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# THE CURSE OF THE GOLEM

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

KAREL ZEMAN

## DEDICATION

*For Thornton Sully*

## THE CURSE OF THE GOLEM

*"You are dust,  
and you will return to dust!"*

The Bible, Genesis 3:19

Prokop Samsa hid behind a thorny rose hedge. He lay on his stomach, watching a villa with a sky-blue facade and the adjoining property behind a picket fence. The gate, the paved walkway, the entrance, the rock garden behind the house, the swing and the sandpit.

He saw everyone who passed by. He was hiding in a neighboring, empty and neglected lot where weeds and bushes grew happily. He spent twelve hours on the lookout. He drank nothing, didn't eat, didn't budge and didn't even raise himself to urinate. The damp cold penetrated his nails, and his fingers stiffened.

A white SUV stopped in the driveway. A slender brunette got out of the car and loosened the seat belts of a three-year-old boy and a slightly older girl. The children babbled uninterruptedly. He could hardly understand them. All three entered the villa. Two minutes passed. In the back of the house, the blinds went up. The patio door was opened. The children ran out carrying plastic buckets and small shovels. They played in the shady sandbox in the garden, fooling around and pelting each other with sand. Their mother was on the phone.

Prokop waited and waited. The hours dragged by mercilessly. The man of the house hadn't shown up yet. A dog's bark could be heard from the surrounding land. At the nearby sidewalk a boy drove past on a Segway.

Prokop's hands were shaking and in front of his eyes danced silver stars. He tried to blink her away. It was increasingly difficult for him to concentrate. Everything looked blurry. He was aware that he was crying. He desperately wanted to be somewhere else.

When it got dark, he rose carefully and knelt. He found it difficult to move, his limbs felt like they were made of wood. He wrapped his precision weapon with a telescopic sight in a blanket and hid it under his coat. He crept as silently as a shadow over the thickly overgrown brush. He pushed his way through a hole in the chainlink fence and hurried to his truck, which was parked four blocks away. His two-ton giant Toyota Tundra seemed like a fist to the eye in the suburb of Sušice.

Prokop stowed the rifle and ammunition in the space under the back seat and stared out the window for a long time. The tears were now running down his face. Suddenly he hit the

steering wheel and swore. It wasn't until his joints ached that he stopped. Then he started the engine.

The small town of Sušice disappeared in the rearview mirror. Prokop switched on the CD player. The interior was filled with rock music by the Czech band, Kabat. Prokop sang along hoarsely the song *To hell, to heaven*. He was sobbing and making angry, inarticulate noises.

While driving, Prokop turned back to grab a bottle of vodka. Took a sip. With one hand on the steering wheel, he screwed the lid shut. A minute later he paused, removed the lid again with his teeth and drank half the bottle in one gulp.

After a few kilometers, Prokop could hardly see the road. He rubbed his eyes with his sleeve. He cut the curves, now and then he drove in the middle of the country road, ignoring the speed limit. If someone were to come from the opposite direction, they would just be unlucky. Prokop no longer sang; he just wept. He didn't care if he had an accident while driving through the Bohemian Forest at night.

Prokop almost overlooked the crossroad. He stepped on the brake pedal. The tires screeched as the car skidded on the wet asphalt. He jerked the steering wheel back and forth until he managed to get a grip on the car. Prokop put the car in reverse, set back a little and turned onto a paved forest path with numerous potholes. He crossed the mountain landscape. The headlights cut through the pitch-black darkness and behind the windows of the cab the silhouettes of the full-grown spruce trees glided past.

After a quarter of an hour Prokop found himself in front of a hunter's hut. He parked in the pebble driveway, turned off the engine, and took out the ignition key. In the remote wasteland, there was complete silence, except that in Prokop's ears the sharp guitar riffs continued to boom. For a moment, he sat motionlessly and stared at the night firmament. The heavenly hunter, the slowly-setting constellation, Orion, and his loyal dog star, Sirius. Far and wide there was not a soul.

