*The Song of the Sirin*

Raven Son: Book 1

by Nicholas Kotar

*The song of the Sirin can overthrow kingdoms. I know. I have seen it. I have seen the song make gods of men. The song carved the eternal city of Vasyllia out of the mountains. The song transformed queens into healers, so that thousands were made well with a single word. But ever it comes as a harbinger of affliction. Only in the fire of adversity does the pure water of healing flow.*

-from “The Journals of Cassían, Dar of Vasyllia” *(The Sayings, Book II, 3:35-43)*

CHAPTER ONE

The Song

The song teased Voran at the first hint of sunrise. His sister Lebía still slept, and he rose quietly, trying not to wake her. Outside his window, the trees were encased in overnight ice. Branches, like freshly-minted blades, clanged against each other in an almost military salute. As Voran leaned against the sill, the sun breached the summit-lines, and the ice-encased branches glowed from within. The song rose in a vast crescendo, then faded again. It stopped his breath short like a punch to the chest.

“Ammil,” said Lebía from across the room, her hair rumpled from sleep.

“Ammil*,* little bird?” he whispered, hoping she would turn over and fall asleep again. It cut him deeply that she still could not sleep on her own, despite her sixteen years.

“The sun’s morning sparkle through hoarfrost,” she said, laboring through a yawn. One of her eyes remained stubbornly closed. “That’s how the Old Tales call it. Ammil. The blessing of Adonais, you know.”

Voran smiled, though there was little to smile about in the purple shadows under her eyes. She needed to sleep if she were ever to find her joy again.

“What is that?” She indicated the parchment lying on the sill, garish in its profusion of purple and red.

“One of the Dar’s huntsmen claims to have seen the white stag.” Personally, Voran doubted it.

Her second eye opened. “The white stag? Dar Antomír wishes to hunt the deer of legend?”

“He’s anxious to begin as soon as possible,” said Voran. Too anxious, he thought, but kept it to himself. “His advisers are less sure. The Dar’s called together a small council this morning.”

Privately, Voran wondered at the Dar’s eagerness. Yes, catching the white stag was supposed to bring prosperity to the hunter’s city for seven generations. But although legends grew in Vasyllia with the same profusion as lilac trees, they mostly stayed bound to the page.

“Why does he want the approval of his advisors? Couldn’t he just announce the hunt, and be done with it?” she asked, rubbing her right eye with the heel of her palm.

“It’s complicated…” Only last week, the Dar’s head drooped in sleep during a small council. “Dar Antomír is of a different time. Most of his advisers are young, and they would prefer to leave old tales and superstitions behind. In fact, I think there are some who wouldn’t mind so much if Dar Antomír retired from public life and allowed Mirnían to take a more active role in Vasyllia.”

“I see. Meddling nags.”

Voran laughed. “I agree with that sentiment wholeheartedly.” He would much rather wander the wilds than sit in council with the representatives of the three reaches of Vasyllia.

“Do you have to be there? Why not stay at home for once?”

She looked away as soon as she said it. His conscience pricked him. Lebía was practically begging him, and he knew how much she hated to beg. It had been far too long since he stayed with Lebía at home, helped in the kitchens, took a long walk through the family vineyards, or actually read something with her. But Dar Antomír depended on him. Even more than he depended on his son, Mirnían.

“I wish I could…”

“Oh well.” She put on a feeble smile like a mask. “Never mind. Only please don’t stay at court the whole day. You can’t imagine how oppressive this house can be.”

Yes, I can, he thought. Why do you think I avoid it so much? Nothing like an empty house to remind you of your parents’ absence.

“I expect I’ll be back before evening,” he said, and his conscience pricked him again. He doubted he’d return before night. “Sleep now, my swanling. You need to rest.”

She looked at him without blinking for what seemed an inhumanly long time.

“Voran, do you think…maybe if I had done something differently—”

“Lebía, don’t.” He hurried to her and sat by her on the bed. “You were the least problematic child in Vasyllia. Mama’s disappearance wasn’t your fault.”

“I remember there were times when Papa looked at me with those heavy eyes, you know? Like he was trying to remember what it was like to love me. To love Mama. Could he have really—?”

“Lebía, don’t believe the gossip. The bruises on Mama’s arms were part of the disease.”

She nodded, thoughtfully.

“I don’t know why she left when she did, swanling. But the fact that he went to find her proves that he loved her, don’t you think?”

Her look only mirrored his own thoughts. *He didn’t love us enough to stay.*

“Please, Lebía, you need your sleep.”

She hugged him and turned over. Within a minute, her breathing had deepened into sleep.

*May all the Powers damn him for leaving you, Lebía*.

The curse did not give him the pleasure he hoped. It gave him no sudden illumination about the nature of Aglaia’s disease. It suggested nothing new about Otchigen’s madness and subsequent disappearance after implication in the mass murder of other Vasylli. Nothing but questions, as always.

At this early hour, he went out the back door of the wine cellar, chary of waking the servants. He managed to close the door with no noise, but the gate at the end of the overgrown back garden moaned like a thing diseased. It always did, but Voran always forgot. Cursing inwardly, Voran looked back at the house. No one seemed to stir within.

The house’s two stories lurched over him, the shadows thrown back by the morning sun, threatening him. As though the house itself were angry that Voran was master instead of his lost father Otchigen. As though it were Voran’s fault that his mother had fallen prey to a strange illness, then disappeared inexplicably.

The song appeared again, hardly more substantial than the red alpenglow on the underside of the clouds. Voran’s heart swelled as he turned away.

Otchigen’s house was nestled among the other estates of the third reach of Vasyllia. Voran loved to walk the flagstoned road through the reach as it crisscrossed the cherry groves of the noble families. Amid the trees, the mansions—each a fancy in carved gables, lintels, and columns—stared at each other as though they, like their masters, were jealous of each other’s status. Some of the most extravagant even sported gilded cockerels on the roof. Voran was grateful that it was generally considered in bad taste.

Every house was built on a small mound, to better overlook the other two reaches that extended downward and outward along the slope of the mountain, like the skirts of a great dress. Voran knew that, if looked at from below, the houses sparkled like jewels every morning: a reminder to the lower reaches that such opulence was as far out of their reach as the Heights themselves.

Voran stopped at a crossroads where stairs carved into the mountain led down to the second reach. Just to his left was the Dar’s palace, its seven onion-domed towers carved out of marble blocks, each larger than a single man. He hesitated, unwilling to brave the nagging of the small council yet. The second reach spread out beneath him in clean lines of austere homes set apart by stone hedges, staircases, and canals, all in keeping with the military calling of most of the inhabitants.

“Make way,” said a voice behind him. Before Voran could turn around, a mail-shod shoulder pushed him off the path. Voran landed knee-first in mud.

“Well, well, it’s the son of Otchigen,” sniggered Rogdai, the chief warden of the gates of Vasyllia. “You seem to have lost your warriors’ edge. No graduate of the seminary should ever allow himself to be surprised by an enemy in the open. I’ll have to speak to the elders about it. Maybe they can find you a post in the Dar’s library.”

The two sub-wardens flanking him laughed, but their knuckles were white on their pommels.

“Ever the paragon of civility, Vohin Rogdai,” said Voran, forcing his tone to remain calm. He would have preferred to knock the idiot’s teeth into the back of his head. “Thank you for pointing out the weakness in my defense. I will gladly accept your further instruction in the sword-ring.” *Where I’ll poke more holes into you than a sieve.*

“A pleasure. It’s been years since my sword has tasted traitor’s blood. Shall we say… this evening? I’ve always thought swordfights are best done in torchlight.”

*Where fewer people can see how bad you are*, Voran thought, *or how you cheat*.

“I’m afraid today I’ll be too busy hunting and catching the white stag.”

“You?” Rogdai spit. “You’ll catch that beast as soon as the sun sets in the middle of the day.”

“I smell a wager,” said Voran. “My father’s entire wine collection if I don’t bring it back by midnight.”

Rogdai’s face twisted in indecision. The superstitious idiot was afraid of drinking the wine of a suspected traitor. On the other hand, it was the best wine in Vasyllia…

“Done,” growled Rogdai. “I wager a public feast hosted in the central square by my family in your honor.”

“No, in my father’s honor.” Voran smiled at the way Rogdai twitched. Voran was sure he would just walk away. The coward.

“Done.” Rogdai’s teeth sounded ready to break from the strain of his jaw. “Not one minute past midnight, mind.”

Voran inclined his head.

Rogdai and his flunkeys walked by, their shoulders not quite as straight as before.

