is to gain mastery over his own path. Jorg ceases to fear the nights, for now he knows they hold the key to his purpose. It is not long ere he scarcely remembers the face of his dead comrades, or that of the one who in the end took his own life.

It is not long, either, ere the man realises he does not recall his own name. When people ask for it, he calls himself Sven, for he thinks it is a name they associate with the people he once called his own.

He is close now, he knows. The snows have steered clear of some places, even on the airless heights where nothing but wind rules over stones like ash, witnesses from a time when the world was young. He climbs still. When they finally come for him, faces wrapped in scarves, sooty robes flying, he is waiting. His axe hungers, and they are no match for his skills.

Their blood does not pool but is sucked into the ash, leaving dried shells.

The man is shocked at how easily they die, at how weak they have become. Later, he is shocked no longer: the mountain does not want men. Their homes are little more than rocks heaped to tottering walls, their altars more rocks, unhewn, flatter than most and smudged with old blood. The cult has been negligent in its sacrifices of late.

There is a whisper of something there — not the brutal power he recalls from the church he ran from in a life that belonged to another man, but something nonetheless. Given time and proper sacrifice, it might have festered. He has been in time to prevent the cult from coming into its own, but he worries about his next point of call. He must trust the speaker of his dreams to guide him there in time.

The man hungers, but he burns the corpses without partaking of their diseased, withered flesh. He might not have exercised restraint had they been healthier. After the deed, he rushes from the place, chased by voices of things that belong in the high places of the world.

By the time he descends the Alps on the southern side, fresh meltwater chases him down the paths. He meets people and finds yet again that he speaks their language. He no longer questions the development within himself but makes use of it: as with the mountain-folk north of the Alps, these people seem to desire his presence.

When alone, he recites prayers in a tongue he does not understand and he finds himself making sacrifice: bones, rocks

and mud, set out along the road in intricate patterns recognisable only to his sleeping mind. His dreams are of urgency, of a need to create more patterns — whatever the cost.

He kills and uses a man before reaching the sea. The death is unprovoked, given in not by threat or danger, but by a yearning for bones and flesh. There is no doubt in his mind now that he will be chased down — his creation, a pattern of pure logic and essence by night, is a thing of morbid horror by day. At the coast, he buys passage on a merchant ship to the dark continent where things are older than man.

Something chases the ship — a blackness, billowing out from the land, and the man hears wailing voices on the wind. The ship's passengers, turbaned merchants, black slavers, pale-skinned Gothic mercenaries and a band of huddling monks, their shaved pates raw red with sunburn, pray to their respective gods with equal fervour. The man is content not to. The blackness thins out, wisps of smoke on the wind and the reek of charred wood and flesh. Prayers turn to wails of mourning: the port has gone, fallen prey to some warlord or other. The man does not challenge the conclusion of his fellow passengers.

When the winds die, the talk turns to pirates and the hope to the mercenaries and the few paid guards. To be sure, a light, battered vessel, its hull a mass of swirling red and black, closes in from the east, slave-driven oars dipping and rising with drummed precision. It pulls up alongside, salt-worn grinning faces readying entering hooks and kissing curved blades.

Stirred into action at last, the mercenaries take up po-

sitions, their chainmail, shields and longswords ill-suited to the dance of ship-to-ship combat. Behind them, the monks chant and the merchants ready their gold and silver.

There will be no battle. The man appears alongside the mercenaries, thumb tracing the edge of his woodsman's axe while he mutters unheard incantations. On the pirate ship, entering hooks fall from powerless hands and a hoarse order is shouted. The drums start up again and the raiders row away.

Moments later, the wind picks up, the sails billow out, and the merchant ship is under way again.

The man finds himself alone, shunned. If not for the wind reappearing, the other passengers might not have suspected his involvement. The mercenaries seemed formidable enough. The man does not yet see the dark continent, yet knows that he will not be able to sleep until they reach it. Already, talk turns to casting him overboard. A ship is no place for a sorcerer, saving everyone's hide be damned.