Prokop barely batted an eye when the cold metal touched his front teeth. He decided to count to ten. He didn't lack courage and he really wanted to end it. But his index finger turned against him, however, froze, and he couldn't pull the damn trigger.

He cursed, put his rifle to one side, searched behind the passenger seat until he found the bottle. With large gulps, he drank the cold vodka down and began to count again. This time until twenty.

A chill ran down his spine, beads of sweat formed on his forehead and his index finger was still mercilessly stiff. In addition, his bowels revolted against the alcohol he had drunk. His tormented stomach did somersaults.

Suddenly Prokop shot out of the car like greased lightning. He leaned against the trunk of a fir tree growing near the driveway and he doubled over. The vodka flew in a high arc into the thicket. Prokop shuddered with disgust.

After a moment he straightened up and strolled with shaky steps into the hunter's house. In the living room he made no effort to take off his boots. Fully clothed, he fell on the unmade bed.

Prokop Samsa, a former elite soldier, was reminiscent of a pile of misery.

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The next day Prokop woke up screaming. He had a bad hangover and his neck was stiff from lying uncomfortably. He sat up and rubbed the muscles of his neck, looked around for a bottle.

Prokop's stomach rumbled terribly. He dragged himself past the kitchen counter, where dirty dishes were rotting, and opened the refrigerator. Coldness and emptiness yawned at him. He stifled the angry howl inside.

Prokop got into the car. His Toyota Tundra was a loyal soul and the only property he still had left after the divorce. He started and drove off.

Driving on a bumpy forest road was exhausting for him. Today he was unable to avoid all of the potholes. Soon the CD got stuck in the CD player. The device automatically switched to the news channel, where a presenter spoke to experts about the purpose of exterminating herds of cattle and pouring excess milk into the sewer system. Prokop pounded the radio with his fist until it stopped. He was definitely fed up by the eternal reports about food waste, increasing solar flares, rising sea levels, the more frequently occurring tsunamis, famine in Africa, global financial crisis, terrorism in Europe, escalation of street fights in big cities and the use of nuclear weapons in war conflicts. People were not only losing their common sense, but their humanity as well. Why did the world go down the drain so quickly? Could anyone stop it?

Prokop was on his way to a village called Borová Lada, where there was a grocery store. He didn't dare to stop at one of the local restaurants. As unkempt and dingy as he was, he would feel out of place.

He parked on a gravel roadside and checked his watch. The store opened after lunch, two o'clock, which was in just a few minutes. He drummed the steering wheel with his fingertips. Finally, he got out and stepped impatiently in front of the door.

When a plump saleswoman with dyed red hair opened the shop, Prokop lifted his Hubertus collar and slipped into the store. He didn't think of a shopping cart, went straight to the shelf and picked up a loaf of bread, three liver patties, butter and canned stew. He

slipped a bag of apples under his arm. Then it suddenly occurred to him that he was overdoing it. On the other hand, he was terribly starved.

Prokop stood in front of the liquor shelf and held out his hand for vodka. Unexpectedly, he felt a piercing look on the back of his neck. He hesitated for a moment, and then took two bottles.

He went to the cash register, lowered his eyes, and searched his pockets for his wallet. He noticed the furtive looks of the saleswoman, who eyed his greasy, disheveled hair, his unkempt beard and the worn clothes. His head slid between his shoulders like the head of a turtle.

The red-haired woman would certainly be amazed at how obsessive Prokop had been with his appearance two years ago. As a member of an elite unit, he had loved discipline and considered himself a proud patriot. No wonder he'd followed in his father's footsteps and become a soldier. He had wanted to defend his fatherland to the last breath. However, he had robbed himself of this honor because he began to seek consolation in the bottle. It all came together when his wife, Susan, cheated on him and was seeing another man. He could not get his feelings under control. By drinking, he had lost the confidence of his commanding officer and was discharged from military service.