The wind picked up and whipped Voran’s hair into his face. Annoyed, he pulled it back. As he did, the song rose as though it were carried by the wind. He gasped for a moment, it was so intense. And it seemed to whisper a thought to him.

*Go now. Forget the small council. Go find the stag now. Leave the blind to lead the blind.*

Voran was running even before he realized it, but not toward the palace. He angled away away from it, toward the headwall of Vasyllia Mountain.

Voran avoided the streets, sprinting along dirt paths behind the gardens of the third reach. Here, the trees were wilder—native fir and spruce for the most part. Sometimes avoiding the paths outright, Voran veered toward the largest of many canals that watered the three reaches, all of them fed by Vasyllia’s twin waterfalls. As he reached the canal, all signs of domestication faded, replaced by mossy rocks and tree roots. Even the air smelled differently here. The spicy smells of the nobles’ kitchens gave way to the cool scent of pine. Though he knew the way well enough, it took him a moment to find the ivy-encrusted archway that led to a staircase going up, away from the city.

Dar Antomír would forgive him, Voran was sure. Especially if he found the stag. An honor for his family, a boon to his disgraced name. Seven generations of prosperity to his city. If the legends were to be believed, of course. Did he believe them? Voran wasn’t sure any more.

The wind gusted, dousing him with the spume of Vasyllia’s twin waterfalls, thundering on either side of the ancient stairway. With it came the music, louder than ever. He closed his eyes, savoring. Only when he clung to the face of the mountain was the melody this vivid. It sounded as if the mountain, the trees, the clouds all sang. And only for him.

He reached a ledge and pulled himself up. He was soaked from the exertion and the mist. Falling on one knee, he raised both arms toward the rising sun.

“Adonais, accept the prayer of this scion of the dishonored house of Voyevoda Otchigen. May my hunt not prove futile.”

The song hung on the air like a memory, then faded. He leaned back against one of the stone chalices that collected the water from the falls, each taller than Vasyllia’s famed birches. The chalice hummed with the steady rhythm of the waterfall pounding it. At Voran’s feet, a stone mouth faintly reminiscent of a dragon’s head spit the gathered water toward the city’s canals.

How mad and beautiful, he thought, considering the dragon. In the old times things were made with beauty in mind, not merely usefulness. How unlike these times. With the passing of the song, Voran felt emptied, hungry for a recurrence of the song. It did not return.

Voran stretched his shoulders, relief flooding into the popping joints. He sat at the ledge's lip, resting his feet on the dragon’s ears. Miles upon miles of the woods beyond the city lay carpeted at his feet. It was the perfect vantage point.

As he stared into the spaces between the trees, Lebía’s shadowed eyes kept intruding on his thoughts. He really should spend more time with her, not conjure up excuses to remain at the warrior seminary after hours, training the boys. Her plea pained him. He had not realized that she was so lonely at home. But of course she was. She had few friends, tainted as she was with their father’s assumed guilt, their mother’s inexplicable disappearance. He promised himself he would take her to the forests more often. Maybe even let her spend the night under the stars with him, as he so loved to do.

He was so wrapped up with the image of her smiling at the innumerable falling stars on a late summer night that he nearly missed it. Something gold flashed in the woods far beneath him. Voran’s heart stopped, then raced forward. A white streak passed through the trees. Fearful of moving even a muscle lest the vision fade, Voran continued to stare. It moved again, now clearly visible. A white stag.

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It took Voran a maddening hour to get through the city’s reaches and out the gates. Another half hour away from the paths as he tried to get his bearings in the forests beyond the city. He was intent on his path like a pointer on the scent. But when the howling started, his blood turned to ice in his veins.

He had heard wolves before. This was no mere wolf. The sound was deeper and darker, like the buzz of a hornet compared to a fly. He tried to recall the details of the many stories of the white stag. Was there a legendary predator to accompany the legendary quarry? Not that he could remember.

A blur of white raced before his eyes, so close he could spit at it. In an instant, it was gone.

The sun showered the foliage with dappled light. Something that was not the sun—a strange golden mist-light—flickered through the trunks, as though the stag had left a trail of light behind it. The mist beckoned him deeper into the forest.

Voran plunged headlong into the deepwood. The strange light continued before him for a mile or so, then blinked out. Voran looked around and realized he had never been in this place before. He stood on the edge of a clearing awash in morning sun, so bright compared to the gloom of the woods that he could see nothing in it but white light. He stepped forward.

The light overwhelmed him, forcing him to crouch over and shield his eyes. Fuzzy at first, then resolving as Voran’s eyes grew accustomed to the light, the white stag towered in the middle of the clearing, almost man-high at the shoulder. Its antlers gleamed gold, so bright that they competed with the sun.

Voran froze in place and adopted the deep, silent breathing pattern that an old woodsman taught him in childhood. Inch by inch, he reached for his bow. His quiver hung at his side in the Karilan manner, so taking the arrow would be the work of half a second, but extricating the bow strapped to his back was another matter. A single bead of sweat dropped from his forehead and slid down the side of his nose, tickling him.

The deer turned its head to Voran, showing no inclination to flee. As though Voran were nothing more than a fly, it flicked both ears and continued to graze.

The howl repeated, just to Voran’s right. Out of the trees crept a black wolf the size of a bear, its fur glistening in the light of the antlers. It paid no heed to Voran, leading with bristling head toward the grazing deer. It lunged, blurring in Voran’s vision like a war-spear, but the stag leaped over it and merely moved farther off to continue grazing. The wolf howled again and lunged again. Back and forth they danced, but the stag knew the steps of this death-dance better than the wolf. His nonchalance seemed to infuriate the hunter.

The wolf charged so fast that Voran missed its attack. The deer flew higher than Voran thought possible, and its golden antlers slammed the wolf’s flank like a barbed mace. The wolf screamed. The sound ripped through Voran, an almost physical pain.

The stag trotted to the other end of the clearing. Looking back once more, it waited. Gooseflesh tickled Voran’s neck. The stag called to him, teasing him to continue the hunt. Voran ran, and the deer launched off its back legs and flew into the waiting embrace of the trees.

Voran stopped. His body strained forward, intent on the hunt, but his heart pulled back. The wolf. He could not leave a suffering creature to die, even if it was the size of a bear, even if it would probably try to kill him if he approached. With a groan for his lost quarry, Voran turned back.

The wolf dragged itself forward with its forepaws. Each black claw was the size of a dagger. As Voran approached, its ears went flat against its head, and it growled deep in its throat. Voran’s hands shook. Gritting his teeth, he balled his hands into fists and willed himself to look the wolf in the eye. Its ears went up like an inquisitive dog’s. It whined.

In the eyes of the wolf, Voran saw recognition. This was a reasoning creature, not a wild animal.

“I can help you,” he found himself saying to the wolf as to a human being. “If you let me.”

The wolf stared at him, then nodded twice.

Voran pulled a homemade salve—one of Lebía’s own making—from a pouch on his quiver. Tearing a strip from his linen shirt, he soaked it with the oils and cleaned the wound of tiny fragments of bone. The wolf tensed in pain, then exhaled and relaxed. Its eyes drooped as the pungent odor suffused the air, mingling with pine-scent. Soon the wolf was snoring.

As Voran watched the sleeping wolf, something stirred in his chest—a sense of familiarity and comfort he had only felt on rainy evenings by the hearth. For a brief moment, the wolf was a brother, closer even than any human. Perhaps it was better that he had given up the chance to hunt the stag. This stillness was enough.

A rustle of leaves distracted Voran. He turned around to see the white stag returning into the clearing with head bowed. Voran could not believe his good fortune. He *would* be the successful hunter. His family’s dishonored name would be raised up again on Vasyllia’s lips. Trembling, he reached for his bow.

The stag stopped for a moment, as if considering. More boldly, he walked to Voran. Voran’s heart raced at how easy this kill would be, but the excitement died when the stag didn’t stop. He stared right at Voran as he strode. Voran pulled out an arrow and nocked it. The stag walked closer.

No. He couldn’t do it. This beast was too noble, his eyes too knowing. Killing him would be like killing a man in cold blood.

The stag stopped close enough that Voran could touch him. To Voran’s shock, he bowed his two forelegs and dipped his antlered crown to the earth, a king of beasts making obeisance to a youth of a mere twenty-four summers. Gathering courage, Voran approached the stag. His hands shook as he reached out to touch the antlers.

