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The Baynok

by Joe Williams

“Do you think Papa will get home today?” Katya asked her mother.

They stood at the window where Zanna chopped mutton on a walnut table, watching through the wood-framed square for a familiar shape on the road outside. Conflicting smells of flowers and farm animals drifted through the open shutters. Past the garden gate, sheep the color of sand grazed on fields tremulous with breezes.

When Zanna turned, she wore a smile belied by the crease in her brow. “He’s sure to be here soon.” She wrung her greasy hands on her apron. “No need to worry if he’s a day late. It’s to be expected without Jedrik to help carry the bolts of wool.”

This was the first time in all her fifteen years that Katya could remember her father traveling to the market at Wroclaw without Jedrik to accompany him. Her sister’s husband used to help tend their flock, but since her older sister died last winter

of a fever, Jedrik had grown sullen, electing to spend his days in the village tending a mug of ale.

Hands protected by a cloth, Katya pulled a fresh-baked apple crisp from the oven in the fireplace and set it on a table to cool. Papa had been gone a week, and in anticipation of his return, she had baked a delicious crisp made from crumbled oats and sweet, succulent red apples fresh-picked from the orchard near the creek. Papa loved frivolous sweets, and this recipe, handed down from Gramma, was his favorite.

A young boy's peal rang from outside. "Papa! Papa!"

Katya ran for the door and collided with her mother. The two laughed and pushed their way from the cottage into the golden light of an autumn afternoon.

Her little brother Miron danced about the garden, sending terrified chickens squawking to the fence posts. He pointed up the road. "Here he comes!"

Zanna, kirtle hitched to her knees, hurried to join Miron at the gate. Katya ducked back inside to fetch the apple crisp, and reached the gate just as her father slouched down the footpath. An ox plodded after him, a bundle of flaccid bags flopped across its back.

Papa must have been just as tired as he looked because he didn't sweep up Miron and twirl him around as he usually did. He ignored the jumping boy and strode steadily on, his mouth hidden in a wild growth of beard. When Zanna lifted herself on her toes to kiss him, he turned his head and the kiss landed on the brown bristles of his cheek.

She pulled back, eyebrows knitted and mouth open. Her hands fluttered about his shoulders like butterflies unsure where to land.

Puffs of dust rose from Papa's boots as he clomped up the path. Katya stepped between him and the gate and smiled sweetly. "Welcome home, Papa."

He swayed slightly as he stopped in front of her and for a moment she wondered if he had tarried in the village to tip a few with Jedrik. But his eyes were sharp and penetrating, with none of the redness of drink.

“Is there meat on the table?” he asked.

“Mama was just fixing supper.” She remembered the cooling dish in her hands and held it out to him. “I made you this for dessert.”

Papa shoved past her. “That meat better be ready. I’ve a craving for some young lamb.”

Katya trotted to keep up with the steady swing of his boots. “It’s an apple crisp. I picked them myself.”

Papa stopped so abruptly she almost stumbled into him. Her relief at not touching him surprised her.

Pinprick pupils bored into her. “Apples, you say?”

She nodded and offered the golden crisp, its top crusted with brown sugar. “Your favorite.”

He was already turning away when his hand casually rose and knocked aside the dish. The apple crisp tumbled twice and landed facedown on the ground.

“Next time,” he muttered, “make a meat pie.”

When her gasp finally came, her father was halfway to the stable.

“What’s wrong with Papa?” Miron whimpered.

“He’s tired,” Zanna said. “Nothing more.”

Katya, blue dress pooling around her, settled next to the upended bowl. When she turned it over, the apple crisp remained in the dirt. Curious chickens clucked closer.

It wasn’t the apple crisp, Katya realized, nor the careless gesture that had sent it

tumbling that made her feel so awful. No, it was her father's missing smile. He always smiled when he saw her. Where had his smile gone? Whatever she had done, she wished she could undo it to make things better.

“He wanted a meat pie,” Katya murmured, searching for an explanation.

“I'll talk to him.” Cool fingers stroked her plaited hair. “We'll find out what happened at market to put him in such a mood.”