After Prokop had ruined his career and his future went to the dogs, the National Park of the Bohemian Forest hired him. He helped guard the marshland, checked compliance with regulations of wood harvesting and protected the animals from poachers. Prokop lived alone in a hunter's hut in the wasteland, but he didn't mind. He was hiding from the world there.

Now Prokop was not even within shouting distance of happiness and was crouching perched on the heap of shambles, what was left of his life. He didn't know what to do with himself. Either he was drunk or he was struggling with the symptoms of a hangover, with his willingness to stay sober decreasing over time. Only when he needed alcohol or food did he go out among the villagers.

Usually nobody got upset about his appearance, as long as he didn't barge into a ski center, which was teeming with tourists.

The saleswoman put on a neutral smile.

While paying, Prokop could barely hide his grubby fingers and uncleaned nails. He felt ashamed of it, but it wasn't worth it for him doing anything about it. Prokop Samsa had given up not only his life, but himself.

Prokop quickly fled the shop. He put the paper bag with his purchases in the passenger seat. Half starving, he tore off a piece of bread and bit into it. Then he rubbed an apple on his coat. He took a bite, and the juice flowed over his beard.

On the way back to the hunter's hut, Prokop saw an old SUV parked with the hood open on the roadside. A man with his sleeves rolled up was struggling with the engine. He was wearing the black coat of a priest. A collar shone on his neck.

Prokop rolled down the side window and called out to him: "Good day, Mr. Stingl. Has your hell machine finally given up the ghost?"

Pastor Franz Stingl straightened up. "Oh where! Only a coil annoys me."

"Can I help you, Father?"

The pastor waved him off with his oil-stained hand. "It's okay, Prokop, I can do it alone. You haven't been to Sunday mass for a long time."

"I had a lot to do," Prokop said, grinning at the pastor's little weakness. He loved his old four-wheel drive off-road vehicle that the Americans left behind in the Bohemian Forest. Stingl's father found it half submerged in the swamp after the war. He pulled it out with the tractor, repaired it, and then hid it in the barn for forty years during the communist era.

Prokop raised two fingers to the brim of an imaginary hat and continued the journey. He rubbed his temples to ease his headache a little.

He drove slowly and looked around the area. The fog lay closer to the ground than usual and clung to old mountain ash, spruce and birch. After the harsh winter, the trees eagerly changed color and absorbed water, but in many places rotten coniferous trunks protruded from the bark beetle. The broken tips of adult spruce trees were reminiscent of the raging storm last year.

The Bohemian Forest never disappointed Prokop; it was always able to deepen his melancholy mood a little more. Because of their deeply shared grief, they even resembled each other. Both suffered in their own way.

After a few minutes, Prokop turned off onto a forest road. Another car with a Brno license plate was parked by the side of the road. Prokop would bet that it had no national park permit. The driver cheekily ignored the entry ban. In this wood harvest location, private persons were not allowed. Prokop started to rant and got out of the car.

Between the trees ran a path. For a few minutes Prokop climbed a gentle hill over pale green moss pillows. The fresh air was good for him and the forest had a beneficial effect on his hangover. The headache disappeared as if it had been blown away by a spell.

A predator bird circled in the sky. From the high elongated cry, Prokop recognized the red kite bird, or red Milan, as the Bavarians nicknamed him behind the border. After a few laps the bird plunged into a dive.

Prokop stopped on the hill. He found not a single sign of the presence of an intruder. Just as he made up his mind to get back to the car, he saw in the fog a silhouette of a man with broad shoulders. He was at least two meters tall.



"Hey, you there!" shouted Prokop and followed him. But he quickly lost sight of the guy. "Stand still!" yelled Prokop, and this time he added a touch of annoyance to his words. He fought his way through dense vegetation, dodging overgrown bramble bushes, jumping over hollows and climbing over fallen, half-rotted spruce trunks. He really wanted to catch up with the guy. For a short while he even thought he was hot on his heels. But the guy quickly disappeared.