Something shook the branches in the trees ahead. Voran looked up, shoulders tensed. Something, some sort of huge bird, much bigger than a mountain eagle, perched in the crown of an orange-leaved aspen. No, not a bird, something else. Then Voran understood, and terror and excitement fought inside him, leaving him open-mouthed and rooted to the ground. The creature had a woman’s face and torso, seamlessly blending with the wings and eagle body. Her head was adorned in golden-brown curls, and each feather shone like a living gem. A Sirin.

She opened her mouth and sang. It was *his* song, but he had never heard it like this.

Voran no longer felt his body. It soared above the clouds; it plumbed the depths of the sea; it hovered on the wings of a kestrel. The song pinioned him like a spear to the earth, but raised him on a spring breeze above the world’s confusion. He was once again in the arms of his mother as she nursed him, her breath a soft tickle. He was inside the sun, and its music weaved him into existence. The earth shuddered, and he knew that he could turn it inside out.

The song of the Sirin stopped, and life lost all meaning. It was all grey, ugly, useless without her song.

When he came back to himself, the stag, the wolf, the Sirin were all gone, though her song lingered on the air. It seemed he would never rest, never sleep until he found her again.

*The prince, beguiled by the aspen grove, sat down to sleep. A sleep that lasted three hundred twenty-seven years…*

* From “The Sleeping-Wood” *(Old Tales: Book I)*

CHAPTER TWO

The Pilgrim

It was a few hours after midday on the same day, as far as Voran could tell in the enormous dark of leaves. He walked in a direction he hoped would lead him back to known paths, but he still recognized few of the trees or hills. The undergrowth was so thick that Voran suspected he had stumbled on a true wildwood. He didn’t know there were any left in Vasyllia, for though there were few outlying villages outside the city proper, many Vasylli had been woodsmen in their time, and hardly an inch of copse, plain, or grove was undiscovered.

One thought niggled the back of his mind, where he tried in vain to keep it contained. It whispered that he was no longer in Vasyllia at all, that he had entered a different realm from the human. Though he had just encountered not one, but *three* legendary creatures, Voran was not yet ready to believe all the Old Tales to be true.

He stumbled out of the murk of oaks into the breathing space of an alder-grove. He was exhausted. Laying down his bow, quiver, and sword, he sat at the base of a young tree and leaned back.

He should be more worried about losing his way. His provisions were few, he had drunk all his water before midday, and poor Lebía would be frantic with worry. But he found he cared little for any of that. He was not even anxious to find Vasyllia. Nothing mattered so much as finding the Sirin, as hearing her song again.

A kind of echo of the music thrummed through him stronger than his own heartbeat. Whenever he stopped moving, everything around him moved with the rhythm of the Sirin’s song. The wind tossed the branches in her cadence; the birds chirped in unison. His own heart and breath began to move with it, until he thought he would go mad with its insistence.

It was not the music itself, he realized. It was the incompleteness of it. The Sirin had sung, but not to him. To the trees and the beasts, perhaps, to the summits and rivers, but not to his heart. The thought held a creeping dread. If her incomplete song had caused him to go half-mad, what would happen if she directed her song at him? Nevertheless, to contemplate the possibility of not hearing the song again terrified him, like a childhood dream of a parent’s death.

As for finding her, none of the Old Tales were particularly helpful. The Sirin were capricious, appearing in their own good time, in their own chosen place. You did not seek out the Sirin, they sought you out. But he had no intention of waiting patiently for the song to return. He needed to do something.

The stag. Somehow, the white stag and the Sirin were connected. He couldn’t exactly understand how, but it made sense on a level of intuition. The stag was of a different world, the world of the tales, the world that never encroached on everyday life. At least until today. If he found the stag again, perhaps it would lead him to the Sirin.

His heart accelerated. Why had he not considered it before? The Dar would have already gathered the hunting party to search for the stag. All of Vasyllia—rich third-reacher and poor first-reacher alike—would be lounging in pavilions and on wool blankets before the city, feasting and awaiting the return of the hunters. Perhaps they had caught the trail already? He must stop them at all costs.

He tried to jump up, but found that his limbs were not responding to the commands of his mind. His eyelids were heavy, his head drooped, hungry for sleep. What had come over him? He had hardly been out for half a day!

Then the realization speared him. He was stuck in a sleeping-wood. By the Heights, surely *that* old story wasn’t true as well?

Out of the corner of his vision, a hairy creature waddled toward him. He couldn’t move his head to see it clearly. He heard a porcine snuffle, though it was far too large to be a tree-pig. It stood up on two hind legs, growing in the process, all matted hair and dirt and encrusted leaves. It growled.

Something changed in the music of the grove. At first, Voran couldn’t place it, then he realized it was the birds. They no longer sang in rhythm to the Sirin’s song, but to another music, more somber and ancient. Every branch in his vision hopped with purple, red, golden, brown songbirds. There was even a firebird trilling on one of the larger branches. The hairy creature snuffled back into the oaks.

“You shouldn’t amble through these woods, young man. The Lows of Aer are not to be lightly entered. All manner of strange things are possible here.”

Voran strained to move his jaw, and realized that nothing held him in place any more. He jumped up so suddenly that the speaker took two alarmed steps back and raised a walking stick in warning.

“I’m sorry, master,” said Voran, eager to make amends. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No harm done, young man.” The voice was as harsh as rock grating on rock, though it had an uncanny melody. It oddly harmonized with the birdsong. “Tell me, what brings you to the Lows?”

The man’s face was wrapped in some coarse grey fabric, though a beard poked out of it here and there. He was a huge man, out-gaining Voran by at least a head, and Voran was of the warrior caste. Something about him suggested incredible age, but he moved confidently, like a young man. Voran urgently wanted to make friends with this strange man.

“I am lost. My name is Voran, son of Otchigen of Vasyllia.”

The man’s grey eyes flashed like the sun reflecting off new snow. “The son of Otchigen? You are far from home, young man. How long have you traveled, then?”

Something in the pit of Voran’s stomach twisted. “Only this day. I hunted the white stag.”

Voran expected the man to laugh, but instead he unwrapped his face, revealing a smile of recognition. Like the beard, the man’s entire face resembled carved stone.

“Ah, a fellow seeker. What good fortune. I am a Pilgrim, young Voran.”

Voran could not believe his luck. Pilgrims were unnamed wanderers who traveled all lands searching for the beautiful and the terrible. They were whispered to have a special grace of Adonais. Meeting a Pilgrim in the wild was more valued than catching a questing beast; hosting a pilgrim brought one’s family years of prosperity. Many a well-bred housewife would brave open war with her neighbors for the sake of a Pilgrim’s visit.

“Good fortune indeed, master! Where do your feet take you this day?” Voran hoped he remembered the correct traditional address to a Pilgrim from his seminary days.

“My feet go where they will, young Voran.” The Pilgrim bowed his head, acknowledging the formality gratefully. Voran’s shoulders relaxed. “But meeting you perhaps has indicated a surer path. You wish to return to Vasyllia? It will take a week, at least, if you take the usual paths.”

Voran’s mouth must have dropped open in shock, because the Pilgrim laughed—if harsh rock can be imagined to laugh—and tapped his chin with his stick.

“You meddled with the Powers, young man. No telling what sort of trouble you’ve gotten yourself into.”

“Pilgrim, what do you know of the Sirin?”

The Pilgrim stiffened in suspicion. “Why do you ask? Have you not been chastened enough for your curiosity?”

“Forgive me. It is just…I have seen a Sirin. I have heard her song.”

The Pilgrim’s eyebrows rose a fraction and his eyes widened a jot, but his body remained still. Voran imagined it took great effort to appear so little moved.

“White stag,” the Pilgrim murmured, more to himself than to Voran, “Sirin-song…Is it that time already?” He seemed to make up his mind about something, and now his gaze was firm. “Come, Voran, I will take you to Vasyllia a different way.”

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Everywhere the Pilgrim went, holloways seemed to carve themselves through the trees. Where Voran saw nothing but trees, the Pilgrim picked out alleys between birches, passages through beeches, and doors through sage-brush. It was like the land belonged to him. As though seeing with new eyes, Voran was inundated with details of the forest he had never before bothered to notice, and he wanted to stop to breathe in the warm birch-smell, to pick out the male sparrow’s call from the female’s, to run his fingers through rain-soaked juniper for the joy of the sticky drops. But he had to run to keep up with the long strides of the Pilgrim.

“Pilgrim, what was that thing in the sleeping-wood? How did you scare it off?”

The Pilgrim stopped walking, turning to Voran. “That? Oh, nothing but a harbinger.” He smiled at something. “Things stir in the deepwoods. Things you Vasylli have not seen, or even heard of, for a very long time.”