###

At supper, Papa sat at the head of the table, sawing at a leg of lamb with his knife. The knife rasped against his wooden platter, scraping and grating, until Zanna cleared her throat. “How was your trip?”

He dismissed her with a wave of his knife and shoved a slice of dripping meat into the hole in his beard. Teeth flashed as he chewed.

Zanna tried again. “What were the merchants selling in Wroclaw?”

This would get him talking, Katya knew. Papa always spoke of his trips, describing the silks of the Byzantines, the furs of the bearded Danes, and the wrought-iron trinkets of the Franks. He would portray the traders with as much wonder as he described their wares.

This time Papa merely grunted and chewed. His eyes darted about the table as he hunched over his plate, his greasy hands staining whatever he touched.

Zanna said, “Did anything interesting happen on your trip? Whatever happened you know you can tell us. Remember when your wagon tipped at the fjord and you lost half your load? No one here complained. You had us all laughing at your story of fish in their woollies.”

Papa slammed his fist on the table. Katya jumped at the sound, her stool rocking

back and her knee banging the underside of the table. She winced at the spike of pain but did not cry out for fear of drawing her father's attention. She did not want him to look at her with the stony glare he now directed at his wife.

Red juices dripped from his whiskers. "Go bray at the hogs, woman. We don't need your chattering here."

Zanna held his stare for a moment, then gathered a few greasy platters and took them out back to wash them. When she had gone, Papa returned to eating.

Whimpering softly, Miron stared at his untouched dinner, his eyes half-filled with tears. Under the table, Katya reached over and squeezed his hand. *Be strong, little brother*, she thought with all her might, wishing the words could travel through her hand and into Miron's mind. She felt his hand tremble in hers and enclosed his cold fingers in the warmth of her palm.

Papa's glower rose from the pool of grease and red juices puddling in his platter. He regarded Miron with eyes as hard as obsidian, as sharp as flint. Katya recognized his cheekbones, his nose, the jut of his brow, but those eyes were the eyes of a ghost haunting her father's face.

His coarse voice scraped her like gravel in an unhealed wound. "Stop your crying."

Miron sobbed aloud.

Papa stood, his knuckles on the table. "Crying is for babies and women. It's not for men. Stop your crying or I'll stop it for you."

Shocked at his cruelty, Katya could only gape at him in wonder. How could this be the same man who used to lift her on his shoulders so she could pick the reddest apples?

Papa circled the table, his fists bunched into bludgeons. His fist drew back and Katya sprang between him and her brother. She reached for Papa, not to hurt him, but to hold him, to pull him back from whatever strange place he had lost himself.

The blow meant for Miron's face struck her shoulder with such force that it jangled her teeth. She fell, her fingers catching on Papa's shirt, tearing it open.

She glimpsed Papa's chest all matted in hair as thick as ram's wool except where a scar no longer than a worm stretched between his muscles. Instantly he clutched his shirt closed and whirled away, storming off to his room. The door slammed like thunder.

Katya shook her head, unwilling to believe. It was just a scar. A branch could have scratched him as he walked through the forest. An animal could have clawed him while he hunted. A thief could have waylaid him in Wroclaw.

Anything could have caused that scar on his chest.

But Katya knew it was none of these things. It was the sign her Gramma had warned her about. The sign of the Baynok.

###

Men change, little Katya. Their love turns to anger, their caresses to blows. You must love them still. It is the curse of the Baynok.

A long time ago, Baynok was the proudest hunter in all the woods. For his bride, he chose the most beautiful maiden. He vowed never to harm her or to take another woman. But his wife, she was no more faithful than a cat in season.

One day, Baynok found some pages hidden among his wife's unmentionables. He took them to a grain merchant who knew the mysteries of letters and paid him to unlock the secrets they held.

They contained poems written by the young vicar. They spoke of eyes like stars, lips like roses and kisses like honey.

Baynok raged at learning his wife had kept such letters, and wondered what she had done to inspire them. He knew if he went home he would do something awful to her, despite his promise never to harm her.

