

Legends tell of a song so powerful, it can overthrow kingdoms and raise mankind to the heights of the divine. Inspired by the song, builders carved the eternal city of Vasyllia out of the mountains, Vasylli warriors banished ancient terrors to the darkness, and her queens healed thousands with a single word. Young Voran knew of this song, and he had even heard its intimation, like a shadow.

That morning, the song teased him at the first hint of sunrise. Outside the window of the second-story bedroom that Voran shared with his sister Lebia, the autumn trees were encased in ice. Branches, like fresh-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 Lebia, still bed-headed on their straw mattress.

“*Ammil*, little bird?” he whispered, hoping she would turn over and fall asleep again.

“The sun’s morning sparkle through hoarfrost,” she said, laboring through a yawn.

“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 would ever find her joy again.

“The Dar will be pleased,” he said. “Perhaps this morning I will sight the white stag.”

Lebia rubbed her right eye with the heel of her palm.

“Liar,” she said, in a matter-of-fact tone. “I know that is not the real reason for your morning excursions.”

She was far too knowing for her sixteen years. Voran decided mock-irritation was the best way to avoid answering her.

“Are you suggesting that I am ignoring the orders of the Dar? You know how anxious he is to begin the hunt.”

She raised both eyebrows and chuckled, momentarily banishing her sorrow.

“Very well. Lie if you want. Only please do not stay in the forest the *whole* day. You cannot imagine how oppressive this house can be.”

Yes, I can, he thought. Why do you think I avoid it so much? Nothing so reminds one of absent parents as an empty house.

“I expect I will be back before evening. Sleep now, my swanling. You need to rest.”

She nodded and rolled to her side. Within seconds, her breathing deepened into sleep.

“May all the Powers damn our father for leaving you thus, Lebia,” whispered Voran.

He dressed quickly. 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 small gate at the end of the overgrown back garden moaned like a thing diseased. It always did, and Voran always forgot. Cursing inwardly, Voran looked back at the house. No one seemed to stir within.

Its two stories lurched over him; the shadows thrown back by the morning sun, threatening him. As though the house itself were angry with Voran for being master instead of his lost father. As though it were *his* fault his parents disappeared all those years ago.

The song appeared again, hardly more substantial than the red alpenglow on the underside of the clouds. Voran walked on.

Lebia was right, of course. Voran’s early morning vigils on the Dar’s behalf were little more than a ruse. The Dar, ever a lover of pageantry, hungered for signs of the white

stag, the deer of legend fabled to bring a generation of prosperity to the city of the successful hunter. Last month a traveling merchant claimed to have seen it, prompting the Dar to assign a constant watch over the forest. But Voran sought a different quarry—the elusive singer of the ineffable music.

Voran ran along dirt paths bordering the mansion-estates of Vasyllia's third reach, until he reached one of the city's waterfall-fed canals. Up the canals, toward the mountain wall backing the city, through ivy-encrusted archways, and up the cracked stairs leading to a ledge where two giant stone chalices collected the twin waterfalls.

Even this morning, after weeks of daily climbs, Voran could hardly breathe for the anticipation of the music. Here the city faded to a murmur. Time seemed to slow down, and Voran found it a pleasure merely to inhale. He paused but for a moment before clambering up the stairs.

At the halfway point, Voran turned back to look at Vasyllia in the morning gleam. Below him all was still dark, save for the Temple Plain at the far end of the city, sparkling with lanterns like an inverted night sky, and the Great Tree towering over the city, its top already half-gilded by the sun.

The wind rose, dousing him with the waterfalls' spume. With it came the music, louder than ever. He closed his eyes, savoring. Only when clinging to the face of the mountain was the melody this vivid. It sounded as if the mountain, the trees, the clouds whispered only for him.

When he reached the ledge, he was soaked from the exertion and the mist, his heart beating louder than the falls. 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 today’s vigil prove more fruitful than yesterday’s.”

The melody hung on the air like a memory, then faded. He leaned back against one of the chalices, each taller than Vasyllia’s famed birches. It hummed with the steady rhythm of the pounding waterfall. At his feet, a stone mouth faintly reminiscent of a dragon’s head spit the collected waterfall at the city.

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 melody. It did not return.

Dropping his short hunting bow and the pack with his provisions for the day—dried meat, three-day-old bread, and a small skin of mead—Voran stretched his shoulders, relief flooding into every popping joint. He sat at the ledge’s lip, resting his feet on the dragon’s ears. He resigned himself to a long day of useless waiting.

Something gold flashed in the midst of the conifers blanketing the downslopes beyond Vasyllia. 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.