He continued forward with even more determined tread.

“Voran, tell me something. While traveling, I have heard tales about your father. Are any of them true?”

The anger rose in Voran with the suddenness of nausea.

“Which tales, Pilgrim?” he asked, unable to hide the quiver of anger in his voice. “That he massacred innocent people? Or that he beat my mother, forcing her to run away from Vasyllia in a half-mad state?”

The Pilgrim stopped, abashed.

“Surely *that* is not what is said of Aglaia?”

Voran stopped in mid-stride. The Pilgrim had knowledge of his mother. The possibility made his heart run circles in his chest.

“Pilgrim, do you know what happened to my mother?”

The Pilgrim smiled, but did not answer the question.

“Voran, am I wrong to believe that you have never spoken of these things to anyone? Will you consider it brazen of a Pilgrim to ask your confidence?”

Voran’s mouth began speaking even before he gave it permission.

“There is no one I can confess to, Pilgrim. Lebía—my little sister—is still haunted by nightmares. She was only eight years old when we lost both our parents. The Dar is eternally sympathetic, but I don’t feel comfortable burdening him with personal worries. His daughter Sabíana, my…intended…” The heat rose in Voran’s cheeks. “Well, she is very protective of Lebía, and has a flinty nature. I find it better not to speak of it in her presence.”

The Pilgrim smiled knowingly. He pointed forward with his staff, offering Voran to continue speaking while they walked. Voran nodded, and they both walked forward as the carpet of fallen leaves rustled comfortably underfoot.

“Pilgrim, have you heard of the Time of Ordeal?”

“Who has not? Vasyllia’s warrior seminary is famed for it. Though I believe my knowledge of it to be several hundred years out of date.” He laughed, with a faraway look, as if remembering. Surely he was not *that* old. “Tell me, how many houses are still extant of the original seven?”

“Three remain. All three are segregated, as you know, coming together only for the training and vigils of the Ordeals. The gates of the seminary close, and no one is allowed in or out, not even with messages from family members. The Dar himself has no right to open the gates, except in times of war. The vigils, physical training, and period of intense contemplation are every bit as grueling as the tales have it.

“Eight years ago, I volunteered for the Ordeal of Silence four years before my allotted time. It’s a vow that few take, and hardly ever in their sixteenth year, but I sought out the opportunity with pleasure.”

“Voran, did you know that some of the oldest legends claim that the successful Ordeal of Silence fulfilled before its time is rewarded with a Sirin’s song?”

It explained a great deal. “No, Pilgrim. I did not.”

The Pilgrim’s smile was knowing. Chills ran down his spine. It was strangely pleasant.

“A week into the ordeal, my mother fell ill. None of the physicians understood it. There were lesions and bruises, and she just withered away. Then she disappeared. No note, no sign of departure, nothing. She just vanished. When I successfully finished the ordeal, the Otchigen I found was half the man he used to be. He had recently returned from a week of searching the wilds, but had found no sign of her. His state grew steadily worse, until I was forced to beg release from my studies, something I hated to do.

“Soon after, Father volunteered for a commission to Karila. There were unfounded rumors of nomad uprisings in far Karila, and it had led to a worsening of tensions between Vasyllia and Karila. He joined the garrison guarding a group of ambassadors who hoped to strengthen Karila’s ties to the throne of Vasyllia. I was against Father’s going from the start, but the Dar insisted. Said it would do him good.”

Through the haze of memory, Voran saw that he and the Pilgrim walked along a more recognizable path than before, and the aspens interspersed with pines hinted that they were coming nearer home.

“You never saw him again,” said the Pilgrim.

Voran nodded. He didn’t have the heart to speak of the murder of the ambassadors to Karila, or of his father’s assumed guilt in their murders.

“Voran, I thank you for your confidence. You may not understand yet why a Pilgrim would be so interested in your family history. I hope, when the trials begin, that you will find some solace in our shared confidence.”

Before Voran could answer, he was distracted by a white streak to his left. The stag.

The path turned sharply and led them to a bald patch in the wooded hills, where they entered open sunlight for the first time since leaving the sleeping-wood. The white stag walked toward them in a straight line. He stopped a foot in front of them, and Voran saw that there was a shimmer in the air between them. Voran touched it, and his hand could not pass through. A transparent wall.

“Never mind, old friend,” the Pilgrim said to the stag. “We have need of you after all.”

The deer raised his head and shook it. Snorting, he pawed the ground with a foreleg. The Pilgrim smiled at Voran.

“He’s annoyed with you. He would much rather remain in Vasyllia. Good country, he says, even if a bit on the forgetful side.”

Voran was dumbfounded. “Vasyllia is on the other side of that…transparent wall?”

The stag bowed as he had in the clearing, and the gold light from his antlers burst out. Voran raised an arm to his face, but the stag was already gone.

The mustiness of Vasyllia’s birches inundated Voran’s senses. He and the Pilgrim stood next to a saddle-shaped branch that Voran often slept on during the hot afternoons.

“The white stag is a bearer,” the Pilgrim explained, “a sort of…doorway. Between the worlds, you know. But to bear us to Vasyllia, he had to return to the Lows of Aer.”

Voran felt no more enlightened than before, but the Pilgrim only rumbled hearty laughter and strode uphill toward Vasyllia.

#

All of Vasyllia feasted before the gates. Close to the walls, rows of wedge-pavilions marked the families closest to the Dar’s regard, all from the third reach. Farther downslope, canvas tents flapped on sturdy frames. First and second-reacher families gathered around makeshift hearths. Heavy pots boiled over with stew. Carts pushed by pantalooned merchants wended their way among the feasters, regardless of social standing. In the midst of it all, a smaller replica of the market day stage had been built, and a storyteller had all the children in stitches, while their parents feigned seriousness, though most couldn’t hide their abashed smiles at the ribaldry their children didn’t catch.

On any other day, the spectacle would have cheered Voran. He loved a good pageant, as did any Vasylli. To see the entire city together like this, the reaches mingling, was a rare thing. And yet, something was lacking. Somehow, everything about Vasyllia now seemed half-empty, devoid of meaning.

The master bell roared in the palace belfry, announcing the return of the unsuccessful hunting party. Copper bells followed in syncopated chorus, beating in rhythm to the bay of the hunting dogs. Silver bells clamored in the rhythm of a thousand blackbirds.

“Pilgrim,” he said, straining to hear himself over the din of the bells, “Will you do my house the honor of staying with us while you visit Vasyllia?”

“Of course, Voran. I thank you for the offer.” His voice was more resonant than the bells. For a quick moment, Voran thought that the grey cloak and the stony visage were a kind of mask that the Pilgrim chose to assume for his own purposes, and that his real face was different. But the moment of intuition faded. Voran shook his head, befuddled.

The mountain city loomed before them, many-tiered and many-terraced. Its houses and streets hugged a sloping peak that curved upward like a saber to a pinnacle high above the mists. Amid the pines and spruces, the city of Vasyllia seemed to have grown from the mountains’ bones many ages ago. Towers were extensions of crags. Alleys, bridges, and archways were natural hollows and caves, gently bent to human will.

Something deep within the city compelled Voran. Not the Vasyllia built of wood, cobbled with stone, and planted in earth. No, that was little more than a mask, like the mask of the Pilgrim. The real city lay beneath it. For the first time in his life, Voran sensed there was something living, something vital in the heart of Vasyllia, something no one knew about or even suspected. The hidden Vasyllia whispered to him, though he could not parse out the words.

“You surprise me, young Voran,” said the Pilgrim. “How quickly you pierce to the heart of things. Whatever happens, my falcon, do not forget this. Vasyllia is everything. You must never let Vasyllia fall. She is *everything*.”

*Vasyllia is the Mother of Cities. Nebesta, our first daughter, will forever be jealous of her second place. Karila, the runt of the three city-states, will seek every opportunity to thrust thorns into the side of her mother. But I charge you, my sons, remember this. A true mother always slaves for her children…*

* From “The Testament of Cassían, Dar of Vasyllia” *(The Sayings: Book II, 15:3-5)*

CHAPTER THREE

The Market

To Voran’s annoyance, the Pilgrim plunged into the middle of the assembled throng of Vasylli. Voran had hoped that he could have the Pilgrim to himself for a time, before the tide of adoration inevitably took him. But Voran’s worries were unfounded.

The Pilgrim walked among the people of all reaches, speaking to none and being addressed by none. It was almost as if the people could not quite see him. And yet, everywhere he went, faces brightened and conversations turned boisterous. Even the colors of fabrics seemed brighter after he had passed.

