

# The castle of Sharmaz

and other stories.



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## Prologue:

This book contains a selection of stories I've written during a number of years. Most of them between 1986 and 2000, after which period I didn't write any new ones for years.

The stories vary from short spherical impressions, fantasy, and science fiction to horror.

My personal favourites are 'Sharmaz', in which a group of young boys enters the domain of a magician and 'There are so many others' about a man who gets stuck against his will in a colony with some odd habits.

In both stories, the main persons are well characterized and the atmosphere I wanted to create is clearly described.

When editing the stories to make them more suitable for this collection, it started itching and I would like to write some more about some of the worlds. This resulted in some new stories from old ideas in 2013 and 2014 and several ideas that can be used for future ones.

Some of the stories I've written have been caught up by time and didn't make it to this collection. Smart phones are common property nowadays; in 1987 those were still a future fantasy. A story in which a portable computer plays an important role, seems very outdated now.

Other stories didn't make it because the idea behind it wasn't that good after all, or simply because they weren't good enough. Especially the early stories show these shortages. In the beginning I squeezed so many ideas in one story that they lacked a proper story-line. Also I used to write in past tense, what, looking back at it, isn't really pleasant reading. Gradually I learned to dose the ideas and use a better style of writing. The disadvantage of that was that the stories became longer and couldn't be written anymore in just a few hours, as I did in the beginning. Since the longer stories in this collection are amongst my favourites, the advantages more than compensate for that.

The last two stories in the book have been written in 2013, based on new ideas. These particular stories are not available in the Dutch version of this collection.

Without giving away the clues, here is a short summary of the stories that did make it to this collection:

- Sharmaz; a group of boys enters the castle of a magician, without knowing that they are being watched.
- Blood brother; a stranger finds a warm welcome, but makes a wrong choice during the evening.
- The mayor's wife; in which love becomes fatal for a few hiding pilots.
- The white glow of steel; a fatal coincidence in a universe full of travelling nations.
- Gisele and Galdan; a tragic love affair
- Ricochet; an elf turns the wishes of some people against them.
- The melody of the heart; a colony of stranded people has to deal with manipulation and some cruel creatures.
- An American Werewolf in London (epilogue); what happened after the movie.
- The ancient magic: a nomad is sent on a journey to fill an old quest.
- The wine collector: a short anecdote about an architectural blunder.
- There are so many others; about a colony where a lone man needs to be on his guard
- Why not all snakes have a split tongue; a dangerous escape
- Sultry; not suitable for young readers
- As soon as it gets dark; you don't want to be outside
- Idyll; a romance that exceeds race
- Architects of fantasy; life through the eyes of a bird of prey.
- Hunger; energy is low but your programs battle over an essential decision
- Clear as sunlight; a harmless activity gone wrong.

Enjoy reading.

Sjef van Homelen April 2014.

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\* bonus stories, not available in the Dutch version

## The castle of Sharmaz.

The last light of day colours the thin layer of snow to a fiery glow on the rooftops.

It's quiet on the muddy streets. Winter is cold this year, most people choose to stay indoors. The few who make their way to the outside world, can see thick clouds in the distance, carrying a promise of more snow.

In taverns old bent men and women tell stories about the one time before that snow fell in these areas. They were still young and loved to play with it, just like the kids now. At that time the snow only lasted for a short while, most of it melted during the day as it does this winter.

Only in the sheltered shadowed places and on the high rooftops, exposed to the cold wind it has lasted.

Irtrudiël already discovered all the fun he can have with the snow. Together with his friends he played in it most of the day.

Normally he would have been working in the stables, but the stable master didn't want to spoil this one chance to enjoy the snow. And so, the whole group of orphan kids that is maintained by Lord Tonnaren has been released to the white world.

And they played as long as possible, all day until they couldn't find any snow and longer, much longer.

The group of young boys became more swaggering during the day. And then someone – Irtrudiël didn't remember who – suggested to sneak into the castle of the town's magician just to take a peek. Off course they all agreed. Who didn't know the stories on the secret, strange stuff taking place there. Every boy dreamed of unravelling those mysteries.

But now Irtrudiël is not so sure anymore whether this was a good idea. Best they would go back to the house they live, where, without any doubt, a kettle of hot soup would be waiting for them. He's afraid though, to speak his mind. The others would only laugh at him and call him a chicken. So he sneaks further alongside the massive castle walls.