As Voran ran to the gates of the city, the ten door-wardens were only beginning to stir. The chief warden, a bearded swordsman named Rogdai, blocked Voran’s passage with his body. His knuckles were white on the pommel of his longsword.

“A bit early for your wanderings, Vohin Voran?”

“I’ve seen it,” said Voran, trying to catch his breath. “The white stag. It’s out in the

forests. You must inform the Dar.”

Rogdai flicked one finger at a young warden to his left and nodded. The youth immediately ran up the main road to the palace. Voran made to move past Rogdai.

“No one leaves the city this morning, son of Otchigen,” said Rogdai, still blocking the way. “There are wolves in the forest.”

“Vohin Rogdai, I am ward of the Dar, son of the Voyevoda of Vasyllia. You will not hinder me.”

“Son of the *former* Voyevoda.” Rogdai spit at Voran’s feet. Voran’s hands twitched to his sword, but he forced them back. This was not the time for settling scores. Rogdai’s time would come later.

Rogdai sneered, seemingly content with his small victory. Moving aside, he waved the rest of the wardens toward the gates. “Let the fool pass through. If he wants to be eaten by wolves, that’s none of my concern.”

As nine men heaved at ropes thicker than a man’s arm, the bronze doors creaked like two crones awoken too early in the morning. When finally their groaning ceased, they revealed a long plateau before Vasyllia, its farmland already harvested for the long winter. The road ran silver-straight through it and plunged into woodland. Voran ran through the open gates, half-drunk on exhilaration.

Far beyond the city walls, in the thickest groves of mountain pines, Voran heard the first howl.

His blood chilled at the sound. He had heard wolves before. This was no mere wolf. The sound was deeper and darker, like a wasp compared to a fly. He tried to remember all the stories of the white stag. Was there a legendary predator to accompany the

legendary quarry?

A blur of white raced before his eyes, so close he could spit at it. In an instant, it was gone. The grove surrounding him was so thick that the sun strained to break through the foliage. Nevertheless, a strange golden light flickered through the trunks, as though it were left behind as a trail by the stag. It beckoned him deeper into the forest, off the dirt path he had been following.

Voran plunged headlong into the deepwood. The strange light that was not the sun 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 gradually, in the middle of the clearing the white stag towered, almost man-high at the shoulder. Its antlers gleamed gold, so bright they competed with the sun.

Voran froze in place and adopted the deep, silent breathing pattern an old woodsman had 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 released his forehead and slid down the side of his nose, tickling him.

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

Something monstrous howled 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.

Never attack with anger, thought Voran, remembering his lessons in the warrior's seminary. If you do, you have already lost.

The wolf charged so suddenly that Voran nearly missed its attack. The deer flew higher than Voran thought possible, its golden antlers slamming the wolf's flank like a barbed mace. The wolf screamed, the sound ripping through Voran, forcing him to crumple over in shared pain.

The stag trotted to the other end of the clearing. Looking back once more, it waited. Gooseflesh tickled Voran's neck. The stag was calling to him, teasing him to continue the hunt. Voran rushed after him, and the deer launched off his 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, Voran turned back.

The wolf dragged itself with its forepaws, one black claw of which could easily slice Voran in two. As Voran approached, its ears went flat against its head and it growled deep in its throat. Voran's hands shook, but he balled them into fists and willed himself to

look the wolf in the eye. Its ears went up like an inquisitive dog, and it whined.

Voran saw recognition in its eyes. 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 Lebia’s own making—from a pouch on his quiver. Tearing a strip from his linen shirt, he soaked it with the oils. Gently he cleaned the wound. The wolf tensed in pain, then released a long breath of relief, eyes drooping 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 only felt on a rainy evening 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, his head bowed, his walk reticent. 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, calmly, deliberately. Voran’s heart raced at the ease of the kill, but the excitement died when the stag would not stop. He stared right at Voran as he strode, all but resigned to his fate. Voran gritted his teeth, pulled out an arrow, and notched it. The stag walked closer.

He could not do it. This beast was too noble, his eyes too knowing. Killing him would

be no better than killing a man.

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, he approached the stag. His hands shaking, he reached out to touch the antlers.

A rustle 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. She 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.

Voran had found his elusive singer. But now what was he supposed to do? In the Old Tales, it was never clear whether the Sirin were good or evil. In some stories, they were the protectors of the Three Cities, in others they were untamed beasts whose songs could drive men to fall on their own swords.

She opened her mouth and began to sing. It was the same melody he heard every morning, 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 earth, but raised him on a zephyr above the world's confusion. He was once again in the arms of his mother as she nursed him, her breath soft and tickling. He was inside the sun, and its music was weaving 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. He would never rest, never sleep until he found her again.