

Once Upon a Sprawling Forest

Illustrated by Soledad Folch

Or the story of:

- A pig—
- A horse—
- & A canoe—



ONCE upon a time, far, far away, there was a rich family of pig farmers. They were, in fact, among the richest in the land. After years in a prosperous industry, they fairly *dripped* with gold and jewels. Like many newcomers to wealth, however, they were dissatisfied with mere money. Having glimpsed the life of carriages and banquets and balls, they wanted the numerous intangibles that born aristocrats took for granted. Nobility. Class. Prestige.

As time went on, then, they did all that they could to obtain these things. Although they lived deep, deep in the countryside, not far from a sprawling forest, they adopted the mannerisms of urban socialites. They had formal meals and banquets. They drove a large carriage and attended nearby balls. And for their daughter, the beautiful, intelligent Shamila, they accepted only the best. The best tutors, that is. The best silks. The best companions.

All in all, this family proved to be a remarkable success. Through extravagant displays of snobbery and riches, they downplayed the lowly, ignoble source of their wealth. The marriage of sweet Shamila would be, so they thought, the final nail in their ascent. With her beauty and natural charm, combined with their gold and banknotes, they were sure that she would forever cement their place within the social elite.

In all plans, however, there are inevitably chinks. And in theirs, it was rather a large chink, one approximately the size and shape of a growing girl. You see, although Shamila was beautiful and sharp, her veins ran with the hot, fast rhythms of the countryside. She spoke too directly. She walked too swiftly. And most of all, she rode too well.

Ahhhhh yes! How Shamila loved to ride! It was her vice. It was her escape. It was her passion. Every morning, whatever the weather, she would slip into the



barn and grab her saddle. Moments later, she would tear recklessly into the open fields. She would trot and canter and gallop, leaping streams and ditches and fallen trees. She would ride so far and so fast that, returning home, her cheeks would sparkle with a healthy, rosy glow.



At the start, her parents simply shrugged. “She is a young girl. She will grow out of it.”

But as she aged, they grew worried. What if people found out? What if *society* found out? What reputable, aristocratic gentleman would want a wild, reckless wife, one who preferred stables to cradles and horses to people? In vain, they reprimanded her. In vain, they lectured her on humility, obedience and temerity. In the end, however, their words proved inadequate. To solve this problem, they realized, would take something far larger and more dramatic. That is, marriage.

Now, before I continue, I must turn your attention to another quarter. You will remember that Shamila resided on the outskirts of a great, sprawling forest. Her parents hated the wild tangle of trees and shrubbery, despising its unbecoming lack of civility. But not everyone felt that way. In a stony, twisting castle, rising from the depths of a shimmering lake, there lived a powerful sorcerer. His life was a solitary one. Lodged deep within the dark, tangled wilderness, he seldom made contact with others, whether human or otherwise. For the sorcerer, that was perfectly satisfactory. In fact, that was just the idea. He lived in his castle *because* it was removed from civilization. And to ensure that no mishaps occurred, he cast a spell to keep humans away. Without his permission, no man, woman or child could set foot on or even *see* his island.

Why this hatred? Why the misanthropic tendencies? The answer, you see, lies in his history. Years before he was born, his father, who was also, a grand and powerful sorcerer, lost his heart to a peasant girl. Utterly entranced and truly, madly in love, he threw caution to the wind and married her. They moved to a deep, dark castle, set in the remote wilderness. And there, drunk on life and each other, they lived in perfect harmony.

Their happiness, however, was not to last. After several years of blissful marriage, the woman fell ill. A mere mortal, lacking the magic of her husband, the sickness consumed her. Within a few months, the battle was lost. And when she died, the sorcerer fell to pieces. While his son, nothing but a scrawny, brooding eight-year-old, looked on helplessly, the man slowly went insane. There was pacing. There were nightmares. There was screaming. And when it



became too much, when he could no longer bear the bittersweet memories and tearful regrets, he climbed to the highest tower and jumped.



When this happened, the young boy, then staring at the open window and the glassy, crystalline lake that lay below, made a vow. He pledged that he would never fall in love. He would live in sweet isolation, free from the trials and dangers and stabbing pains of human attachment. To help him do this, he cast the spell that I mentioned before, one that would forever protect his mind and his heart.

Even so, curiosity is a powerful thing. From time to time, the sorcerer would visit local towns. They fascinated him. He would lurk in the shadows, marveling at the odd customs that he saw there. Although hardened to love, he became intrigued with decorated homes, sumptuous soups and breads, stables of horses and sprawling markets. When he found small objects, lying neglected on the roadside, he would take them and hoard them. One day, when doing thus, he encountered a straw hat. Soon, the little object became the jewel of his collection. He placed it on his mantle, regarding it in wonderment. How beautiful it was! How delicate! How light!