When the icy cold bit his feet through his shoes, Prokop noticed that he was walking on soft, damp earth. Now he found himself in the swamp, which was mysterious and at the same time dangerous for those who didn't know the area. The mist sat on the tree stumps and rolled over the mountain pines and the heather. Dry pines, covered with moss and moose-antler lichen, lined several black lagoons.

It started to drizzle. Prokop felt his way cautiously on a path that led through the swamp, where either only the inveterate old settlers or reckless fools ventured. Of the latter, only a backpack or hat was found later. It is not for nothing that popular wisdom said: What the swamp takes, it never gives back.

An uneasy feeling overcame Prokop, but he went on anyway. He was careful not to step off the narrow path. Soon he reached a small pond with dark water. He searched for any sign of human presence.

Prokop himself didn't know why he was chasing an unknown intruder in the middle of the wilderness. Or could it just have been an illusion in the fog? Prokop cursed roughly to himself. He soon realized how silly he was acting. He was putting himself in danger. Perhaps he didn't want to go back to the hunter's hut and be alone in a room with his own gloomy thoughts and the rifle.

A branch snapped nearby. Prokop pricked up his ears. A bird's cry came from somewhere. Then it got quiet. Suddenly there was an uncomfortable silence, tense and mysterious, as if the world had held its breath.

Deep in thought, Prokop's awareness of his steps slackened more and more. His right foot slipped and he sank up to his knee in the peat soil. He grabbed the dry sedge and pulled himself out with all his might. As he freed his leg, he took a handful of tufts of grass and wiped off his shoe and jeans with a fleeting motion.

He made his way back through the swamp. For a while, he actually had the impression that he was on the right track. Only after a while did Prokop notice that he had lost his way in the fog. He was now trying to orient himself to the sun. The problem, however, was that she was hiding behind thick gray clouds.

Prokop came to a flat plain with withered birches. He looked over the moor, over the storm-fallen spruce trunks and the stunted dwarf trees, the sad victims of the harsh and

merciless nature. They were reminiscent of scary skeletons of a dead forest. The crippled stumps of rotten branches jutted like warning fingers to the sky, threatening the passersby with the ruin and the slow asphyxiation in the peat.

In the middle of the flat plain was an island with solid ground. There stood a richly branched giant with wrinkled bark, an ancient pine that was as old as eternity itself. The trunk, covered with moss and lichen, showed that it had grown here for centuries. Prokop's grandfather had always spoken respectfully about trees. Presumably also this evergreen pine was a source of cosmic wisdom, the connection between earthly and heavenly spheres, the tree of life, the image of immortality and a silent witness to ancient times. It remembered the past when the Bohemian Forest lived modestly side-by-side on their mountain farms – the Bohemians, Germans and Jews – and tried to get from the rocky ground their daily bread for themselves and their families. It was a witness to the fame of several generations of glassmaking families, of the forest pastures of the herds of cattle, of the tobacco smuggling from Bavaria, of the construction of the canals for the transport of wood, the two world wars, the expulsion of the Czech Germans, the legendary King of the Bohemian Forest, the Iron Curtain and of the sniper shooting in the back. It was hard to believe that thirty-five years ago the guns were still barking in this area.

"How are you, Princess?" Prokop asked the tree with cracked bark, in the veins of which flowed Vltava river's spring water, the life-giving juice of his beloved fatherland.

In the shadow of the pine tree crown lay many roundish stones, which were smoothed by wind and rain and were largely overgrown with moss or grass. A little off the beaten track, they were even collected into large cairns.

Prokop walked around the burial mounds, crossing the exposed tree roots, wondering where he actually was. Strange that he used to roam the swamps and forests of the area, but never encountered anything like that. None of the old settlers ever mentioned a word that there was a pagan burial ground in the middle of the mire of the Great King's Swamp.