He reaches the port alive but is stared off the ship. Two of the merchants throw him a purse of gold — not a gift but a plea to steer clear. He wanders the port and the city beyond, its life breath that of a dead people. Roman pillars war with those who would claim the pitted stones for their own use.

Outside the city, the sand hints at the demise of one of Rome's enemies. The relics intrigue the man, and he spends a quiet night among them, sand rustling on flagstones lulling him into forgetful sleep.

In the morning, his purpose is set. He uses some of the gold to buy horses from a merchant who does not meet his

eye. Already, street urchins have spread talk that he has been among the cursed ruins longer than any sane man has a right to be.

A desert-dweller, swathed all in a bright blue, catches the man's eye and offers to lead him into the desert. The man has given no indication that he wishes to do so, but the offer is no coincidence. He accepts and his guide refuses payment. The rewards at journey's end will suffice.

As the buildings and ruins fall behind, the heat builds into a breathing thing, yet the man finds that the desert agrees with him. The guide knows the appropriate places to camp. He brews sweet tea and will stand guard, though there is little threat in these shunned lands. The man trusts him, convinced that their goals align.

In his dream, he sees himself at the small camp, the horses tethered nearby. A shapeless presence looms above, a black vortex that cuts a swirling gap into a firmament that does not correspond with what the man knows. The guide is nowhere to be seen. When the man wakes, the guide sits smiling at him, black eyes glowing. The guide knows the dream and is satisfied that his charge has shared it. The dream repeats itself and the man comes to long for it. The looming presence grows more defined, its shape a thing not of this world, vast and animate in ways beyond the human mind to grasp.

They reach their destination in seven days. A long, deep gorge stretches before them, a withered cut in a landscape beyond hope of healing. A single path winds down the lifeless cliffs to a floor slick and pale like milk glass. Bone-like pil-

lars jut from the rock: the ruins of a temple — not Roman, like the man saw at the port. Older, whittled down by aeons of winds and by rains that have not hammered the desert in centuries. They seem to close in about the riders, dead claws grasping at life, but it is only the effect of the dun, shambling shadows on the gorge walls.

They get off the horses, knowing that the beasts will be useless from now on, and set them free. Wide-eyed, the horses turn and rush back up the path and towards the desert, where they might stand a chance. A single slab of stone awaits at the gorge's far end. Black and matte, it does not reflect any light. The man grasps his axe, but his guide shakes his head and offers him a long, curved dagger, far too sharp and thin for battle but just right for the task to come.

The guide removes his headscarf, revealing a dark, unblemished face. He lies down atop the stone slab and offers his throat. The man does not know what has been offered the guide to make this sacrifice. He does not care, and cuts fast and clean. The body spasms once, rich blood spurting then pooling and darkening in a small, oval indentation near the dying guide's head. When the man scoops the blood into his hands it has turned a shimmering black. He drinks one mouthful, the liquid surprisingly cool and slippery down his throat, wholly unlike the true taste of blood.

Looking up, the man sees that the gorge continues on, narrowing as it goes but not — never — ending. He walks past the stone slab and welcomes the chill that permeates the air. The desert's eye does not reach this far, and moments later

neither does the blue of the sky. Amber streaks of light curl past above, carried on unfelt winds, and within them the man spies leviathan shapes that stretch and contract, their rhythm both sensuous and repulsive.

The man halts, mesmerised, his axe falling from a hand that no longer feels a part of himself. Desire is all — a craving to live among those twisting, contorting shapes. The man laughs aloud at the vain hopes and the ideas of vengeance and murder he cherished when setting out on his journey. The shapes need him. He is human, and he will continue to understand his own race — his former race. His will be the gift of seduction, the dream of power and of the wonder of places unseen, attainable by all who open their mind's eye to the possibilities. As he looks down, the man rejoices at the sight of his new being.

Soon, men will come, seeking to either join or destroy the ageless thing that waits beyond the gates of knowing, and to him will fall the responsibility of welcoming them. Ravenous, the man-thing joins the vast shapes that dwell and revel in the amber light.