Unarak raises his hand and they all freeze. He points up to a small open window; that's where they will enter the castle. One by one they climb up the thick stalks of Ivy that cover the walls, taking a firm grip and afraid to look down.

Shortly after, all eight of them stand in a small dark room, only containing an old cupboard that is falling to bits.



Carefully Unarak opens the door a bit and he peeks through the chink. 'It's safe.' He whispers, after which he slips into the dark hallway, followed by three other boys.

Itrudiël is in the second group, together with Dirn, Ullok and Spirnas. Ullok is the eldest and therefore the leader. He signals Dirn; they move out.

Itrudiël is the third one in line. The hallway they enter is not only dark, there's also a strange musty smell in the air. They creep further, backs against the wall, collecting spider webs with their hair as they move along. Their feet sometimes hit objects that are left on the floor. Apparently this part of the castle is not used very often.

Sometime later they see a light. Carefully they come closer.

They reach the edge of the dark part. In front of them the hallway continues, still abandoned. On the floor they can see footsteps, almost faded by time and a thick layer of dust.

The faint light seems to come from no particular place at all, no signs of torches, oil lamps, or other sources.

Carefully Ullok steps into the light. The dust at his feet whirls up, after which it slowly sets down again. Itrudiël watches him and gets the idea that something is not right. For a moment he is puzzled, but then he sees it. He pokes Spirnas in the side and whispers in his ear: 'There is no shadow, look.'

'What? By the eyes of the magician, you are right.'

Baffled they stare at Ullok, who is already a few meters ahead of them. Nowhere, neither left nor right, front or back his shadow touches the stone floor.

He seems to realize this himself and he circles round while looking down. He smiles at them, a small that turns into a grin fast. Itrudiël needs to repress the urge to scream and run away. More than ever he wants to stop with this ridiculous mission.

Alas, the others move on. Trembling like a leaf he gets back in line.

They penetrate the castle further and further, the hallway has already split a few times, but apart from several closed doors and some decayed tapestry, they don't discover anything of their interest.

The light is still frighteningly strange. The pale faces of Spirnas and Dirn show that they are also not very comfortable with the situation, as he is.

Ullok alone seems to gain more pleasure from their adventure. Filled with bluff, he walks in the middle of the hallways, in a

tempo that the others can hardly cope. Suddenly he stops and turns abruptly.

'This floor is totally abandoned. We'll have to go up or down; what will it be?'

The others look at him in a baffled way.

'How do you want to..?' Dirn asks.

Ullok steps aside and then the others can see it as well. Behind him a narrow staircase disappears in the darkness.

'I don't know,' Spirnas says, 'it's getting late already, perhaps we'd better turn back.'

'Have you gone mad. What will the others say. We don't need to go far, I just feel it.'

Ullok doesn't await their response, but steps quickly into the dark staircase.

Irtrudiël looks at the other 2 boys. 'Well, come on, we have to stick together.' Then he also steps into the darkness.

Luckily it is less dark than it looked at first sight, they can see just a few metres ahead, where the stairs disappear behind the curved walls. Behind of him, he can hear Dirn and Spirnas. Their scraping footsteps seem to fill the whole staircase. Soon they reach Ullok, who is waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs. He has stopped in front of a door, which is mostly covered by spider's webs. The wood however shines as if it has been brushed yesterday.

When they're all there, Ullok wipes away some of the webs and slowly opens the door until he can take a peek. A few seconds later he opens the door far enough to slip through the opening. Irtrudiël stretches his neck to see what is behind it. He can see another hallway, however, completely different than the one they just came from. The hallway is decorated with several pieces of furniture and on the walls he can see luscious tapestry and the heads of stuffed animals.

He follows Ullok meanwhile checking all he can see. Their dirty shoes leave a trail of dust on the shiny tiles. The scent of a strange mix of spices and herbs reaches their noses, indicating that they have reached the domain of the magician.

'Look at this,' Ullok whispers, 'I knew that what was upstairs wasn't everything.'

The four boys move on at close distance from each other.

In this hallway the light is coming from torches and candles, spreading a flickering light and shadows.

Ullok turns around a corner and jumps back almost immediately. Frightened he presses himself against the wall and hisses to the others: 'Someone's there.'

'Is it him?' Dirn asks.

'I'm not sure, the moment I saw him I jumped back.'

They stand frozen for some time, expecting to hear the sound of closing footsteps.