It was a really strange place. Prokop felt a strange energy rise from the ground that flattered him, spoke to him, and appeased him. It was a pure, noble harmony attuned to the wavelength of nature. The old settlers knew about the ley lines and even the geomantic energy zones, also called geopathic stress zones, but didn't talk much about it, as any mention of something higher outside the walls of church would probably have sounded too banal.

Prokop sat down on a rock and stared up to the sky. Until then there was only drizzle, but the heavy clouds that hung over the landscape prophesied nothing good.

This time Prokop heard a cracking branch in his immediate vicinity. He looked around carefully. Was it an animal? Or was someone watching him? He thought he saw a huge

figure peering out from the dwarf birches. The misty shadows inspired his imagination and his eyes played a bad joke on him?

"Who's there?" shouted Prokop.

He got no answer.

Prokop shook his head in annoyance, jumped up and walked towards the birch trees. He took a few steps and the grass gave way. Prokop lost the ground under his feet and he fell down.

His freefall took two split seconds. Prokop landed in a pit, his back in a puddle. It took his breath away. He was lucky that the pit floor, about five meters below the terrain, wasn't too hard. He sat up and gasped.

It began to rain more intensively.

Prokop lifted his head and let thick drops clap on his face. He cursed, got up and watched his feet sink ankle-deep into the thin, dark red-colored mud, soon sinking further up to his knees. The dark red clay resembled the blood of a prehistoric creature: the blood of the Bohemian Forest.

What an irony that it happened today of all days. He'd tried to kill himself the previous night. He would probably try again now if he hadn't been a fool and chased a ghost in the fog.

Prokop roared with laughter. *It is probably a dream! Or a truly macabre joke of nature.* The universe, the devil knows, had a weird sense of humor. "My life is a bad joke! Joke! JOKE!" He screamed until he got hoarse.

But Prokop was wrong; Nature didn't mock him, but grieved ... over him, because of his ruined life, because of his lost soul.

Prokop stood there, shaking his head in disbelief and watching in horror as the pit floor filled with mud. Several rivulets of water flowed down the walls and mingled with earth. Prokop slumped knee-deep. Dark red clay held him imprisoned and slowly devoured him.

Prokop was seething with anger. He tried to step out of the damn mud, but he sank deeper and deeper. The torrential rain ripped entire chunks of soil from the edges of the pit. The morass now reached up to Prokop's thighs.

He tried to climb up. The more he endeavored to hold on to the walls, the more earth fell down. If it continued at this rate, the sticky clay would fill the pit in no time.

Prokop's coat meanwhile soaked up the mud like a sponge and became very heavy. He unbuttoned it and searched his trouser pockets. In addition to his wallet, he found the car key and cellphone. However, he soon realized that there was no mobile reception.

He stretched on tiptoe and he lifted his cellphone over his head. Suddenly it slipped out of his hand and fell into the mud. Prokop spat out a few expressions of the worst kind,

fishing out the device. He wiped it off and put it in his back pocket. He didn't have anyone to call anyway. For ages, he had already voluntarily set out on the path of gloomy solitude.

Prokop loved the Bohemian Forest with its dark, wild forests and clearings, alpine meadows and bottomless swamps. Not even the weather bothered him. But the Bohemian Forest set a trap for him. Prokop realized that it was no longer his friend, but a mean, crafty creature.

A wave of hate surged up inside him and seemed to flood his mind. "You goddamn bastard! What do you want from me? What the hell do you want from me?"

Prokop took a deep breath and fought down his anger. Then, completely unexpectedly, a strange, inconsolable abandonment and a sense of desperate helplessness overwhelmed him. He had almost become accustomed to being lost, but now he didn't even know what to do. How should he fight? How should he fight with a dirty hole?

He suddenly realized that it was going to be tough now. Either the cold would kill him or the clay soil would devour him. Would the mud manage to stifle him quickly? In any case, he would drown here like a rat. He would be another victim of the swamp, a number in the statistics, if they found him at all.

