

Praznik na Vrani: Feast of crows

"Životnata sila na Kievan e i vo korenot i vo krvta. (The life force of Kievan is in both root and blood.)"

-Kievan Saying

Noma opened her hand slowly, allowing the handful of dirt she still held to fall through her fingers. It was the first day of Praznik na Vrani, or "Feast of crows," a time for celebration and harvest. The week-long festival symbolized her people's connection to Innatraea's forests. Their belief in Ciklusot, or "The Cycle," the ephemeral thing that governed birth, life, and death; that defined everything they were. That was the problem with tradition though, there was no place for the feelings of one specific woman. The dirt from her hand was gone, and now she could only see her soiled fingers through the tears blurring her vision, so she moved them and blinked. The watery salt of her grief fell to the ground also, along with the dirt, and the chaos of her emotions. This day was now another thing also, the day of her father's death. Most Kievan thought it best that he was gone now, Kashchei the mad had no place of value in their Innatraea, but he had still been her father.

Noma looked up from her father's grave, at the small forest clearing that was empty except for her, and followed the massive trunk of the Great Tree she'd chosen with her eyes until she saw clouds. Somewhere out there her father's spirit was making its journey to Kanraphim, the spirit world, and leaving Innatraea, their people's beliefs, and his daughter behind. She was Vesterka, a mistress of death, a guide for all Kievan. It was her responsibility to show her people their path through birth, life, and death; to help them lay their loved ones to rest. She looked around the empty clearing again, eyes filling with fresh tears. Where was her help? Where were the other



Vesterka? Where was the woman who was supposed to guide her through this grief and help her father join the cycle after he passed?

Her father had believed differently. To most Kievan only those who could birth life truly had the gift to understand Ciklusot. All Vesterka were women, it was their way, the very center of everything they believed. They called him mad, because he had sought power over Ciklusot as a man, worse he had found a way to wield krovcara, or "blood magic," as a man. He was damned, cursed and hated amongst all Kievan, but he was also the man who had raised her. The man Noma went to for comfort, advice, support, and love. Was she not Vesterka? Did she not deserve their support and love? They abandoned her to this grief because of her father? What did that make her in their eyes? What if her father had been right all along?

Noma blinked away more tears and wiped her eyes again as something moved through the nearby trees. She had to blink again to make sure she wasn't hallucinating from grief as it emerged to calmly look at her. The beautiful creature was still there when she opened her eyes though, a Katyogei, Sacred Folk that resembled a winged deer with the head of an owl. She gasped in shock and had to remind herself to breathe as it came closer, pausing to calmly look into her eyes again. It was tall, the stories about Katyogei didn't mention that, but the thing was easily twice her height. It took another few steps closer, its neck rotating at a strange angle as it lowered its head to regard her evenly. Noma reached out her hand slowly as it came even closer, its large eyes gleaming in the sun, seemingly full of light, emotion, and understanding.

The Katyogei touched her outstretched hand gently with its forehead, ruffling its feathers against her hand as it twisted about. Then it silently lifted its neck again, leaving her hand there, and regarded her. Noma, unsure of what to do, did not move. It took a few long strides back



towards the trees, then turned its long neck back towards her and released a few twittering chirps before disappearing the way it had come. She stood there staring at the trees nonplussed, lost in thought. Why had it come to her? She hadn't asked

Sumadusi for help, The Forest of Souls held great power, but only for things of monumental need; not the burial of one man regardless of how much his passing hurt her. Nor had she sought out the creature, and even if she had, very few Innatraeans were ever blessed with a Katyogei's presence. Had it sensed her need? Was something in her thoughts a clue to her future destiny?

Noma turned back to her father's grave, feeling her raw emotions anew. The grief of his loss and her sisters' abandonment of Noma to this fate. Was that the Katyogei's message? Kashchei had been a mad man to most Kievan, but to her he had always been a loving father in every way she needed. Her sisters were supposed to be that now. Her comfort, her solace, the voice she needed to hear, and the arms she needed to hold her. Noma placed her hands on the Great Tree before her, the one her father would feed from his passing through Ciklusot, and looked up at the sky again. The tears did not come this time, because something else took their place, resolve. Previously she had always believed that the Vesterka were her only road to power and that her father had been insane. What if that wasn't true? She didn't know, but she was going to find out, and if it ended up that they were lying to her she would make them pay.