Walking unnoticed among the people, Voran and the Pilgrim reached the gates of Vasyllia. As they did, Voran’s heart skipped a beat. He had forgotten that they would have to pass through the first reach.

“Pilgrim, shall we go up another way?” He pointed at one of the smaller gates at a higher elevation. It avoided the first reach entirely.

The Pilgrim looked at Voran, and it seemed that he looked throughhim.

Voran was ashamed of himself and of Vasyllia, ashamed that this splendorous city still hid the poor of the first reach in dim alleyways where dogs and children lay side by side in filth.

“Lead as you will, Voran,” said the Pilgrim. His eyes seemed to chide Voran, and he felt his face burning. Voran’s heart gently inclined away from his desire. To his own surprise, he found himself leading the Pilgrim *into* the first reach, not away from it.

The gates of Vasyllia yawned to accept them. They passed under the arch—two massive beech-trees carved out of marble, leaning toward each other, locked in an embrace of branches and leaves. The refined perfection of the carvings seemed worse than a mockery compared to the squalor of the first reach.

Voran’s senses were overcome, as though he were experiencing the first reach truly anew. Smells of horse-dung and freshly baked bread mixed together. The chatter of playing children and the barking of old mongrels joined in a strange cacophony. Most of the houses were hardly more than sticks leaning against each other, with a board for a door. They were not built along any ordered streets like the second reach. Instead, they seemed to be thrown about randomly. Foul-smelling dirt roads meandered between the houses and towering dung heaps, some of which smoldered with fire that never went out.

And yet, behind all that Voran sensed something he never felt in the third reach. Some native vitality belied the filth and poverty. Yes, the suffering around him was obvious. Every street corner was littered with beggars. Some of them fought for territory out in the open, pummeling each other with no care for the glances of others. A few children had a glint in their eyes as they assessed the contents of his pocket. But most of the people here seemed more *real* than in the other reaches. There was something natural and unconstrained in their interactions with each other. It contrasted sharply to the careful conventionality of the merchants, the sour disdain of the nobles, and the constipated piety of some of the priests.

Voran approached the opulence of the third reach with conflicted emotions. From his newfound perspective, he saw his father’s house as a sprawling monstrosity, inundated by peach and cherry trees like weeds.

Among them, Lebía danced, arms outspread. The setting sun lit up three singing firebirds on her shoulder and arms.

“Lebía?”

She turned, startled, and the birds flew up at once, giving her a red-gold halo. She smiled, and her smile’s warmth was even more astonishing than the firebirds.

Lebía ran up to him and embraced him, her golden curls pouring all over his shoulders.

He picked her up and twirled her as she loved. She laughed, as though she had not a care in the world. Years of tension sloughed off his shoulders like old skin.

“I’m sorry I took so long, swanling.”

“Oh, Voran,” she said, ignoring his words completely. “I’ve been trying for *months* to get the firebirds to come down to me. And today, they all came at once, singing. Can you imagine?”

Voran was astounded. What had happened to his sad Lebía?

“Lebía, dear, run and tell cook to prepare something to eat, quickly. We are honored with a Pilgrim’s stay tonight.”

Lebía was suitably impressed as she assessed the Pilgrim towering behind them in the shadows of the cherries.

“You grace our house, Pilgrim,” she said formally, with a touch of uncertainty.

“The honor is mine, little swan,” he said with disarming tenderness. “May the blessing of the Heights be forever yours.”

Lebía smiled a little, stealing a quick glance at Voran that said, “I am not quite sure what to make of him.” Voran inclined his head toward the house. She bowed to the Pilgrim in the formal Vasyllian manner before running into the house, hair streaming behind her like a banner catching the wind.

#

Voran sat the Pilgrim at the place of honor, in Otchigen’s own high-backed oak chair, then bowed to one knee before him, a supplicant in the traditional ceremony of welcome.

“Pilgrim, I greet you for Vasyllia. I greet you in the name of my father Otchigen (may his honor be restored). I greet you on behalf of my sister and myself, the Dar and his family. I beg you to bestow upon us Adonais’s grace, given to all who choose to wander the wilds in search of the beautiful and the terrible.”

The Pilgrim looked briefly uncomfortable at the mention of Adonais, but he laid two hands on Voran’s head and said, “Sometimes the Heights are moved by our fervent supplication, sometimes they are silent for our hidden good. I wish that Voran will find the strength to choose the right way among all ways, though it be the most painful.”

A wave of heaviness lifted from Voran’s shoulders. He felt younger than he had in years, worn down as he had been by his family’s situation. His head was clear and bright as after a full night’s sleep. Still, a shadow lurked behind the final words of the Pilgrim’s blessing.

Voran and Lebía served the Pilgrim with their own hands while the servant girls stood in the doorway, gawking at the sight. The Pilgrim hardly ate anything, though he constantly thanked them for the morsels he did eat. He enjoyed the drink in greater quantities. Only after he put his horn down for the final time did Voran and Lebía sit down on either side to begin their own meal.

As they ate, the Pilgrim grew more and more somber. By the time Voran and Lebía had finished, he stared at Voran intently with a pained expression. It unnerved Voran, making the space between his shoulder blades itch wildly. He wanted to pelt the Pilgrim with his questions as soon as possible, but convention would not allow it. At table, a Pilgrim spoke first.

“Voran, tell me about Vasyllia’s Great Tree.”

Voran’s ears pricked up at his tone. There was no doubt—the Pilgrim was testing him. Something told him that much would depend on his answer. He tried to feign calmness.

“Well, it’s a bit of a misnomer, isn’t it? It’s hardly even a tree. It’s an aspen sapling. But…well, it’s on fire. Every year, the priests officiate a ceremony that summons fire from the Heights. It keeps the tree’s fire fresh, and the sapling eternally young.”

The Pilgrim looked annoyed.

“No, tell me what it *is*.”

Something stirred in Voran’s memory, an old story his nanny used to tell him.

“It used to be called the Covenant Tree.” The details escaped him, no matter how hard he tried. “A seal of Adonais’s promise to Vasyllia.”

“What promise?” whispered the Pilgrim, his tone urgent.

“A promise of…protection. Yes, a girdle of protection against…oh, Heights, I don’t remember.”

The Pilgrim sagged into his chair, a look of open despair in his face.

“The stag was right. How forgetful Vasyllia is. I had not realized how forgetful.”

#

Voran slept badly and lay awake before the sun rose. The morning fog promised to dissipate, though the clouds in his mind threatened to remain the whole day. Something must be done about it.

Not bothering to dress, Voran slipped on his boots and wrapped his bare chest with his old travel cloak. Lebía didn’t stir, even when he climbed out the window and slid down the carved lintel to the gardens below, to the brook that Otchigen, with the Dar’s blessing, had redirected from one of the city’s canals. Their own private river.

At least I can thank you for this one good thing, Father, Voran thought.

Throwing off his boots and cloak, he flung himself into the water, bracing for the icy shock. It was immediate and glorious, the sun inside his head bursting apart his huddled thoughts. As he rose again into the cold, he laughed with pure exhilaration.

Afterward, he sat by the river, wrapped in his cloak, which did little to stave off the late autumn chill. The momentary euphoria of the swim had faded, leaving behind nagging unease. The song of the Sirin, which would often tease him after his morning wash, had stopped entirely since his encounter with the stag.

“Early riser, Voran?” The Pilgrim materialized out of nowhere, making Voran’s heart attempt a desperate leap out of his chest. Voran laughed, shaking with more than the cold.

“Good morning, Pilgrim.” He gestured for the Pilgrim to sit. “I could not sleep. Too many questions.”

“Have you considered that you may not understand the answers yet, even if I told you everything? In any case, I am eager this morning to take part in the feasting before the walls. Will you come with me?”

Inwardly, Voran groaned, but he nodded. “It would be my honor.”

Though it was early, already many people were huddled around their makeshift hearths in the fields, busy with breakfast. There was a joyful tenseness in the air; Vasyllia had not yet tired of waiting for the success of the hunt. Already a bustling marketplace stood ramshackle around the storytelling stage.

The married women in headscarves with temple rings, the young women with their hair unbound or in the tell-tale single braid—they all regarded Voran and the Pilgrim with smiles that rarely lit their eyes. The men, in tall beaver hats and wide, sweeping coat-sleeves, barely looked at them before passing on to the more important business of the day.

Pipers and fiddlers danced and spun about among the people, sometimes narrowly missing colliding with them, to general comic effect.

