

THE TALE OF THE END OF SERIUZ FORCEPHUL

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This story summarizes the writings of Artem Clairvoyant, who was the famous duke's most loyal subject, and at the same time his scribe.

Seriuз Forcephul was a young duke. He led the grand army of the Land of Grey and Blue Waters. Tales of the glory of his soldiers have resounded again and again across the then-known world. In the present story, Forcephul faces a bitter end. Almost to the very end, his entire army stood beside him. It was the mightiest army ever to gather in the tales recounting those worlds. Yet it stood one day before a city, where it had to stop fighting.

It was the fourth week since Seriuз Forcephul had found himself in this tragic story, one of the most talked about people counted by the sun under the skies of those days. It all happened unexpectedly, but the troops of soldiers from all corners of the world were hungry for battle.

One day the troops that walked side by side to Forcephul himself in the discovery of new lands, spotted a foreign army in the distance. The speed and coordination of the movement of their lined-up white stallions inspired the heavy cavalry of Forcephul's units with awe. Among the horsemen, a peculiar kind of archers stood out from the crowd. Their arches were small, but in the quivers on their shoulders they carried long steel arrows. Their attires were not only flawlessly coined, they were beautiful, too. Every soldier in Forcephul's army was dressed to the nines and every soldier was always full and never thirsty. They were well-nigh invulnerable, but also hefty and slow-moving. Forcephul's battles lasted long. They were full of complex strategic decisions, but defeat was something they had not yet tasted.

Instantly, Forcephul sent a messenger to meet the marvelous cavalry troops, a swift horseman raced along the ravine, coated into a golden-yellow by the evening light. He carried the message: "My name is Seriuз Forcephul and my army is the mightiest army under the Sun. We come in peace. We do not demand your treasures. We will share your lands with you, your mines and watermills. And thus ye, noble-born men, shall receive all the riches of the olden days of the Land of Grey and Blue Waters, and the mercy of their ruler's crown, Radimir Fightphul."

When the messenger thus read the notice, he gazed across the foreign army, and the luster of its armors blinded him. Not a single word was uttered by the soldiers, they just stared at him silently. In the following, single moment, the horsemen tightened the reins, and the foot soldiers fell in a single step that shook the ground. They turned back towards the ravine, not one of them looking back to the messenger even for a moment.

Forcephul knew he did not receive an answer even before the messenger with a meaningful look on his face returned to him. In a slow-paced, majestic rhythm, his battalion followed the unnamed army adorned in shine. Darkness fell, torches were lit; they were not in the habit of entering foreign territory at sunset.

A cold morning wind glided against the cliffs announcing the break of dawn, as the army, moving alongside the increasingly narrow gorge, so that one horseman could not ride next to the other, climbed up to reach a dry plateau. On the horizon, something was shining like a brilliant jewel.

The next day the blazing sun was drying out the throats of Forcephul's soldiers. The sun cut across the sky for the whole day, not a single cloud. As it began to set behind the faraway mountains, Forcephul realized that the jewel was a city, from where the army came which they had met the previous day. He was overwhelmed, but he was a military commander. He spurred his horse vigorously, and called out: "Before nightfall, we will make camp in front of this city's walls!" The soldiers became restless. Yet, they probably did not know what Forcephul did, that there were only very few of such grand and splendid cities, which man's spirit could conceive, and which in turn his hands could build.

They came before the city. Seriuiz waited for a whole week. All his scouting officers were summoned to the camp. All of his cannons, even the heaviest, he awaited, until they rolled in from the hinterland. The following day, he sent a gift to the city gate. It was not so much expensive, as it was exquisite in its splendor, a sphere made of flint in all colors of the sky; to him, it was about recognition. He stood there from the night of the full moon, to the night of the moon's eclipse.

And on the morning of the next day, he sent a messenger to the city gate, so that he could announce there was a battle ahead, and that he, Forcephul, was there entirely. He threatened, because he considered refusing his gift an insult to the glory of the Land of Grey and Blue Waters. The messenger, Currant Teary, returned, not having used his pen. As evening set in, he rode around the camp to check on the soldiers' spirit. Silence, which he was not accustomed to, accompanied him, barrels of beer lay untouched on the wagons. At nightfall, he sat down with his advisors and company commanders. They knew they were soldiers and there was not much else for them to do other than fight. "Tomorrow, when the clock strikes seven, we shall give orders to our troops. At dusk, we strike. A hail of fire shall come upon them," they concluded.

It took a long time that day for the twilight to set on the plain. When the sun's arch disappeared from the sky, fireballs came rising out of the horde of cannons. For half a night, Forcephul's mighty artillery illuminated the firmament that stretched high above the city. As he watched the salvos, he shook his head: "My gunners, they used to lead me through battles without my having to lift a finger." Later on that night, one could hear barrels of beer rolling across the camp. One could hear beer pouring down the soldiers' throats, yet there were no dirges, nor any encouraging tales of the army's glorious past, that could be heard.

Dawn, but Forcephul stayed in his tent. It might be a good idea, perhaps, to turn around the horses – the thought searched for him, but he was dumbfounded by the sight of cathedral belfries behind the white walls. He had his spurs sharpened, then got on the horse. He rode alongside the walls and it took him all day to finally circle it fully by evening time. Many wonders he had seen, some he enkindled from his memories of accounts about the glory and wisdom of the old world. He was thinking about his army: "No heroes, apart from myself. How tired this kingdom is. There is no one who could carry words. Only orders, commands, bowed heads and silence.