He would never break a vow, so Baynok fled into the forest. The woods took the jealousy in his heart and changed him, the same way a lamb changes into a ram. It gave him the power to take his revenge.

To this day, little Katya, Baynok steals the hearts of men who dare sleep alone in the woods. They don't die because what he takes, he replaces with a fist-sized stone. By the time they awaken, why, the only sign of what happened is a small scar.

Just like the scar on Papa's chest.

And yet what should have dismayed her brought her comfort, and what should have repelled her brought her hope. Despite her love for her father, or because of it, she felt a profound relief in the hope that his heart had been stolen.

She tried it on, tentatively. *The Baynok stole Papa's heart.*

The thought soothed her. She hadn't disappointed Papa by baking an apple crisp instead of a meat pie. No, he was angry because the Baynok had stolen his heart. To save her family, she needed to find his heart and restore it to him.

###

Early the next morning Katya marched into the field and selected the strongest ram. She petted and stroked him and apologized for what she needed to do, then guided him into the shed where they stored the washed fleeces. A glance outside to make certain no one had seen her, then firmly she shut the shed door.

A knife hung by a leather thong from a peg on the wall. A red crust filled the cracks where the curved blade joined the grip. The wooden handle, polished smooth by her father's palm, felt awkward in her fingers. It was made for a man's hand.

She stood next to the ram, steadying him against her leg as she had seen her father do. She always looked away before Papa finished his work. Although she had never seen the stroke, she knew where to hold the knife against the ram's throat.

She closed her eyes.

The knife in her hand seemed to move on its own, as if it knew what to do from long years of practice. The ram staggered against her, its bleat an almost human cough. A warm wetness sprinkled her eyelids and cheeks. Copper drops anointed her lips.

She clenched her eyes, but still her tears crept out and washed the blood away.

The creak of old hinges startled her.

She blinked at the sunlight. Miron stood by the open door, staring neither at her nor the dead ram at her feet, but at the bloodstained knife hanging loosely from her fingers.

Katya wiped her forearm across her face, hoping to remove the drops of blood.

"What are you doing here? Don't you have chores?"

"Mama told me to fetch a bale of wool." He looked at her with wide eyes. "Why did you kill Curly?"

The knife rattled as she laid it on a bench. "I had to."

"If you don't tell me why you killed Curly, I'll tell Papa. He always said Curly was his best breeder."

The weight of the ram pinned her feet. Blood pooled around her, so much the dirt floor couldn't absorb it all. The mess sickened her. She pulled her slippers out from

under Curly's soft coat one at a time, almost falling from the weakness in her legs.

"I did it for Papa," she murmured. "And for you, Miron."

Between the lightness in her head and the heaviness in her legs, Katya couldn't keep her balance. She sat on the bench and dropped her face into her hands. How could she make him understand? "The Baynok has stolen Papa's heart. I have to go into the woods and convince the Baynok to trade it for the heart of this ram." To her ears, it sounded absurd. Yet she hoped the Baynok, bound by an ancient vow of revenge, would be accustomed to bargaining.

Miron didn't question her logic. "I'll go with you."

She looked up, and the grimness in Miron's face chilled her. Never had she seen the boy so expressionless.

"No," she said. "You must stay here and make excuses for me. If Papa asks where I am, say I am in the fields tending a sick ewe. Or if he looks for me in the fields, say I am in the garden weeding."

Miron nodded. "When will you be back?"

"Tonight." She picked up the knife. The fit of the handle in her hand made her shudder. "Now take Mama a bale of wool before she comes looking for you. I'm not finished here."

The boy stared at the knife. "Let me help. We can hunt the Baynok and if he doesn't give back Papa's heart we can kill him."

Katya shook her head. "I must do this alone, Miron. Now go outside." She threw a fleece at him.

He caught the soft bundle in his arms. Frowning, he backed out the door, then turned on his heel and ran.

Katya crossed to the door and closed it. Holding the knife awkwardly, she returned to Curly.