However, it remains still and in the end Irtrudiël carefully peeks round the corner of the wall.

He bursts of laughter and steps out into the open, while winking at the others. Somewhat baffled they follow him, only to come face to face with themselves.

'It's a mirror.' Irtrudiël still laughs. 'Ullok, you've scared yourself, behold the great magician.' When saying that, he sticks out his tongue to his own reflection.

Ullok's head becomes red and he bows in shame. Also the others have to laugh.

When they've calmed down again, they continue. The laughing had a relaxing effect and took away most of the fear. Spirnas leads the way. He boldly goes into the next hallway and moves with heavy footsteps. Only Ullok has become more careful. He seizes Spirnas and directs him to be quieter. Immediately Spirnas seems to realize where they are and he shrinks. Only after persistence of the others he dares to go ahead.

Sharmaz, the magician, bows over the old book again. He just removed four boys from the premises, in such a harsh manner that they will remember their lesson for sure.

He noticed them when they were browsing the abandoned upper floor. He caught them when they were going through the content of an old cupboard. After a firm beating and a number of impressive curses, he chased them out with the message never to return again.

Now that is done, he can turn back to the problem he was working on. But somehow he can't concentrate on the complicated drawings on the paper. Something gnaws away at him.

He walks back and forth through the room, trying to calm down. Something is nagging him. He needs to find out what it is and then he has to take care of it.

He sits down on a wooden bench and takes a few deep breaths, wondering what causes this unease. Suddenly he realizes that he hasn't lost the feeling that someone has entered the castle.

He closes his eyes and it only takes a short while for him to discover the rascals. For a moment he thinks that this is the same group of boys he just chased off. Then he sees that these boys are younger and more careful. That's why he didn't detect them any sooner and that's why they managed to penetrate his domain this far. He almost feels admiration, although he is not happy with the situation.

He decides to play a game with them, to see how they will react. They will think again before making the same mistake.

He casts a few spells, changing the hallways of the castle into a magic maze, where a mere mortal would get hopelessly lost.

'Let's see how long it will take for them to panic, that'll teach them.'

Irtrudiël is the first one to notice that something is not right. When he looks back at some point, the hallway seems to be altered.

He tabs Ullok on the shoulder and tells him what he discovered. The two of them walk back a bit to investigate, while Dirn and Spirmas remain.

Suddenly they hear a scream. Irtrudiël turns in less than no time and faces a wall separating them from the others.

'Oh no!' He runs at the wall, to find it is solid brick, blocking their path. From the other side he can hear the high voices of Dirn and Spirmas, calling them in anxiety.

Ullok looks at him and hisses with a frightened voice: 'We've been discovered. What should we do?'

Irtrudiël tries not to get into a panic.

'We have to try and reach the others again and then we need to get out as fast as we can.'

'But where do we go, there are so many hallways.' Ullok faces left and right, where indeed several hallways can be found.

'I'm not sure. But we'd better not stay here for Sharmaz to find us.'

They can hear Dirn calling their names and they shout back that they will try to reach them. Dirn just needs to keep calling them, so they can use the sound to find their way.

Soon they discover that it's easier said than done. Following the sound seems to lead them away from each other and the alternatives look no better.

Ullok is losing his mind, he looks like he can burst into tears any moment. Also Irtrudiël feels all but comfortable. He doesn't want to give up and keeps going. Somehow a strange sense grabs hold of him.

'We need to go here.' He pulls Ullok along.

‘But we just came from there.’

‘I know, but something tells me that we need to go this way. I’m almost certain.’

‘Ok, what difference does it make. We probably can’t do worse than we did so far.’

And so Ullok let’s Irtrudiël lead the way. They take many turns and even some stairs down. Irtrudiël just follows his gut feeling, sending him into different directions all the time.

Suddenly they enter a big hall. Across the room, Dirn and Spirnas are pressed against the wall. Spirnas is crying and a wet spot in his trousers, shows that the fear was too much for him. Dirn just wiped his tears and stares at Irtrudiël and Ullok in disbelief; as if he is facing two ghosts.

‘Quickly!’ Irtrudiël runs towards them. ‘We need to get out before someone finds us.’

He pulls both boys to their feet and leads them away. Again they pass the strange hallways that seem to criss-cross through one another. The other boys soon lose their sense of direction and they doubt that they will ever find an exit.

