

I SHALL
AWAKEN

KATEŘINA ŠARDICKÁ

Albatros

I SHALL
AWAKEN

I·SHaII
AWAKEN

KATEŘINA ŠARDICKÁ

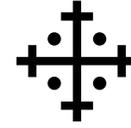
Albatros

*Dedicated to my grandparents,
Anne and Jan, one of whom awoke in me the passion
for storytelling, while the other supported me in it for years.*

*And to anyone who has ever been afraid to look underneath
their bed before going to sleep.*

Text © Kateřina Šardická, 2020
Translation © Tereza Novická, 2021
Editing: Scott Alexander Jones, 2021
Cover & Illustrations © Štěpánka Coufalová, 2020

ISBN 978-80-00-06347-8



THE NIGHT BEFORE



It was a winter that would be talked about for many years to come. A winter that came so swiftly and abruptly that there was hardly any time to adequately prepare for it. But what was to be etched in people's memories wasn't the frost and the cold—no, it was those twelve nights, on the cusp of the New Year, that ended up changing everything.

As dusk fell, Dora Lautner had to press her cheek against the window to even see the scenery passing by. And when the train suddenly hurtled into such pitch darkness that it seemed as though it had left the ground below and was moving through nothingness, Dora turned away to face the train compartment.

Apart from her and the conductor, nobody else was left sitting in the old diesel train. The brown leather upholstery on the seats was torn and the door wouldn't shut properly. Dora sped along the single-track railway in a Hurvínek train car, which had been used abundantly in the past on regional lines with fewer passengers.

She couldn't believe that these old models could still be found on the tracks. Dora had spent a substantial part of her childhood near trains, whenever she would stay at her uncle's place near the

upper side of the valley for the summer, and even back then, he used to tell her how they'd soon be replaced by wholly new trains. But things hardly ever changed here, so it didn't surprise her all that much. Most of the inhabitants put down roots here for good, becoming so entwined with the village that they couldn't leave even if they wanted to. Whatever took root here eventually ended up dying here too.

But Dora was glad there was even a train to take. It stopped here only three times a day by sheer force of habit. Back in the day, a supply route used to pass through here for passenger trains going over the mountains to the borderlands. But that had fallen into disuse a long time ago, and it was only a matter of time before the train station would be closed down for good.

Dora often found herself feeling disdain for her village. She hated its inhabitants for what they had done to her. She despised them from the bottom of her heart. But she suppressed these feelings just as quickly as they took hold of her. The village was her family. It was all she had.

Dora was on her way back from school. Class let out a bit earlier due to the beginning of winter break, but she'd gotten held up by her shopping in town.

She let the train rock her, feeling the gaze of the conductor upon her since the moment they were the only two people left sitting in the train. *Don't look him in the eye, for goodness' sake.* She wasn't in the mood to talk to him.

"Last stop," he announced suddenly. The two hours had flown by unusually fast.

He always said it in the same tone, in that impersonal, definitive voice of his. *Last stop.* Nothing more.

The train stop was in the middle of nowhere, the station

building having been torn down right after the war. Dora got off and set out along the Black Forest toward her village.

She didn't like the cold, and here, in these parts, it was always cold. Or at least it was cold in the winter and cool in the summer. Not her cup of tea. The inclement weather only intensified the feeling she had of returning to the brink of hell itself.

Dora trudged northward through the snow-covered fields. She knew the way by heart. Despite the hunger, cold, and her frozen limbs, she refused to let up. If she were to stop now, she wouldn't be able to muster the strength to go on. She suddenly wished that she had never been born in this godsforgotten land, this secluded little stretch of wasteland.

After several minutes, Dora spotted her house through the trees. Judging by appearance alone, few people would think someone actually still lived there. Her family never did have much money, but once they were on their own, everything began falling into ruin much faster. As always, whenever she came back, an uneasy sense of dread overcame her. In the city, nobody knew her—she could be anybody. But here, everybody knew everything.