###

By the time she finished, it was almost noon. She hid Curly's carcass under bales of wool, collected some of the old work clothes her father kept stored in the shed, and slipped into the fields. Under one arm she carried the bundle of clothes, while in her left hand she carried the ram's heart wrapped in cloth. Keeping to the hollows between hillocks, she passed beyond the sheep pastures, crossed the creek on a row of stepping stones, and stood facing the dark firs that marked the forest edge.

Here, screened from the cottage by the trees, she stripped off her blue dress and put on the clothing she had smuggled from the shed. The Baynok preyed on solitary men, so she dressed as a man in the hopes it would stalk her.

She donned a ragged wool cloak that Papa had worn until it was more patches than fabric. Her hair, the umber color of rich sod, she piled under a hood that concealed both her braids and much of her round face. On her legs she wore a pair of Jedrik's old trousers, huge on her slim build, baggy even with the legs rolled up and the waist tied with a cord.

She hid her dress behind a bush and swung along a deer track, plunging into the woods with grim determination. Fir trees engulfed her in greenery and the smell of pine needles. As she ventured deeper into the woods the trees grew denser, their interwoven branches blocking the sunlight and casting her into shadow. Moisture clung to everything, turning the trail to mud. White fungus sprouted from ancient trunks and moss dripped from spiny branches, swaying like spider webs in a forgotten cellar. The fresh scent of pine turned to the fetor of mildew rising from the carcasses of fallen trees

the size of giants.

For a long time, only the sigh and rustle of the wind came from the undergrowth. Then a twig snapped.

She had not stepped on a twig.

She looked over her shoulder, saw only the close-set trees and dense curtains of moss.

A prickling on the back of her neck made her hopeful her disguise was working yet equally fearful, a strange, double-edged emotion that made her heart quicken and her forehead tingle.

She pushed her way past a tree limb draped with moss, allowing it to snap into place behind her. A dozen paces from the branch, some residue of fear caused her to glance back. The moss on the branch still swung long after it should have stopped, as if something behind her had recently shoved it aside.

Her heart pounded in her chest. If she had attracted the notice of that which she had come here to find, why didn't it show itself?

Then she remembered. The Baynok attacked only sleeping victims.

Katya took a deep breath to steady herself. Keeping to a measured step, she hiked along the path until she found a place where the trail widened. Here she stopped, stretched, and made a great show of yawning. She sat down on a damp bed of moss, ate a little bread and cheese she had brought along, drank from a small jug hanging from her belt, bunched together a pillow of leaves and laid on her side as if to sleep.

A few shafts of sunlight slanted red and glistening through the trees. Although it was too early for a traveler to lay down, Katya hoped her exhaustion would lend credibility to her act.

She thought she heard movement in the woods, such as the rustling a lamb makes as it moves past a bush. Then, nothing.

The bloody scent of the ram's heart leaked through the cloth. Katya wondered if the smell would attract wolves. She clutched the bundle tightly, determined to keep it even if faced by a bear.

She forced herself to lie still. With her face hidden by the shadow of her cowl, she opened her eyes a crack and watched the woods.

Shadows lengthened and the red of evening turned to the gray of dusk. At last she grew accustomed to the sounds of the forest, learning to block out the flutter of birds and the whisper of branches.

The crunch of a heavy footfall startled her. Back the way she had come the foliage trembled and a heavy smell of musk swept down the trail. Overhead, the birds took flight in a frenzied swarm and vanished in an instant.

Every instinct screamed for her to flee. Would the Baynok, seeing her shivering, guess she was awake and leave before showing itself? A part of her wished it would, wanted never to see the thing that was once human. Her heart thundered within her. *For Miron, she thought, and Papa.*

The footfalls stopped before they reached her. The stink of musk stung her eyes, but the Baynok did not show itself.

From the woods, a deep sigh rumbled. The words that followed were slow and resonate. "Ah, little one. What a morsel you shall make."

The voice of the Baynok. But it wasn't speaking to her.

She rolled to her hands and knees and crawled toward the sound. She pushed aside a fern. There, on the trail, she saw it.