Is this all the world I know? Like a virgin, history lies in bed with me every night of my life. Yet, who is the man to be the last to step before such magnificent walls?"

When he rode his beautiful spirited horse into the camp, one of the commanders stepped up to him, suggesting that it might perhaps be sensible to have wise men and their books brought there. Perchance they could envisage how to push one's way through this setback between here and the great fortune yonder. "To lead a library into the battlefield," Seriuз boiled over, "has long been known a delusion. To study in the battlefield, when indeed trembling for our lives all of us shall be? To drive the precious knowledge across muddy cart tracks, past ignorant marauding bands? Never, my dear soldier!"

When that day Forcephul sought his peace before going to sleep, he remembered a story told to him at an early age by his first teacher, Nulla Aknowing. About how some warlord once conquered some glorious city. He surrounded it, and the besieging lasted for a few long months. He would despair during battles, but the beauty of the city kept him from retreating. When ravens finished feeding off of the last remains of his famished soldiers, and the mice ate away at the tents and ropes on the catapults, he eventually stepped before the gates of that city himself. The door opened wide for him, he stepped through it, and that was the last anyone ever heard of him.

Forcephul feared the same fate might be upon him. He could see himself, how suddenly an arrow bursts through his throat on the battlefield, or how in the enemy's dirty prison rats eat away at him day after day, while he is still alive. "Nothing can happen without a fight," was his last thought before he slowly sank into sleep.

Like nearly every morning, Forcephul was striding among his troops on that day, too. There was order in his army, and the soldiers were greeting him with cheerful looks on their faces, as he walked past them. He was happy to see they were not disheartened nor dispirited, after they had been staring that night so helplessly at the invincible walls of the city. Once alone for a moment, he bent down and picked up a handful of dry soil. He got up, slowly unclenched his fingers and began watching how it slips back to the floor between them. His dark eyes began tearing up, slowly, slowly, a single tear gathered in their depths, and then suddenly and wholly, like a fat drop of summer's rain, it fell onto the dry soil and became lost in it.

He would be remembered by worlds, he has known this for a long time. What prosperity, what worldliness he had expanded across the globe! He was himself a man, who sowed the seeds of centuries of knowledge into the empty provinces. He went back to his tent and sat on his modest chair. He buried his face in his hands, placed his elbows on his knees, and he felt like he was turning into stone. Life, caught between what it is and what it wants to be, has lost its balance.

Two more days and nights went by, cold winds in the evenings harbingered the end of summer. It was the end of the third week since they had arrived on the plain. Seriuз Forcephul commanded the whole army to clean up the camp and wait for him in a lineup at sunrise. And not before the dawn finally broke did the young duke step in front of them. He was sparing of words: "Return home, I shall return home, too, on my own, once I have conquered this city." There was not a single soldier who would dare or know how to oppose him. It was, however, with great sorrow that they bid him goodbye, as he walked among them, and slowly the soldiers moved to form a line.

They were descending into that same ravine, the ravine of unfortunate encounter, a sad tune echoing from it. In front of them, banks of tall, lush grey clouds full of rain hanging on the horizon. The sight of them, to many, only strengthened their grim premonitions.

For a long time, Forcephul was looking at them, seeing them cross many a mountain pass, as they slowly faded away like a silver river in the mellow, melancholic silhouette outlined by the cliffs and gorges. When the last cannon toppled over the last mountain pass, a gust of wind blew through the lonely duke's russet beard, and he felt he could smell the sea in it. Unhurriedly, even somewhat clumsily, in full battle array, he turned around. There were just him and the city left. He took a step closer and the city was closer. He took another step and gradually moved forward in this way. It was not long before the city covered all his eyes could gaze upon, he came so close. He knew he was going to stop here. He drew his sword from its sheath, carefully polished with a leather ribbon, held it tightly with both arms, and with all the strength he possessed, ran it into the dry ground before him. Wherever he looked, tall walls were rising, leaning against the steep rocks. Above the walls, mighty and fortified watchtowers grew.

He removed his armor, untied his helmet and took it off. He unbelted his silver knee guards and carefully placed everything beside him. For a moment he stopped, and then uttered loudly and thunderously: "My name is SeriuZ Forcephul. In my life, I have conquered many lands. All of them I have put out of centuries of tyranny, disease and misery. To the people I have brought health, mercy and love. But never in my life have I known that between what I am conquering and myself there is something else, which I have always overlooked. I have always dashed past here with my horsemen at full speed. What I overlooked is that I have never in my life defeated something, which would itself defeat me. What I am gazing upon from here, is defeating me. The spirit of centuries shall remember me, but I myself have been defeated. I have stepped thus far, so that my own sight of your city can finish me. My end is here, my end is the point, from which I gaze at you. Glory to the Land of Grey and Blue Waters."

Here, he came to an end. Like a couple of flocks of bedazzled sparrows blasting off a stony cliff, so did the steel arrows stir up the sullen sky. As they pierced through SeriuZ Forcephul, unsettling the dry dirt beside him, the final words of the greatest duke under the Sun were: "Thank you, your grace."

On the spot where he rotted since, a big tree grew with a luscious treetop. Thousands and thousands of branches provided shelter for the birds who found their new home here. With the birds came singing, and the plain grew green again.