Sharmaz witnessed the reunion of the boys, quite surprised that they managed to find each other. They either have been very fortunate, or something else is going on. He decides to keep an eye on them to find out.

He can see them running through the ever changing hallways and staircases.

One of the boys is directing them all the time and he seems to lead them through the labyrinth with great certainty. Again they reach some stairs, leading up to the out of use top floor; they managed to leave the maze behind them.

The boys recognize the hallway as being the one where their adventure started. They can even see their own footprints in the dust. They start walking even faster. Gasping they reach the room where they entered the castle.

Sharmaz senses the boy that led them that way.

‘Finally,’ he whispers. ‘After all these years. Where in the name of the book did you come from.’

Irtrudiël has no idea of the attention that he has drawn to himself. He is much too happy to be able to leave this haunted castle. Dirn and Ullok already climbed out the window, Spirnas is about to follow.

When he is gone, Irtrudiël steps forward and he wants to place his hands on the window-sill. But then he bumps into an invisible

barrier. Astonished he presses against it, without causing any effect. Ullok calls his name.

'Irtrudiël! Hurry! You have to get out before the magician comes. You don't want him to find you, now do you!'

Nervously Irtrudiël looks for an opening. Then he hears a sound behind him and he freezes. Slowly he turns around. In the doorway he can see Sharmaz, enlightened as if standing in the full sunlight.

In panic Irtrudiël slams his fists against the invisible wall blocking his escape.

'You can't get out there.' The magician's voice is calm, almost soothing.

Irtrudiël turns again and seeks for another way out; perhaps he can slip by the magician, out the doorway.

Sharmaz snaps his fingers and the door closes with a muffled bang, eliminating the boy's last hope.

He wonders what punishment awaits him. He dares not speak, afraid this will only worsen the situation. Trembling he can see the magician approach. When Sharmaz reaches him, the magician stretches his hand and puts it gently on the boy's shoulder. Irtrudiël shivers.

'What is your name boy and how old are you?'

Irtrudiël is too surprised by the gentleness of the question to give a straight answer.

'Are you deaf?'

'N..No my lord.'

'Well then, could you perhaps answer my questions.'

'Yes, my lord. My name is Irtrudiël, I am thirteen years of age.'

'Hmm, thirteen. Did you ever attend a magicians test?'

'No lord, I didn't.'

'Why not?' Sharmaz is rather baffled. It is considered a great honour for every father when his son is selected at such a test. It indicates talent and the boy could become one of the next magicians. Off course only few have the talent to pass the test. But this boy shows a big natural talent.

Regrettably he is already thirteen. Mostly boys are tested when they reach the age of six, after which the selected ones start their training right away. He hopes it is not too late for this boy.

'I am an orphan, lord. My master didn't see any necessity for me to perform the test. He said that I cost him dearly already. I would have to make myself useful as a servant instead of being given away to.... one of you.'

'So, he knows you are gifted?'

'Gifted, me? No sir, not me, not even as a stable boy.'

Sharmaz smiles. 'You will be surprised on the talents that you have.'

He takes his hand of Irtrudiël's shoulder and bends a bit forward.

'Tell me, Irtrudiël, what would you think on becoming my apprentice?'

## Blood brother

The shattered sunlight shines on the water forest, making it gloomy, almost melancholic. Slow clouds in the air and the rags of mist in between the trunks enhance this atmosphere.

At places where the sun can reach the surface of the water, the light seems to be absorbed, rather than reflected.

The nearly unstirred surface is moved only there where falling drops from the treetops hit the water. The current of the green-brownish water is so small that it is hardly noticeable. Not even between the roots of the giant marsh trees and other vegetation.

On one of the giant roots, several meters above the water, a carcass lies in a puddle of blood. Parts of the carcass hang over the edge of the tree roots, however, not enough for the creatures in the water to be able to reach it. The rotting flesh is still a prey for worms and numerous flying insects. A swarm of parasite-mosquitoes has landed. Their greedy humming soon attracts other scavengers.

The more they devour the carcass, the more the unstable equilibrium is being jeopardized. Slowly it slides further down the edge, the insects swarm up in fear.

The water below the tree shows increasing movement of those who have been lurking there for some time. The long wait will be rewarded soon.

It looks as if the carcass will remain in this unbalanced position, but then the surplus of weight already over the edge tips the balance. With a scraping sound the carcass slides down over the wood and lands in the water with a splash. Immediately many hungry beaks start to rip the last flesh from their bones.