It was about his life, which he had not cared about before. Yesterday he wanted to end this himself. And now life didn't care about him anymore. What irony! Why did he cling so suddenly to his life? Probably because he had nothing else. He had lost his soul to his own wrath years ago.

Perhaps out of sheer defiance, and perhaps on principle, Prokop decided not to give up. He gritted his teeth and pulled himself up with both hands. He gathered all his strength and clawed his way up. Sharp stones carved his skin and burrowed under his fingernails. He ignored this and fought bitterly for his survival.

### **End of a free sample.**

The English version of "The Curse of the Golem" will be published in March, 2021 on Amazon.

The German version: <https://www.amazon.de/dp/B07DNGS5Z7/>

## FURTHER INFORMATION

### AUTHOR MARTINA HOHENBERGER



Martina was born in the Czech Republic. She studied at the LM-University in Munich and is working as a German lecturer and translator at the language school Aslan in Budweis. She mainly writes Fantasy. In 2016 her novel *BALANCE OF LIFE* was published in the Czech Republic. In 2017 was released the first book of her fantasy trilogy *THE CURSE OF THE BLOOD*. Her short story *THE CURSE OF THE GOLEM* was a finalist in the *Daidalos* literary contest in 2017. In April 2018, her short story was published in the print edition of the science fiction & fantasy magazine, XB-1, and, in June 2018, in the German version available on Amazon. The short stories, *THE FLOWER OF LIFE* and *THE AWAKENING*, were published in the print edition of XB-1. In 2020; the story, *LUCK IS HELL*, placed fifth in the literary competition, *Daidalos*.

To learn more about the author, you can find her website here:

<https://martinahohenberger.wordpress.com/english/>

### THE SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY MAGAZINE XB-1

The Czech magazine XB-1 is a print medium and appears monthly. It is dedicated to the fantasy genre in all its breadth. The main content of the magazine is short stories by foreign and domestic authors as well as journalism, including film and book reviews. The XB-1 magazine website is an independent and daily updated supplement. It is open to all types of cooperation ... [www.casopisxb1.cz/](http://www.casopisxb1.cz/)

### THORNTON SULLY – EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF A WORD WITH YOU PRESS



Thornton Sully has Jack-Londoned his way across the globe sleeping with whatever country would have him, and picking up stray stories along the way. A litter of dog-eared passports that have taken up residence in his sock drawer are a constant temptation, but, as the founder in 2009 of A Word with You Press, dedicated to helping you tell your story persuasively and with passion, it's not likely he will stray too far from the towers that are A Word with You Press, now located in the Bohemian village of Ceske Budejovice in the Czech Republic, except, perhaps, for an occasional swim in the Aegean. Authors who have sought his advice have won major awards, including the

Pulitzer Prize, the Isabel Allende Miraposa Award for new fiction, and the Best Poetry Award from San Diego Writers' Awards. "I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day." Thornton Sully, plagiarizing E.B. White.

<https://awordwithyoupress.com/author/thornton/>

### **ARTIST KAREL ZEMAN**

The author of the illustrations, Karel Zeman, was born in Prague in 1950. He lives in the Czech Republic. He taught himself to draw and paint. He has already drawn numerous caricatures, comics and illustrations, including for the sci-fi & fantasy magazine XB-1. His homepage: [www.karelzem.cz](http://www.karelzem.cz)

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First Edition in English, February, 2021

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The original edition was published in Czech in April 2018 under the title "Golemova kletba" in the science fiction & fantasy magazine XB-1 in Prague, Czech Republic

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Translation from German into English: Martina Hohenberger

Editing and proofreading of the English edition: Thornton Sully

Illustrations: Karel Zeman, Royalty Free License

Cover design: Martina Hohenberger

Cover image: Aleš Tošenovský, Royalty Free License

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