While the sorcerer debated this, *Shamila's* parents were debating something else. Specifically, the girl's impertinence. By this point, she had brazenly rejected dozens and dozens of suitors, citing reasons obscure and petty. At long last, then, enough was enough. The girl *would* be wed, they decided. And since she would accept no one, *they* would choose *for* her. So when the wealthy, pompous Lord Myers expressed interest, they said yes almost instantly.



Shamila was furious. "You must be joking!" she cried.

Her parents, loving the girl deeply, were embarrassed. They tried to convince her. "He is rich!" they said. "He is learned! He is a pinnacle of society!"

Shamila remained unmoved. "He looks like a bullfrog."

Her mother shifted uncomfortably. "Maybe. But a very *wealthy* bullfrog."

In response, Shamila sighed. With those words, she knew that she had lost. Drunk with dreams of carriages and circuses, her parents refused to see reason. They refused to accept that maybe, just maybe, Shamila wanted something besides fine things and pedigree. She wanted love. She wanted true, passionate, deep, everlasting devotion. She wanted the kind of love that would inspire ballads and paintings and Herculean quests. She wanted love like she wanted freedom. And when her parents threatened both, forcing her engagement to the Lord, she did the only thing that she could. She ran away.

Taking a few provisions, Shamila escaped the expensive, mahogany furniture and ornate tapestries of her bedroom, climbed through window and stole into the dark forest. At first, the adventure

was exhilarating. But as time passed, exhausting her food and water, she grew hungry and despairing. Her legs were cut and bruised from the brambles. Her hair was snarled. Her body was bordering on collapse. But then she saw something ahead. Yes! There it was again! She saw a light.

Within moments, Shamila reached the shores of an enormous, glittering lake. Oh, how beautiful it was! In the hot, windless night, the glassy surface perfectly reflected the starry sky. The dark, forbidding castle, rising ominously from the icy water, could have graced the richest, most illustrious of



fairytale. Heart pounding with awe, amazement and relief, Shamila turned her gaze to the shoreline. And after a few moments of searching, she saw the tip of a wooden canoe. In an instant, she had climbed inside and was paddling across.

For a sorcerer, quite confident in his abilities and spells, the sight of beautiful, *human* Shamila was quite a shock. As he opened the door, he became speechless with surprise and disbelief. When she entreated a bit of hospitality, then, a bit of “bread and ale” to restore her strength, he could simply nod.

The moment that she entered the parlor, the mystery was explained.

“Why, isn’t that my hat?” Shamila cried. “I could swear that it is! I must have lost it while I was riding. But what on *Earth* is it doing here?”

The sorcerer glanced at her, surprised and just a bit mortified. Now everything made perfect sense. There was, you see, a caveat to his spell. The moment that he carried someone’s personal possession into his abode, the charm would no longer work for that person. By collecting Shamila’s horseshoe, then, he had unwittingly allowed her inside.

“Wait here,” he said gruffly. Moments later, he returned with a tray of steaming food. It was not much, of course, just a bowl of soup, some bread and some cheese. But for the ravenous Shamila, it was perfect.

As her hunger was sated, her curiosity was awakened. “Won’t you tell me something?” Shamila asked impulsively.

The sorcerer frowned. “What?”

“Something about yourself.”

He shook his head. “I don’t talk about myself.”

Shamila nodded and returned to her food. Then, since *someone* needed to say something, she started to talk. She described her house. She described its gardens and elegant rooms. She described her passionate love of horses. When she had finished, she reclined contentedly.

“Are you sure about, you know, what you said before? Won’t you tell me *anything*?”

The sorcerer shook his head.

Shamila gritted her teeth. “Pigs! You’re frustrating.”

The sorcerer glanced at her, looking slightly taken aback. Then, abruptly, he rose. “I’ll show you to your room. You’ll leave at dawn.”

Shamila nodded resignedly, trailing her host up the winding staircase. When they reached her room, she saw that it was a small



and somewhat dusty, clearly long out of use. She turned around, intending to say goodnight. Before she could, however, the man was gone. So, shrugging her shoulders, she undressed quickly and fell into a dreamless sleep.

The next morning, it was pouring. As she sat up, several peals of thunder sounded loudly. Shivering slightly, she grabbed her things and headed downstairs. As she walked into the room, the sorcerer was spooning two bowls of white, bubbly porridge. Seeing her rucksack, he shook his head.



“The weather’s too dangerous. You’ll leave tomorrow.”

Shamila nodded gratefully, hardly keen on braving the raging monsoon.

“But you’ll have to amuse yourself,” he added. “I’ve got work to do.”

True to his word, after breakfast, the sorcerer disappeared. Unable to go outside, Shamila roamed the hallways and corridors. She explored the dusty rooms. She found the library. She pored through volumes and volumes of ancient and modern books.