Above the water, on the wide tree root, a puddle of blood remains, some drowned insects float in it. In the middle of the finger deep blood there is a fleshy shape. It looks like something between a maggot and a finger. Its surface is shiny moist and slightly lumped.

Now the embryo has been released from the weight of the carcass on top of it, it reacts swiftly. With a soft, popping sound, thin limbs emerge from the swelling shape. Two of those limbs develop a hand-like structure at the edge.

While the cub sucks itself full with the blood, the limbs swell into claws with four firm bent, hardly moveable fingers with razor-sharp nails. At the top of the swollen body, close to the arms, a



head starts to appear. From within the round eyes seem to be pressed out, while small ears appear on either side.

The cub opens its mouth, showing two rows of sharp teeth. It takes a deep breath. It is almost finished. Finally it develops a thin blonde fur, protecting it from cold, wind and attacks of carnivorous insects.

Now the cub has been completely formed, it looks a bit like a maki, although somewhat sturdier, with shorter limbs and it possesses no tail.

Its small black eyes carefully monitor the surroundings. Carefully it takes its first unsecure footsteps on the tree root. Soon it gains confidence and starts climbing up to the top of the tree, towering over 200 metres above the murky waters.

Before it reaches the crest, its attention is drawn by something else.

Just a little further, four creatures wade through the waist high water. They look somewhat like the cub that is observing them. Their fur is darker, the limbs are formed more delicate and their beaks are considerably smaller, enfolded by something looking like primitive lips.

The first of the four seems to be the leader. He holds a stick in one of his hands with what he carefully scans the bottom in front of them. The second one escorts a young that stays meticulously close to the adult. The last one, also an adult, looks like he is not part of the group. As if it were a temporary companion, making use of the comfort of a group for the crossing of the water.

The hungry cub climbs down and slides carefully into the water. As the group comes closer, it waits behind a floating log until they have neared enough. Then it submerges itself and starts swimming towards them.

The four Röh seem unaware. However, the first adult produces two short sounds, indicating the presence of danger coming from their own kind. The other adults don't respond, only the young clutches even closer to its guide.

Suddenly it feels how something grasps one of its legs and he gets partly pulled under. While screaming fearful cries, it grabs the arm of the female and it starts to kick at the attacker. The water splashes and mud get's tumbled loose from the bottom, making the water even darker. Strangely enough none of the adults reacts to the ongoing attack.

The cub soon gets out of breath and it has to release its prey. It swims away fast, to emerge from the water a bit further.

Disappointed it looks at the others, who are still moving on, almost dragging the frightened young along with them.

The predator realizes that it doesn't stand a chance against the Röh, despite their passive attitude. It moves towards the nearest tree root and starts climbing up.

One more time it looks at the four Röh, the young stares back, now more curious than afraid. Then the predator climbs further, moving out of sight rapidly.

The Young Röh slowly mumbles to itself the two tones indicating the danger coming from its own kind. It learned a lesson today it will not forget easily.

After a while, the group reaches the end of the water forest. The bottom gradually rises up to a big hill. At the edge of the water bushy vegetation seems to block their way. There are however a few paths leading through to the less overgrown dry areas.

The first Röh points to one of the paths and emits a sound indicating their own race. This path will lead them to their family.

Before moving on, the Röh pushes the stick he holds deep into the moist soil. Soon this will carry new leaves and help strengthen the barrier of plants.

The Röh doesn't realize that, he is just following a ritual that has been practiced by his kind for generations. It seems pointless to him, but apparently there is no harm in it either. And since his ancestors have done the same, it'll probably be good for something.

They follow the path that meanders through the scrub, until it fades as they reach more grassy territory. Many footprints indicate that their kind comes here quite often. The village of the Röh, therefore, can be found beyond the top of the hill.

Around that village is where most of the life of the Röh takes place. There, where food is prepared, the almost domesticated blue dancing birds crowd. Chirping loud they try to poach the best crumbs.

As the group walks further into town, the number of greetings increase. When they reach the centre of town, they are awaited by the chief of the village, sitting on a big flat rock. When they have come close enough, he signals them to stop and acknowledge his authority.

The first Röh takes the young by its arm and pushes it towards their leader, meanwhile calling the name of their kind. This is a new son for the town, born in the water forest. The young squeals and presses its face flat against the ground.