Dora arrived home just in time for dinner, the clinking of plates in the kitchen reaching her ears.

"Where were you all day?"

It wouldn't be like Pa not to start admonishing her before she had even stepped into the house. His head popped into the hallway just long enough to give her a once-over.

"Sorry."

"Git to the kitchen. Move it!"

Dora hung up her things in the hallway and obeyed. Her younger brothers were just setting the table while Grandpa sat in the rocking chair by the window, dozing off. The kitchen was cramped. Dora

rolled up the sleeves of her blouse to avoid getting dirty. Her exposed forearms revealed her tattoos—traditional symbols of protection. A pot of soup was already bubbling on the stovetop. Pulling out some semolina, eggs, and milk from the pantry, Dora began to make dumplings, just like her mother used to do. The smell of the soup brought back childhood memories. As she sunk spoonfuls of dough into the boiling water, she wished she could go back in time. Back to when her mother was still alive, or when she still had friends. A time when the entire village didn't think she was crazy.

Twelve years ago, four children vanished. Dora Lautner was the fifth child, who hadn't. The child whose bed was in the middle. The child who, for years, couldn't utter a single word about what had happened to the others.

"Done?"

Pa's sudden presence in the kitchen pulled Dora out of her reverie. He gave her a fright, as she didn't hear him coming in. Ever since the accident she'd had as a child, she was deaf in one ear. Whenever somebody would talk to her on her left side, she had trouble understanding them. She was never allowed to use her injury as an excuse, though. Wordlessly, Dora cut the flame under the pot and grabbed two dishtowels to carry the hot soup to the table. Her twin brothers were already primly sitting side by side, awaiting the food eagerly.

"Grandfather, sir, please come take a seat. Dinner is being served."

For generations, they had always upheld the deep-seated tradition of addressing elders, even family members, in a proper, formal manner as a show of respect. Dora leaned down to help her grandfather get up. He was all frail and withered, barely able to stand on his own two feet. Clutching Dora's wrist in a viselike grip, his long,

yellowed, dirty fingernails dug into her skin. She tried to hold her breath to avoid smelling the mustiness and sickness surrounding Grandpa, and was ashamed of herself for feeling repulsed by him.

Grandpa sat down at the table with difficulty, with Pa already at the head of the table. The seat on his right was empty. It had belonged to her mother, and nobody was allowed to claim her spot. Dora took the ladle and began to serve the soup, while the others looked on wordlessly. After she too sat down, they all held each other's hands and said grace together.

Pa was the first to start eating. When he swallowed a bite and didn't object, the others began to eat as well. He was the head of the family and everything was always done his way. They ate in silence, and only the clinking of cutlery on plates echoed through the kitchen.

After dinner, Dora dutifully cleared the table, washed the dishes, and stored the leftover soup in the chilly hallway. In the meantime, her brothers took a bath and got ready for bed. She had promised her father she'd read them a bedtime story tonight and put them to bed. In doing so, she hoped to avoid having to help bathe Grandpa. Pa didn't object, but she could tell from his expression that she wouldn't be getting off so easy tomorrow.

The twins were lying in bed, their covers pulled right up to their necks. Dora reached for a storybook and began to read right where she'd left off the night before. She didn't pay much attention to the story, her mind wandering, but her brothers didn't seem to mind.

"One more," Oleg pleaded.

"That's enough for today. It's late."

She set the book down on the bedside table between the twins' beds. In unison, Oleg and Anton stuck out their arms from underneath their covers.

“Now I lay me down to sleep, and I shall awaken, for the evil spirits cannot reach me,” Dora whispered, her fingers tracing the tattoos on the boys’ forearms. At the age of five, all the village children underwent the tattooing ritual. The tattoos served as protection and warded off all evil.

“At this nightly hallowed hour, we call upon the ancient powers,” all three siblings recited in unison. “Protect us till the light of day from Notsnitsa’s evil sway.” They completed the prayer by crossing their index and middle fingers and placing them first on their brow, then their lips.