At dinner, the routine was identical to the previous night. “Tell me something about yourself,” Shamila said, looking at the sorcerer.

The sorcerer shook his head. “I don’t talk about myself.”

And so, once again, Shamila spoke. She told him about her parents. She told him about the pig farming. She told him about the balls and the carriages and the elegant dinners. She told him about the marriage.

At this, he listened closely. “You’d let them do that?” he asked. “Choose your husband?”

Shamila shook her head, gazing miserably at the table.

“That’s why I left.”

He nodded. Moments later, they stacked their plates and headed upstairs. And again, as they reached the landing and her bedroom, the sorcerer said—“You’ll leave at dawn.”

And then, before she could say goodnight, he disappeared.

But the following day, the storm had simply strengthened. After breakfast, then, Shamila continued to explore. She found unused rooms of paintings and sketches. She navigated narrow passages and the labyrinthine kitchens. At dinner, the same scene played out. The more that she asked, the more that he refused.

“I don’t talk about myself,” he said.

Shamila sighed. “You also *don’t talk*.”

At this, the sorcerer restrained a grin. Shamila sighed again.



This continued for a week. Every morning brought more rain and shrieking wind. Every dinner brought more questions and conversations beside the fire. After a little while, Shamila became used to his silence. She grew accustomed to the strange, sharp contours of his face and pale blue eyes. But eventually, she could no longer resist.

“Just one thing!” she implored. “That’s all I ask. Tell me *one* thing. And if I do, I promise that I won’t ask for anything more.”

He considered. “Do you mean that? No more questions? No more prying?”

She quickly crossed herself. “A woman’s honor.”

Smothering another smile, he nodded. “Well? What do you want to know?”

The girl sat back, pondering the matter deeply. Finally, she nodded curtly and sat up. “On the first night, you mentioned the charm that you have. You know, the one to repel humans.” She paused. “Why did you make that?”

“That’s easy,” the sorcerer said promptly. “I hate people.”

Shamila shook her head. “Wrong.”

He glanced at her sharply. “Wrong? What do you mean *wrong*?”

She shrugged. “I mean that you’re lying.”

His frown deepened. When he spoke, his voice was sharp. “And how would *you* know? You don’t know me at all.”

She smiled. “That’s not true. I know a *lot* about you.”

He stared at her. She smiled again. “I know that you had a mother.”

The sorcerer froze.

Shamila nodded. “You had a mother. And quite a beautiful one at that! She had dark hair and fair skin and sky blue eyes, just like yours.”

“What!” the sorcerer exclaimed. “How did you—”

Shamila interrupted him. “I found pictures. And not just of her, either. I also saw your father. He must’ve been the sorcerer because he looks a lot like you. Were you close?”

The sorcerer was numb, far, far too frozen to speak.

She shook her head. “In any case, *they* were. They were inseparable, I bet, hopelessly in love. So it makes sense that when she died—”



“*How do you know this?*” By now, the sorcerer was practically shaking. “You can’t. You can’t possibly know!” Then realization struck. “The letters,” he said, his voice a whisper. “You found the letters.”

She nodded. “They were with the pictures.” All at once, she looked away. “I’m *so* sorry.”

He shrugged, not meeting her eyes. “It was years ago.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m still sorry.”

Another silence fell. Then Shamila said quietly—“You never fixed the window.”

The sorcerer refused to meet her eyes. “What else do you know?” he asked, his voice hard now.

“I know that you live alone. I know that you claim to hate people. And yet, I see that your rooms are filled with their belongings. And I know that you’ve got more power than you let on. I know that you can start fires. Open doors.” She paused. “Even control the weather.”

At that, his gaze snapped to her. For just a moment, their eyes locked. Then he stood up. “You *will* leave tomorrow.” His voice was strained. “At daybreak.”

Shamila nodded, too tired to argue. But that night, sleep did not come easily. For hours and hours, she stared at the ceiling. And by the time that dreamland claimed her, the sky was already growing light.

When she came downstairs, the kitchen was empty. The porridge was waiting on the table. With a sinking heart, she ate it quickly. The weather had cleared beautifully, she saw. Through the open window, she could smell the fresh, clean air. But for some reason, the sunny sky held little joy. Taking a deep breath, she shouldered her bag and headed for the door.

At the edge of the lake, he was waiting for her.

“Before you go, I have a favor to ask,” he said, his gaze right past her.

“A favor?” Shamila asked mildly.

He nodded. “Would you come with me?”

With his help, they reached the shore in no time. And once there, they followed a small, grassy trail that ended in a giant pasture. Shamila gasped. “A stable!”

In just moments, she had raced into the wooden structure. Then she grabbed a saddle and climbed astride one of the beautiful, chestnut mares. For a moment, she entirely forgot her strange, surly companion. The feeling of the animal’s smooth skin and corded muscles was enough.