Again, that nagging sense that something was missing bothered Voran. It was as though Vasyllia were a woman far past her prime, who still painted her face in the fashion of newly-married youth.

The Pilgrim showed little interest in the usual wares—ceramics, fabrics, trinkets fashioned from wood, some of which sang on their own, some of which moved about in choreographed figures. The chalices of gold did not hold his attention; the woven tapestries may as well have been rags. He walked past the most ornate stalls with hardly a glance, though many of the merchants’ wives, impressed with his mien, tried their loudest to attract his attention.

Like hens flapping their wings to attract a cockerel, Voran thought.

The only stall that seemed to interest the Pilgrim was that of an old potter. It was hardly a stall at all, rather a tattered canvas hung over a frame of grey wood. It stood at the farthest edge of the market, surrounded by refuse. The potter, who smelled as bad as his teeth looked, could not even speak from surprise when the Pilgrim approached him.

All of his wares were plain, unglazed, though Voran sensed that they were made with great skill. The Pilgrim seemed to think so as well. He pointed at an urn of perfect proportion, smooth and undecorated. A hand-written rag sported the price: two copper bits. Voran winced at the price. This potter must have no business at all, if he was willing to sell his handiwork for so little.

“May I buy this?”

The potter stuttered something unrecognizable.

“I’m sorry, my brother,” said the Pilgrim. “I did not hear you.”

The potter’s eyes changed. Their dull yellow cleared to white, and something in them sparked. To Voran’s surprise, the potter seemed to shed his years before their eyes. He wasn’t old at all. He was hardly more than forty.

“From a traveler, I ask nothing but blessing,” he said. “Take it with my thanks.”

Voran was taken aback. The man spoke in a beautiful accent, similar to how the old priests spoke. It was a pleasure merely to listen.

“May you be blessed, my brother,” said the Pilgrim.

The potter continued to watch after them as they walked back to the center of the market. Shame nagged at Voran, though he couldn’t exactly explain why.

The Pilgrim returned to the center of the marketplace, where the tallest hats and the shiniest temple-rings congregated. Approaching a ceramics merchant, he pointed to an urn twice the size of the potter’s, glazed and hand-painted with fanciful images of animals and plants interweaving so tightly it made the head spin.

“Ah, you have quite the eye, good sir,” simpered the merchant, his five jowls quivering with subservience. “Best Nebesti make, that is.”

The Pilgrim raised the decorated urn in his right hand, the potter’s simple clay in his left. The crowd stilled. Just before it happened, Voran saw it in his mind’s eye, and he had to stop himself from laughing.

“Sudar,” said the merchant, using the honorific of respect for a person of indeterminate social class, “may I ask what you intend…”

All the ladies gasped in unison as the Pilgrim dropped both urns to the ground. The Nebesti urn shattered with a beautiful noise. Next to it, the potter’s vessel lay as though no one had even touched it.

“And so falls Nebesta,” whispered the Pilgrim. His eyes bored into Voran. “But will Vasyllia prove to be as strong as the potter’s urn before the coming darkness?”

Voran’s stomach churned at the Pilgrim’s words, but the Pilgrim merely turned and walked out of the market, accompanied by shocked silence. Voran picked up the potter’s urn and turned to pay the merchant.

“Will a silver suffice for your trouble?” Voran asked, abashed.

The merchant glared at him. “Five silver ovals. Not a lead jot less.”

Voran chuckled at the merchant’s willingness to take advantage of the situation. But he still pulled out only two silvers. He handled them for a moment, looking over their rough edges. These coins were little more than slivers cut from a long bar of grey metal. How strange that they were more cherished in Vasyllia than the life-earned work of an artisan like the poor potter. Shaking his head at his own muddled thoughts, Voran dropped the silvers down in the bulbous palm of the merchant. He rewarded Voran with cursing eyes.

The Pilgrim was already halfway back to the city, his shoulders bent and his step labored. Voran had no trouble gaining on him this time.

“Sudar!” called a voice behind them. It was the potter. “Please,” he said, running up to them, “I know you must be a Pilgrim. Forgive me, but…would you honor my house…” He seemed to run out of words, though his hands continued to gesture expressively until he noticed and laughed at himself. Voran had never seen such unguarded simplicity in any man. Everyone he knew seemed to plan every gesture, every word spoken in public. This spontaneity was strangely refreshing.

“Yes, we will come with pleasure,” said the Pilgrim.

*In the beginning was the Darkness. The Darkness covered the earth. Yet an ember of light there was in the high places. In Vasyllia, upon the mountain, the Harbinger found a people worthy of the Light. He blessed their leader, a man named Lassar, and he made a Covenant with them. As a sign of their calling, he summoned fire from the Heights upon an aspen sapling. As long as the fire burns, as long as the Covenant Tree remains young, Vasyllia remains blessed by the Heights, and the Darkness shall not touch it.*

*-* From “Lassar the Blessed and the Harbinger” *(Old Tales: Book I)*

CHAPTER FOUR

At the Potter’s

The potter’s house stood wedged between two taller buildings—a common mead-house and a smithy. It seemed built of shadows more than wood. But the open door revealed a different picture. A bright hearth illumined a much longer interior than Voran expected. At the far end, the house grew into a two-story loft swarming with small children. Their clamor was far more pleasantly inviting than the sour smell of the mead-house next door. The potter’s wife, dressed in simple but clean grey homespun, laughed with her eldest daughter as they cooked something tinged with thyme and mint in the cauldron over the hearth. The potter’s many wares adorned every nook and cranny in the long house. Some pots clearly contained stores, but many more overflowed with flowers. Colors in mad profusion burst from unexpected corners—fabrics, blossoms, the bright eyes of a ruddy child. Voran was breathless with unexpected pleasure at the harmonious madness of it all.

The Pilgrim seemed to grow taller and wider as he entered, and his eyes lit up with more than the light of the hearth. He sighed in relief.

“Come, come, my dears,” called the potter, clapping his hands as though herding a flock of turkeys. “It is as we hoped. A Pilgrim comes to our home! You will take part in the day’s celebration, yes, Pilgrim?”

The Pilgrim laughed—a full-throated guffaw that encircled everyone with affection. Even the hearth seemed to leap.

“What an unexpected joy!” he said. “And I thought no one in Vasyllia remembered this day.” Voran wondered what he meant.

The simmering household boiled over, and all the children exploded into movement that looked perfectly rehearsed. Two girls, their braids pinned to the top of their heads, carried an embroidered hand towel to the Pilgrim. A boy of about ten years floated over with a silver basin of water—where did a potter manage to find himself a *silver* basin? —and spilled only a few drops on his way to the Pilgrim. The Pilgrim washed his hands, then lowered his head. The boy’s eyes sparkled with delight. He had obviously been hoping for this moment. He threw the remainder of the basin over the Pilgrim’s head. The Pilgrim exploded into laughter, and the two girls with the hand towel could hardly keep their hands steady for their own giggling.

The eldest daughter brought a loaf the size of her head, still warm by the smell of it. The eldest son carried a frothing tankard of mead carved in the shape of a mallard. It was exquisite workmanship. The smallest boy—no more than two or three—stood by them with a ceramic cup full of salt. The Pilgrim tore off a piece, dipped it in the ale, then in the salt. He smelled it with his eyes closed, savoring. Then he threw it over everyone’s head directly into the hearth. Everyone cheered. Then he downed the tankard, leaving a sip for the boy who brought it. The boy looked like he had been given gold coins for his birthday.

Pleasant gooseflesh tingled Voran’s back and neck. He had never seen anything like these rituals. They were rustic, but clearly ancient. How pitiful his own words must have sounded to the Pilgrim when he welcomed him into Otchigen’s cold, empty feasting hall.

The potter walked around his children, tucking in a shirt-tail here, fixing a stray hair there. His wife gestured with eloquent hands to two more girls coming down from the loft so insistently that one of them fell before reaching the final rung. The entire family presented itself to the Pilgrim. But instead of bowing before him as Voran had expected, they exploded into a complicated line dance that weaved in and out of a circle of which the Pilgrim was the center. It felt spontaneous, and yet no one stepped on each other’s feet. Not even the smallest children. Above the noise of stomping feet, a song rose as if from the depths of the earth. Everyone sang it, even the Pilgrim.