Sovniya looked around the large clearing, named Proslava or "Celebration" by her people. It was a sacred place deep within Sumadusi, used for ceremonies, revelry, and feasting. She smiled quietly seeing the throngs of her people throughout it, happily singing, dancing, or eating. None of them would see her smile of course, it was covered by her sodiba, the owl mask that marked her position within Kievan society, and represented the wisdom she obtained through seeing ill omens. She was so used to the thing, she'd been amongst the Vesterka Carici or "Empresses of Death," her people's rulers for most of her life; that the thought of her face being invisible barely occurred to her anymore. Kajsema, who was standing near her, sensed the smile of course and quietly put a hand on her shoulder. They had been friends for their entire lives, since before they'd become what they were now, they even knew each other's old names, and were both ninth generation Vesterka Carici, many of their interactions no longer required words.

Then she shivered as a cold wind blew over her, she knew what fate felt like and something had just changed. Kajsema's hand tightened on her shoulder. "What is it?"

Unsettled Sovniya looked around the clearing, surveying faces and voices, searching for anything that would explain the cold she now felt. "Something..." Then she stopped turning her head as the feeling of cold seemed to coalesce around a figure that stepped into clearing across from them. It was a woman, and one she knew well, because there were only ever eighty one Vesterka within Kievan. Her name was Noma and she had just lost her father today, though it was not only the grief she expected to see in the woman's eyes. Sovniya gripped her friend's arm tightly for she now felt dread, Noma's eyes held grief yes, but there was also anger, hatred, and worst of all a primal resolve; the kind you saw in the eyes of a predator before it killed.



Sovniya was about to speak, but then she gasped as the Gatanje took her, that state of being where she could see glimpses of what the omens meant and hopefully divine their meaning. *Vines entangled Noma, dark tendrils that somehow represented the forest's desire to feed and its magic. They started to bleed at the roots, creating a lake of blood that consumed everyone in the large clearing, as a cloak of darkness surrounded the young woman leaving only her eyes, brightly shining hatred.* Gasping, Sovniya fell to one knee, holding her friend's hand for support as the visions faded and she tried to regain her composure.

Kajsema did not move her hand or make any motion at all, only spoke quietly so only they could hear. "What did you see?"

Sovniya finally recovering her breath, though not yet able to stand again, answered as she watched Noma move into the crowds of celebrating Kievan. "Dark hungering roots, a lake of blood, and hatred that will doom us all."

"She is Vesterka, even given the difficulties with her father I cannot believe she would harm Kievan. Are you certain?"

Sovniya pulled herself up with her friend's help. "I am certain of what I saw." She looked around the clearing but could not locate Noma again amongst the revelers. "As to why, or even if these things will come to pass I do not know."

Kajsema nodded sagely, it was the same as always, visions and omens never traveled in straight lines. "We will need to watch her carefully, to see the connections and discover her true nature."

"Yes, and we must tell the others what I saw." She caught sight of Noma again, at one of the bonfires in conversation with a small group



of Kievan. Was she taking solace in her friends for the loss of her father? Fulfilling her duty as Vesterka and guiding them in spiritual matters? Or planting the seeds of darkness?

“Do you think it wise to tell them now? You have told me before that things seen within Gatanje are not necessarily true. Maybe we should keep this to ourselves until we are certain?”

Sovniya was already turning away from the clearing to go find the other seven Vesterka Carici. “Normally I would agree with you. She is however Vesterka, and there is the anger surrounding her father's death to consider. We cannot ignore what I saw this time, they must know, too much is at risk.”

Kajsema turned to accompany her without argument. “Do you think we made a mistake in choosing to leave Noma alone for her father's passing?”

Sovniya sighed heavily. “I do not know. Being Vesterka she is our little sister in all things and deserves our support, but we could not help guide a blasphemer to Kanraphim.”

“It is a complicated web to unravel. Let us hope that Ciklusot is still in balance.”

“Indeed my friend, let us hope, yet plan for the worst.” Sovniya wanted to turn back one more time before they left, but she didn't for fear of what she would see there.