The sorcerer, however, did not forget her. As she returned to his side, slightly flushed from her exercise, he was watching her closely. “What’s the favor?” Shamila asked breathlessly, reluctantly disembarking her mount.

The sorcerer shifted. “Could you—teach me?”

Shamila’s eyes widened. “What! You have these horses, this beautiful, beautiful stable, and you can’t ride?”

“Will you or won’t you?” the sorcerer snapped.

Shamila restrained a smile. “Well, of *course* I will.”

For the rest of the day, she taught him. She taught him to saddle a steed. She taught him to mount it and fit a bridle. Once he had mastered that, they took one of the numerous trails and rode for hours. At first, they walked sedately. With time, though, they tried a cantor and a gallop. As the afternoon progressed, some of his gloom dissipated. He talked. He laughed. He seemed somehow different. Lighter. Younger.

When they were hungry, they ate the food that he had brought. And by the time that they returned to the castle, it was dark.

Over a delicious dinner of vegetables and meat and bread, they talked more. But when the food was finished, the cold silence resumed. As they stood up, the sorcerer hesitated oddly.

“You never told me,” he finally blurted.

Shamila looked up, surprised. “Tell you *what?*”

“You never told me why I cast that spell to repel humans. I mean, since you wouldn’t take *my* explanation for it. But if not because I hate humans, well, why *would* I try to keep them out?”

“That’s easy,” Shamila said quietly, her gaze rising to his. “To remove temptation.”

A long silence stretched between them. And this time, the sorcerer had to look away. “Tomorrow you *do* leave.” His voice was thin. “Daybreak.”

As they climbed the stairs, you could have heard a pin drop. But when she turned into her room, he did something that surprised her quite a lot.

“Good night,” he said, his voice soft.

Shamila looked at him, surprised again. And for a moment, his eyes glittered. Then, before she could unglue her tongue, he had vanished.

At daybreak, the kitchen was eerily silent. The porridge that he had left was too thick. The spoon that beside it was too heavy. When she opened the door, approaching the wooden canoe and the lake



beyond, the day was too bright. And the sorcerer was nowhere to be seen.

When Shamila crossed the lake, the man was *still* nowhere to be seen. And then, heart thumping strangely, she saw the horse. It was the chestnut mare that she had ridden yesterday, now



saddled and outfitted with provisions. Seeing it, her throat grew hot and sticky. There could be no more delusions. No more fantasies. This was really it. Somehow, seeing the horse made it final. She was really leaving.



He was letting her go.

As she rode away, she kicked the horse from a walk to a run to a gallop. The wind pelted her face, feeling cool and refreshing. All around her, the day held the warm, rosy warmth of spring. Nevertheless, as she raced down the dusty road, there were tears in her eyes.

Just about sunset, she heard a noise. Straining her ears, she slowed her horse. And then, lo and behold, what did she see but the sorcerer approaching her! To be fair, his gallop held some flaws. Shamila, however, saw none of them.

“You ride well,” she said with a smile.

He returned the grin. “Good teacher.”

For a moment, neither said a word. Then, looking strangely flustered, the sorcerer slid from his horse. Shamila did the same, the animal whinnying slightly in the evening air. In the end, it was the sorcerer who spoke first. “So I was thinking. If I’m going to have a stable, it seems that I’m going to need someone who can, well, look after things.”

“Like a stablehand?” Shamila inquired mildly.

The sorcerer fidgeted. “I suppose so.”

Her face remained carefully blank. “And that’s why you came? You came to tell me that you need a *stablehand*?”

He shifted again. “Yes. And to see if, well, you’d be interested.”

“In being your stablehand,” Shamila repeated, her voice was deadpan. This was not the ending that she had been hoping for.

He nodded. “Yes.” Pause. “And wife.”

Shamila nearly fell over. “I’m sorry, but *what* was that? Are you asking me to *marry* you?” she gasped.

The sorcerer frowned. “Well, yes. I guess so. It appears that I just did.”

Shamila laughed. “Well, pigs! What a story for the grandkids!”

The sorcerer frowned again. “So is that a yes?” he asked carefully.

The girl grinned. “It’s an of course.”

And with that, she promptly walked to his side, grabbed his face and kissed him. When the kiss was over, the pair took their horses, turned them around and headed home sweet home. Home, that is, to

the castle on the lake and the wooden canoe and the bustling stable. And, of course, to Happily Ever After.

Or at least Happily Ever *Now*. After all, I do not know if, looking far into the hazy future, some calamity will befall them. I cannot claim that they are forever safe from sickness and death and the rest of the divisive items that were in Pandora's Box. But at the very least, they are making an effort. They are doing their best. And at the end of the day, well, what else really matters? Pigs!

Some things are simply worth the risk.