“*We greet you, distant traveler!*

*Rejoice, beloved brother!*

*You’ve come from behind the mountain,*

*You’ve risen to the high places.*

*Now bless our grass, our flowers blue,*

*Our bluebells with your words, your eyes.*

*Warm our hearts with gentle words,*

*Look into the heart of these brave children,*

*Take out the evil spirits from their souls,*

*Pour into them your living water,*

*Whose source is locked, and the key is in Evening’s hands.*

*Evening the bright took a walk and lost the keys.*

*And you have walked the road and found it.*

*May you bless us, if you will,*

*for many years, for the long harvests,*

*for the endless ages of ages!”*

Voran found himself inching away from the song and the dance, since he was not party to its mysteries. But the eldest girl took him by the hand and led him into the pattern. To his own surprise, he melded into it without a thought. Something about the steps, the shape of the dance seemed natural, intrinsic, as though his feet already knew what to do. He even found himself singing the song, which they repeated three times.

Finally, they all ended up in a rough circle around the hearth, seated.

“Will you say the incantation, Pilgrim?” asked the potter.

The Pilgrim stood up and raised his hands and began to chant:

*“The Evening of the year has come,*

*And the joys of sun will fade to naught.*

*Now sleep in earth, our fathers dear,*

*Kept warm by our remembrance, tears.*

*We’ll give you joy again anon,*

*When the rising sun sees snow no more.”*

The potter handed him a bowl filled with oil. The Pilgrim poured it over the fire. It was scented with lavender. Voran breathed in as long as he could, savoring the symphony of herb, cooked fowl, and sour mead.

Now, platters of food passed from one to the next around the circle, and everyone ate with their hands. A large horn full of mead was also shared by all. Voran’s head spun from all the constant movement, but his heart was warm and content.

Was he even still in Vasyllia? Nothing in the third reach compared to this simple joy in life. He had thought that the scholars and warriors of the seminary had preserved the mores and traditions of old Vasyllia. But there, everything was formalistic, strict, conventional to a fault. Repeated movements without inner content. Everything in the potter’s world was replete with significance.

“Thank you, my friends,” said the Pilgrim from his seat, “for celebrating the departed with me. It is fitting. I had thought no one kept the Evening anymore.”

He looked at Voran, his eyes probing. Voran felt the flush creep up his cheek.

“Tell me,” Voran whispered.

“The Evening, my falcon. It is the old festival of the dead. The remembrance of our departed parents. The send-off of the world into the sleep of winter.”

Two of the younger girls giggled at Voran’s stupidity. He was surprised to find himself smiling.

“I have never heard of this festival. How many others have I not heard of?”

“There’s the Day of Joy,” said a boy with a shock of white hair, probably no more than three or four. “Then the Presentation of the Bride, the Awakening of the Ground, the Cleansing of the Harvest, the Summoning of Fire…”

“*That* one I know,” said Voran, abashed at the child’s precocity.

“There is much that you third-reachers don’t notice, I’m afraid, Vohin Voran,” said the potter, laughing. “And even more that you’ve forgotten.”

Voran was mortified. The potter had named him, and he had no idea what the potter’s name was.

“Sudar, forgive my rudeness. What is your name?”

“I am called Siloán, Vohin Voran. You are welcome at my hearth.”

Again, Voran wondered at the purity of the potter’s accent. Priest-like, it was. As though speaking the language of Vasyllia had sacred meaning in and of itself.

The conversation weaved in and out of Voran’s hearing as he descended into brooding. Shame uncoiled itself inside him. There was so much he didn’t know about his own city. So much beauty wasted in the putrid alleyways of the crumbling first reach.

Siloán put a rough hand on Voran’s shoulder and looked him in the eye. It lifted the fog from Voran’s heart. They conversed. Easily, without constraint. Siloán spoke about things Voran never expected a potter to know—about ancient songs, about the ways of craft that Voran thought long lost, handiwork that required creativity of mind as well as skill of hand.

“You see, Voran…I am sorry, may I call you by your godsname?”

Voran hadn’t heard the term “godsname” since he was in school. It was an archaism, a term found more often in the Sayings than in daily conversation.

“Yes, of course, Siloán. It would be my honor.”

“I thank you. As I was saying, your bewilderment at the richness of our life here in the first reach is understandable. It is all connected with our general sickness as Vasylli. You must have noticed how the people of our great city prefer cheap, gaudy wares to the beauty of a craft well done.”

“Yes,” said Voran, thinking of the shattered Nebesti urn. “Things are not made with beauty in mind anymore.”

“Have you considered why this is?” The potter seemed eager to share his own theories, so Voran extended an open palm to him, encouraging him to speak on. “Creating something truly beautiful requires labor pains. Vivid as childbearing. Not many willingly choose such a path, especially if every craftsman is encouraged to churn out cheap trinkets by the dozen.”

“Yes, I see,” said Voran, warming to the topic. “Without the time of labor, there will be no pleasure from the fulfillment.”

“You both reason well,” said the Pilgrim. “But I want you to think it through to its end. Imagine if every person in the entire city-state avoided these labor pains, as you’ve called them. Not just craftsmen, but fathers and mothers, priests and elders, Dars and representatives.”

“It is like a disease,” said Voran, feeling the gaze of the Pilgrim like fire on his cheek. “A disease that would weaken Vasyllia. Not only as a nation. All would become weak in spirit. If not already dead.”

“And consider this,” said the Pilgrim, his every word carefully enunciated. “What if Vasyllia were faced with an enemy. Not any enemy, but one that lived for an ideal. That was ready to die for it. What if this enemy were a follower of a dark power, servants of another god?”

“We would not stand against them,” whispered Voran, his voice heavy. “Not for long.”

“Voran, that is what I fear as well,” said Siloán. “We are a trivial people if we only come to Temple services because Dar’s law closes trade on holy days. A people with dead hearts.”

“And so we must do everything we can to reawaken that flame in the heart,” said a new voice from the doorway.

The potter beamed at the newcomer. “Otar Gleb! We only needed you to make this evening perfect. Come, come!”

The newcomer was a young priest whom Voran didn’t know. He was dressed in a linen cassock with no adornment other than a red embroidered belt. Blond ringlets and short beard with a few white streaks framed a sharp face with exaggerated features. At first glance, he seemed fantastically ugly, especially with a broken nose that covered half his face. But his smile came easily and illumined his pale-blue eyes. When he smiled, he was beautiful.

“Vohin Voran,” he said, approaching Voran and taking his forearm in the traditional warrior greeting. “We have not met, but I have long wished to know you. How fitting that it should be this day, and in such illustrious company.”

When he saw the Pilgrim, he went a little pale, as though he saw something in him that Voran did not. The Pilgrim smiled in acknowledgement and nodded once.

“By the…” Otar Gleb cleared his throat and chuckled. “What an honor to meet a Pilgrim. Truly you bless this day, when we bring joy to all our dead.”

“Vasyllia is blessed while its clerics still zealously labor for the flame in the heart,” said the Pilgrim enigmatically.

The conversation around the hearth grew even more boisterous, if that was possible. Voran watched the young priest intently. He was different from most priests he knew. Less concerned with outward appearances. When he spoke to someone, even the smallest child, he looked them in the eye and didn’t flinch or allow his eyes to flick away. His smile was always ready, always present in the corner of his eyes, but he only let it blossom fully when he felt joy in himself. Everyone seemed physically drawn to him, despite his ugliness.

“Otar Gleb,” said Voran in a rare lull in the conversation, “please forgive my rudeness, but are you a first-reacher?”

“No, Voran. I am a second-reacher. Merchant stock, as it happens. But with no interest or ability in the fine art of trading. And in any case, you know, I’m sure, that one of our priestly vows is the rejection of reacher status.”

Siloán chuckled. It seemed that he and Gleb shared a private jest.

“But now that you mention it,” said Gleb, “I find the division into reaches to be a crippling reality for the city, don’t you think, Siloán?”

“No, not in the least,” said the potter. “Only in our segregation can we hold to the traditions that are so fast disappearing, even in your second reach.”

“But the separation limits the reach of your wares, does it not?” said Voran. “Not many third-reachers will buy first-reacher work these days.”

In answer, the potter reached behind himself and pulled out an urn, very similar to the one he sold to the Pilgrim. Except it was more beautiful. At first glance, it seemed no more than a simple clay urn. But the longer Voran looked at it, the more perfect it seemed. Its proportions were flawless. Its form and color were unique. The gradations of the natural clay had been manipulated with purpose, but to look as though it were the work of nature. There were even words and figures in between the swirls of clay, invisible to the careless eye.

“Yes, I see you understand,” said the potter. “If this urn were to appear in a third-reacher stall at the market, it still would only sell to the discerning eye. And those are rare in any age. Especially our decadent one.”