Fear crawled across her skin like loathsome insects, leaving a nest of goose bumps in its wake. If she had seen it from the front, she would have run screaming. It crouched over a sleeping form, its back to her. A mantle of black fur, matted with twigs, hung from its shoulders and upper arms. Antlers, shaggy with moss, sprouted from a hairy skullcap.

Tearing her eyes from the inhuman shape, she saw the face of the slumberer and almost gasped. Miron! The boy must have followed her from the farm. And he, exhausted by the trek, must have fallen asleep while she just pretended.

The Baynok held a silver knife, a knife ridiculously small compared to the black nails that curved from its fingers. With its left hand, it lifted Miron's tunic to reveal the boy's narrow chest.

At last the fear that paralyzed her broke. She staggered to her feet, shouting, "Stop!"

The Baynok whirled with an alien grace, moving not as an animal moves, but as a puppet of an animal moves in a shadow play. She balked at the snarling visage, recoiling from the massive jaw that jutted down at her.

The Baynok sniffed at her through a wide, flat nose. "Another pup? I smell blood on your hands, yet your scent eludes me." Yellow eyes flickered across her, probing the shadows beneath her cowl. She wasn't certain which disguised her more, her baggy clothes or the smell of blood.

"I . . ." Her voice broke and she had to swallow before going on. "I have a gift. To trade." She held out the bundle she carried.

The Baynok tossed back its head and uttered a scornful howl. Great flaps of fur jiggled across a chest banded in muscles. "Trade? No mortal should bargain with one

whose vows are eternal. You may not live long enough to satisfy your promise.”

At its clawed boots, Miron stirred. His eyes opened, and the spell that held him in slumber must have broken. The boy scrambled to his feet, jerking a long knife from his belt, the same knife Katya had used to slaughter the ram.

A look of icy hatred froze Miron’s face. For eight years, she had seen him smile and laugh, his face dancing with the joys of childhood, but now she hardly recognized him.

Wordlessly Miron lunged at the Baynok’s shaggy back, the knife raised for a killing blow.

The stroke never landed. The Baynok merely swung its fist, the one that held the silver knife, and knocked the boy sprawling. The butcher knife spun into the undergrowth.

Katya charged. She knew she couldn’t fight the Baynok, yet she had to get between it and Miron before it struck again. Let the Baynok kill her, if it must, but she would not let it hurt Miron further.

The Baynok stopped her with an outstretched hand, claws splayed. “The little one has courage, yet his heart is hardly bigger than a pebble. He will grow to be a fine hunter, a merciless warrior.”

Stunned, Miron sat in the undergrowth, staring at the blood that dripped from his mouth. A mask of pain painted his cheeks. He looked not like an avenging warrior, but a terrified little boy.

“Take my heart,” Katya said, without thinking.

The Baynok regarded her from beneath the ledge of its brow. Katya stepped closer, her determination growing. She pointed to the tears that streamed down Miron’s

face. “You call him a warrior? Let him grow into a young man, and then cull him. For now, take me instead.”

The Baynok tilted its great head. “Yes, you are also brave. And yet I wonder why your scent is so strange. I smell blood and . . .”

“Then we have a deal?” Katya pressed.

“Yes, I will take your heart. This sobbing babe I will leave for another day.”

Relief washed over Katya. “Run, Miron!” She backed the command with all of her strength. “Go home! Now!”

Miron hesitated for a moment, holding his hand to his mouth. Anguish knotted his face. He stepped closer, fists clenched, then spun and raced away.

“Stay on the trail!” Katya shouted, worried he would stray and become lost.

The Baynok grunted and stepped toward her. The antlers on its helmet brushed the branches.

“Wait.” Katya held out the parcel she carried. “There is one other matter we must settle.” The advancing Baynok ignored her and she quickly continued. “I have brought you the heart of our finest ram. I want to trade it for my Papa’s heart.”

A snarl rippled the gash of its mouth, revealing a glimpse of yellow fangs. “More deals? Lad, your impertinence tries my patience.”

Undaunted, Katya hastened to explain. “My Papa passed through these woods two nights ago. You stole his heart.”