“Sweet dreams,” Dora bid them good night.

Pausing in the doorway, she made sure they were both properly covered before shutting the door behind her. She had a quick wash and headed to bed. After she lay down under the covers, she kept the lamp in her room lit.

It took Dora a long time to fall asleep. It was only after an hour of tossing and turning that she finally began to drift off. Her mind was wandering somewhere between the realm of dreams and the conscious world, when all of a sudden, she felt somebody touch her.

“Dory!”

Jolting awake, Dora shot up in her bed. She pressed the palm of her hand against her cheek where she had felt somebody’s touch just a moment ago.

“Astrid...?” she whispered into the empty room.

Dora felt as if her friend had just left the room and closed the door behind her. She had no doubt that it was Astrid who had visited her in her dream. The girl had always had a peculiar, unmistakable aura surrounding her.

Astrid had been Dora’s closest friend. That is, until she disappeared twelve years ago without a trace, along with the others.



The seventeen years she’d been in this world had taught Dora one basic rule. It wasn’t zoning plans and walls that made up the village she lived in, but the inhabitants themselves. At one end, mountains separated them from the rest of the world. At the other, a river cut through the valley and, if followed downstream, would lead to several smaller villages and settlements. In other words—words that would cause her father to scold her, at the very least—it was a dump. Dora was a little ashamed of herself for thinking it. But she couldn’t think of a more fitting description. It wasn’t the remoteness of the village that was to blame for the lack of progress here. It was the locals.

Pa had always taught her to blend in, to make do according to what the village wanted. So, Dora conformed. What she had never come to terms with, however, was the locals’ shortsightedness. She couldn’t think of a better expression. The events that had transpired at the cemetery that very morning only served to further convince her.

Once a week, Dora would visit her aunt, Valeria Hattler—her mom’s older sister. Dora did it secretly behind her father’s back, as he had never really liked his sister-in-law, and after Dora’s mother died, he had completely shut the woman out. He forbade Dora from seeing her aunt. Nevertheless, Dora would sometimes help her out with stuff, and every month, they visited the cemetery together to honor the dead.

Dora genuinely liked her aunt. In some ways, she reminded Dora of her own mother and took on her role, to some degree, during those days when Dora felt all alone. But what the teenage

always waited patiently for me to tear myself away from my manuscript and get to the task at hand.

But I owe my greatest thanks, as ever, to my loved ones. You know who you are. For me, writing will always take precedence over everything else; there is no middle ground—and never has been. And I'm grateful to you for respecting me whenever the first option wins out over the other. I couldn't do it without you.





Kateřina Ŝardická
I Shall Awaken

© Albatros Media Group, 2022.

5. května 22, Prague 4, Czech Republic.

Text © Kateřina Ŝardická, 2020

Translation © Tereza Novická, 2021

Editing: Scott Alexander Jones, 2021

Cover & Illustrations © Ŝtěpánka Coufalová

Printed in Czech Republic by TNM Print, s.r.o.