“You do realize that by limiting yourself thus you are depriving your family of comfort and riches?”

“Oh, you third-reachers!” laughed Siloán. “You have so much that your hearts have become small. You can live very well with very little. Sometimes, it is better this way.”

Voran wondered if that were really true.

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They spent most of the day at Siloán’s. Afterward, Voran was morose and unwilling to talk. He meandered through the first reach’s dingy streets, wondering at how few trees remained in these levels. The only greenery he saw was the occasional kitchen garden. The Pilgrim took his arm and led him up a staircase leading into the second reach. Just before entering the archway to the clean and orderly streets of the military sector, they stopped at a naked outcrop with a perfect view of the crowd in the plain still feasting in front of the city. From this vantage point, the embroidered designs of the pavilions of the rich took on a life of their own. Here was an embroidered dragon, there a longboat with sail unfurled, even owl eyes staring from butterfly wings. Everywhere the colors danced as the mist from the waterfalls showered the feasters with drops of gold and opal.

“Beautiful, is it not?” The voice behind them was low and musical.

“Good eve, Mirnían,” said Voran, feeling oddly abashed. “I had hoped you would be about. I wanted you to meet the Pilgrim in person.”

“A Pilgrim in Vasyllia,” said Mirnían, his right eyebrow barely rising.

Voran felt like a hump-backed invalid next to Mirnían, though the prince was not much taller than he. Curling gold hair resting on his shoulders, eyes grey as a storm, perfectly straight teeth—Mirnían had everything that Voran did not have, but desired greatly.

“My father the Dar will be pleased to see you, though he is much engaged with matters of state at the moment. I can walk you through the market in the meantime.”

“We spent most of the morning there, Mirnían,” said Voran.

“Well,” said Mirnían as though brushing off a mosquito, “I hardly have time today, in any case. Pilgrim, surely you have tales to tell of the other lands. Yesterday’s storyteller was a disaster. Would you honor us on the stage? Tomorrow will be the last triumphal day before the Dar calls off the hunt for the white stag. Your story may help alleviate the disappointment the city will feel at our famed hunters not finding any trace of it.” Mirnían stared at Voran significantly.

“I would like nothing more, Prince Mirnían,” said the Pilgrim.

“Excellent. I will send for you at the proper time. You must forgive me, but matters of state, you know.”

Voran breathed a sigh of relief at Mirnían’s departure.

“Why do you dislike Mirnían?” asked the Pilgrim.

Voran was annoyed at the Pilgrim’s astuteness.

“We were very close as children, and soon I am to be his brother. And yet…I don’t dislike him, it’s only…”

“Tell me, did he take the Ordeal of Silence with you that year, Voran?”

Voran’s heart sank. He nodded.

“He did not last, did he?”

“No, he broke after two weeks. But there is no shame in that. It is a very difficult ordeal.”

The Pilgrim stared without expression at Voran, until Voran looked down in shame.

“Voran, do you know why the Nebesti urn cracked so spectacularly, while the potter’s vessel did not?”

Voran shook his head, not daring to raise it yet.

“It was baked in too hot a fire.”

Voran looked up.

“I thought the heat strengthened the clay, Pilgrim.”

“The right amount of heat does, just as the right amount of adversity strengthens any relationship between two people. But there is one fire that is always too hot. Do you know what that is?”

Voran did not answer.

“Envy.”

They joined the main road of the second reach that led through the open marketplace—now empty of stalls—toward the center of Vasyllia. Ahead of them stood the large central square, at the heart of which stood the Covenant Tree. Pale flames danced over the translucent leaves of the aspen sapling, which stood barely taller than a man. For a moment, Voran thought the fire was low. But that was unlikely. It was months still until the day of the summoning of the fire.

“Pilgrim. Do you think the potter is right? Can we restore the ideal of Vasyllia? Or are we just idealistic dreamers?”

The Pilgrim exhaled a long, wheezy breath, all the while staring at the sapling. Finally, he looked at Voran with heavy eyes.

“Come, I will show you.”

The Pilgrim took Voran’s arm, his grip like an eagle’s talon. A white light enclosed them, rising out of nowhere, and for a moment Voran saw nothing but the light. Then it dimmed, and the aspen burst into wild color. The aspen was surrounded by red and silver fire—firebirds and moonbirds frolicked and sang with the kind of joy one sees in a one-year-old child just awoken from a full night’s sleep. Surging waves of purple, red, orange, blue, brown pulsated around the tree—songbirds unable to contain themselves enough to sit on a branch. All their music interweaved as though imagined by a single mind, harmonized from a single melody.

The single melody came from far above the aspen sapling. Three Sirin reigned over their kingdom of lesser birds, flying a distant circuit around Vasyllia. One wept, one laughed, one remained stern and impassive. All three sang, each her own variation of a single melody, each weaving in and out of the other, first a motif of joy, then a shadow of grief, replaced by a long moment of introspection. Then all three sang in unison, and Voran fell on his knees, unable to bear the weight of the music pressing down on him.

All around, Vasylli walked with heads high, backs straight, quiet joy and hidden song evident in each face. Strange flowing robes adorned both men and women. It was as though one of the old Temple frescoes had come to life.

“This is Vasyllia as it used to be, yes?” Voran asked the Pilgrim, his voice hardly above a whisper. The Pilgrim inclined his head, looking around with an expression Voran couldn’t quite define.

As he looked at them, Voran was amazed at the faces of these past Vasylli. Nearly everyone in his own Vasyllia walked with bent shoulders, eyes turned inward, faces full of cares. In *this* Vasyllia, joy burst forth from the eyes of every person. But there was something more. Voran tried to focus above the music of the Sirin, and suddenly he saw.

“Pilgrim! I can see every one of their talents. That man. With his own hands, he will carve the great stone chalices catching the falls, working days and nights without end. When I look at that girl with the long hair, I see an embroidered banner that will be carried in battle, sparking inspiration in the hearts of many warriors. That woman will raise a Dar long to be remembered. That man will raise a temple in a land far away, a land of endless fields of undulating grass. And their hearts! Every person has a flame in their hearts, burning steadily. What is that flame?”

“It is the soul-bond with the Sirin. This is the Vasyllia of the days of the Covenant. Over one thousand years ago. Lassar of Blessed Memory is Dar.”

Voran gasped in pleasure. No time was more decorated with legends. No time gave more of the Old Tales and Sayings than the reign of Lassar. But the pleasure was short-lived, as his own Vasyllia returned to his thoughts, so grey and drab compared to this place.

“How much beauty has been lost, Pilgrim. Every person here is a maker, a creator of vast potential. I can see every man, woman, and child shine with beauty, beauty made and beauty lived. Now all we care about is the latest trinket from Karila sold at market.”

Voran sat down on the bare earth, hugging his knees. He felt exhausted, emptied, confused. Why did the Pilgrim show him so much? Was something expected of him in return?

“Why did we lose it all, Pilgrim?”

The Pilgrim’s half-smile faded as he looked down at Voran. “Many reasons, my falcon. Chief among them, you forgot your part of the Covenant.”

“We have always been taught that the Covenant between Vasyllia and Adonais was merely an instructive tale. A reminder of Vasyllia’s greatness, surely, but not literally true. What have we forgotten?”

The light faded as though the sun were obscured by a cloud. Voran looked up at the sky, but there were no clouds in the sky. Yet the darkness deepened. A chill crept up his arms and down his back. He shivered.

“You forgot the Darkness, Voran. It has been so subtle, these centuries. So wise. And now, no one even remembers it. But it lives. Look up, Voran.”

He pointed at the sun, looking at it directly, to Voran’s amazement. Squinting in expectation, Voran turned to the sun.

It was almost completely gone, a creeping darkness devouring it. The darkness ate and ate, until nothing was left. Voran began to shake with fear.

“It comes, Voran. The Darkness comes.”

All around Voran, men and women were running about, hands shielding their faces in fear. Mothers clasped their children, husbands encircled the waists of their wives. They were no longer in the flowing robes of Lassar’s time. Voran’s heart plunged.

“Yes, Voran,” said the Pilgrim. “This omen is not of the vision. It is happening now.”

Vasyllia roiled around them. A river of people rushed through the gates back into the city. Guards in the Dar’s black livery ran past Voran, trying to restore order.

“Come, Pilgrim, we must go.” He took the Pilgrim by the arm, but the big man did not budge. Voran turned back at him, questioning.

“Voran, it begins. So soon, and so much yet unsaid. They move so quickly against us. If you remember anything, remember this. Find the Living Water. They must not find it first.”

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