“And replaced it with a stone. A fair bargain. What use has a man for a heart? A stone serves in all matters. It does not bleed and it cannot be broken. He is a better man for it.”

“I want him to have his heart back.” She unwrapped the bundle. An

unappetizing muscle the size of a fist rested in her hands. “I have--”

Harsh laughter cut her off. “Lad, put away that meat. His heart is gone. I ate it, as I will eat yours.”

Aghast, Katya stood as frozen as a hare before a wolf. Devoured! No one told her the Baynok *ate* the hearts of its victims!

Papa’s heart . . . gone.

The massive creature prowled closer, its musk almost overpowering. The blade of the silver knife shimmered in the gloom. With its free hand it pulled a smooth red stone from the folds and flaps of its furs. “Come now. A bargain is a bargain. Your heart for a stone. As you promised.”

“Yes,” Katya said. She tore her gaze from the red stone and glanced down the path in the direction Miron had run. She hoped he would not lose his way in the dark. How she wanted to run after him and escape this forest! But the Baynok was so close that its long arms would most certainly catch her. And if she escaped, betraying her promise, what would become of Miron? Would the Baynok hunt him down and take what she had bargained to replace?

She could not risk it. She could not save Papa, but she would not fail her brother.

“Yes,” she repeated. “A bargain is a bargain.”

She lowered the ram’s heart and with her free hand opened her cloak. A tug at the neckline of her tunic exposed her breasts to the Baynok’s knife.

A ferocious snarl, more bestial than human, broke from the Baynok. The roar blew across her, hot and fetid, dappling her with spittle. “Trickery! You deceitful . . .” the last word came out a curse, “woman!”

Hope fled her, bringing with it a smile. Could the Baynok still be bound by its

promise to never take another woman? Her mind reeled with a sudden plan. “A bargain is a bargain,” she said, sternly. “You promised to eat my heart. So take it.”

The Baynok recoiled from her, stepping back with slow, mechanical movements. “Pass safely, woman. I will find my nourishment elsewhere.”

It was letting her go. As much as she wanted to flee, she held her ground. “No. You made a bargain. You must eat my heart.”

The great horned head shook vehemently.

She stepped closer, the neck of her tunic pulled low. “You must eat my heart. Or else make a new bargain.”

The beast quivered, torn between its vows. Clearly it could no more eat her heart than she could eat a burning coal. Yet it had made a bargain.

She grew serious, her amusement vanishing. Everything depended on her next few words. “If you can’t give me my Papa’s heart, then give me his love. You have no need for it.”

Scowling, the Baynok sheathed the knife in what Katya realized was not a sheath, but a flap of skin fused to its leg. Without a word, it extended its hand until the great clawed forefinger touched the ram’s heart Katya carried. A red glow passed from its finger and the heart beat once, surprising Katya so much that she almost dropped it. Fresh blood oozed from the severed arteries.

“There,” the Baynok sighed, its great bulk sagging against a tree. “If you want him to be the way he was, a sheep easily led to slaughter, feed him that thing. But if you want him to be a man, leave him as he is.”

All she wanted was for her father to love her again. Katya swaddled the heart, turned away from the Baynok, and started along the trail to home. The scent of the

Baynok followed her for a time, making her think the beast pursued her, but it soon faded. Then she thought of Miron alone in the woods and broke into a jog. Despite a moon to guide her, it took all her concentration to stay on the narrow path.

Before long she saw the boy shuffling down the trail with his head lowered. When Katya called his name, Miron looked up with such joy that she hugged him in her arms and kissed him.

“I wanted to help,” Miron said. “But I was scared.”

“You did help. You left when I told you to, and that’s exactly what I needed you to do. It takes a brave boy to walk in these woods alone.”

“I won’t have to walk the rest of the way alone, will I?”

“No, Miron, we’ll walk together.”

Miron held her hand, while in the other she carried the ram’s heart. Warmth radiated from it, giving her the strength she needed to walk even when her legs felt like wooden posts. Every so often a powerful beat thrummed through the severed organ.

All the way home, she thought of Gramma’s recipe for lamb’s heart pie.

The End