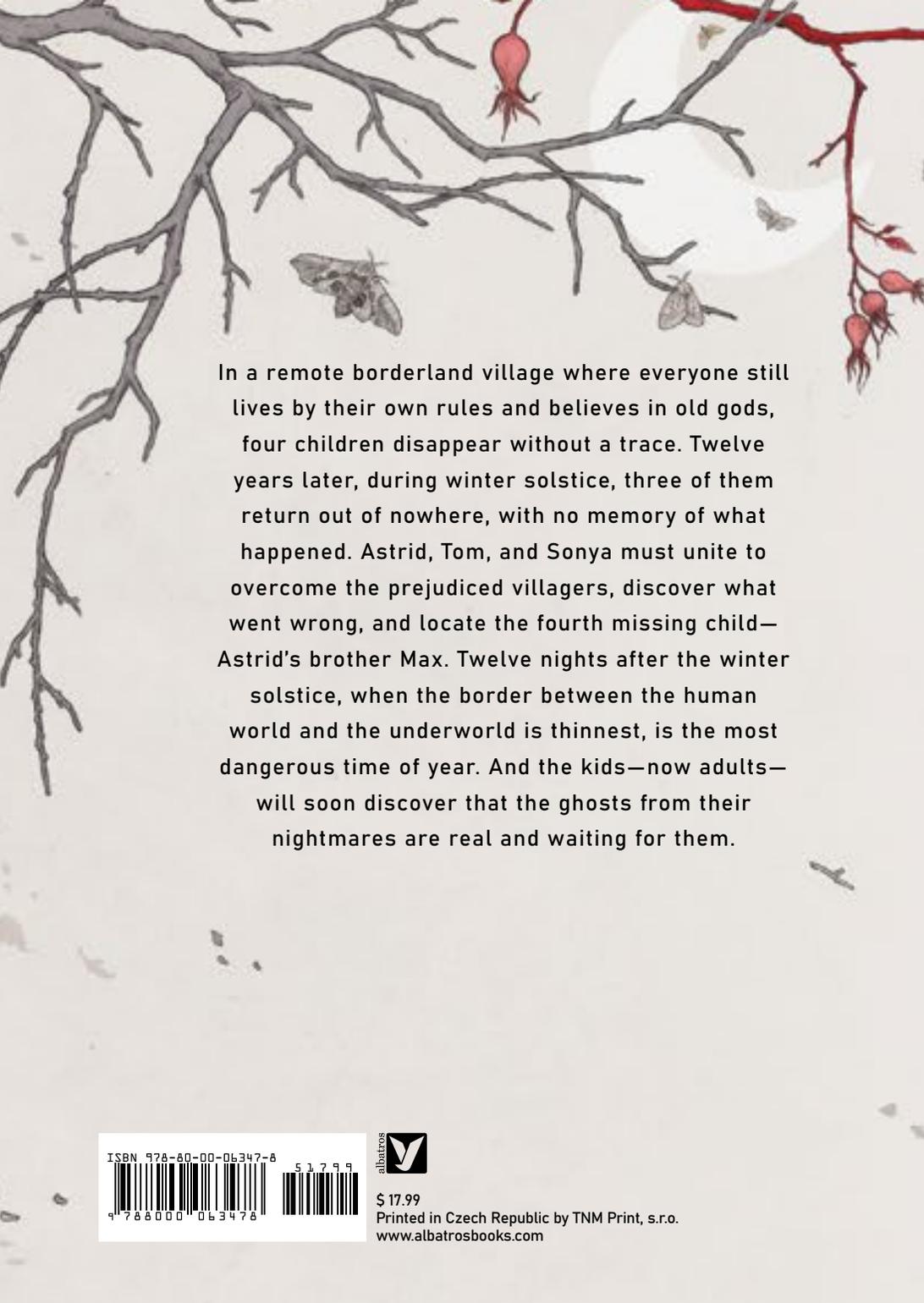
www.albatrosbooks.com

ISBN: 978-80-00-06347-8

All rights reserved.

Reproduction of any content is strictly prohibited
without the written permission of the rights holders.





In a remote borderland village where everyone still lives by their own rules and believes in old gods, four children disappear without a trace. Twelve years later, during winter solstice, three of them return out of nowhere, with no memory of what happened. Astrid, Tom, and Sonya must unite to overcome the prejudiced villagers, discover what went wrong, and locate the fourth missing child—Astrid's brother Max. Twelve nights after the winter solstice, when the border between the human world and the underworld is thinnest, is the most dangerous time of year. And the kids—now adults—will soon discover that the ghosts from their nightmares are real and waiting for them.

ISBN 978-80-00-06347-8



9 788000 063478



5 1 7 9 9



\$ 17.99

Printed in Czech Republic by TNM Print, s.r.o.
www.albatrosbooks.com