



Koliada

Journey of Sorrow



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“The Danae people love life, celebration, and kindness. Their heart is the greatest strength they have.”

-Tavid the Traveler

The dark evening flickered with bonfire light.

Flames danced in great spiraling columns throughout the camp, casting long shadows that swayed like drunken lovers across the frost-touched grass. The smell of roasting meat and honeyed wine hung thick in the winter air, mingling with woodsmoke and the sharp green scent of pine boughs that the Danae had hung from every wagon and tent pole. Somewhere nearby, someone was playing a fiddle—a bright, quick melody that made the feet want to move and the heart want to forget, at least for tonight, that winter was long and the world was hard.

The man stood at the edge of the firelight, watching.

People were everywhere—dancing, singing, eating, drinking, and generally enjoying their existence with the fierce determination of those who knew that joy was not guaranteed. Many of the Danae were beautiful, their dark hair loose and threaded with ribbons, their eyes bright with ale and firelight, and he acknowledged the pleasure of gazing at them for a moment.

But his eyes were only on one woman tonight.



She moved through the dancers like water through stones—graceful, unhurried, *alive* in a way that made his chest ache. Her laugh carried across the celebration, warm and unselfconscious, and every time he heard it something inside him twisted tighter.

He couldn't believe that she would eventually give birth to his sister.

A twig snapped to his left.

He turned immediately, body tensing—and then relaxed as a small, lithe form materialized out of the darkness. He knew her shape the way he knew his own heartbeat. But one could never be sure who was listening, especially here, so he replied as though she were a stranger.

"You're a far ways from home, Shedon."

She laughed—that musical, soft lilt of hers that had been making him smile for longer than most people could comprehend. "You are also very far from home, farm boy. What are you doing here?"

His eyes sharpened at the name, scanning the shadows beyond her, and she laughed at him again.

"No one is listening. Besides, why would they care? We're just two old friends enjoying the evening, aren't we?" She lifted an ale mug and took a long draft, watching him over the rim with eyes that held centuries of patience, alongside mischief and humor—all Myrtle.

He nodded, though still not completely convinced. Secrecy had been his ally for a very long time, and old habits died harder than old enemies. "I am watching her. Making sure that things happen how they are supposed to."



Myrtle looked at him rather suspiciously—which, for her, was saying something. She had seen him do many things across many years, and very little surprised her anymore. "I hope you know what you're doing, farm boy."

He rolled his eyes in an exaggerated fashion, grateful for the familiar rhythm of her teasing. It made the weight in his chest slightly easier to bear. "Indeed. Do you see that woman dancing over there?"

He motioned with his head and Myrtle looked, her eyes finding the dark-haired woman in the blue dress who moved through the celebration like she owned the night.

"She's very pretty," Myrtle said, a mischievous smile curving her lips. "Do you fancy her?"

His eyes widened and she laughed even more—that deep, delighted sound that always made him feel like perhaps the world wasn't entirely made of sharp edges.

"No, that's not what I mean!" He shook his head, but he was almost smiling now. Almost. "She's going to give birth to a baby girl who's very important. In about a year."

He looked away for a moment, out into the dark beyond the firelight where the winter waited with its cold patience.

"I'm sad for what she has to go through. But some things have to happen in order to save us all."

The words tasted like ash in his mouth. True, but terrible. The kind of truth that made you understand why some people chose comfortable lies instead.



Myrtle's hand found his arm, her touch warm even through his sleeve. "That knowledge of yours must be heavy sometimes." Her voice had softened, the teasing gone. She knew him too well to pretend this was easy. "We should go join the party. You can watch her just as easily while dancing, instead of brooding by yourself in the dark."

He didn't move.

"You deserve one night of fun, farm boy. And besides—" She tugged at his arm, persistent as always. "—it's been forever since you and I danced."

A man came to join the woman he'd been watching.

Everything in him went still.

He knew that walk. Knew the casual arrogance of it, the easy charm that masked something rotten underneath. He knew the shape of those shoulders, the tilt of that head, the way those hands moved when they reached for something they wanted.

He knew, because he had spent years learning to hate every detail of the man who had—

His fists clenched. The rage came up hot and sudden, flooding his veins like poison, and for one terrible moment he wanted nothing more than to cross the distance between them and rip the man's throat out with his bare hands. For what he had done to his mother. For what he *would* do to this woman. For all the suffering that radiated out from this single charming, smiling monster like ripples from a stone dropped in still water.



But he couldn't.

Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

Because if he stopped this—if he changed it—then Aife would never exist. And without Aife...

Myrtle's hand tightened on his arm.

"Is that him?" Her voice was very quiet now. She wasn't looking at the man. She was looking at him, at the war playing out across his face, at the way his whole body had gone rigid with the effort of not moving.

"I'm sorry," she said. "This must be painful for you."

Painful.

The word was laughably inadequate. Like calling the ocean "damp." Like calling fire "warm."

But she knew that. She knew, and she was giving him the dignity of understatement, of not making him name the full scope of what he was feeling while he stood there watching his—

She hugged him.

It was sudden and fierce, her body pressing against his, her arms wrapping around him with a strength that had nothing to do with muscle. And then she kissed his cheek—soft, gentle, the kind of kiss that said *I see you, I'm here, you don't have to carry this alone.*

"We can dance another time," she murmured against his ear. "I'm sure we will see each other again."



For a long moment, he just stood there. Breathing. Letting her hold him. Letting the rage recede enough that he could think again, could remember why he was here, could remember that some things had to happen even when they shouldn't.

Especially when they shouldn't.

He sighed and let the tension go. He was doing the right thing. The only thing. Even if it felt like swallowing broken glass.

"We should go dance," he said finally. His voice was rough, but steady. "It has been a very long time. I've missed our talks."

Myrtle stepped back and ruffled his hair affectionately, the way she always did—like he was still the farm boy she'd met all those years ago, before he'd learned how heavy knowledge could be.

"What do they call you here?"

She grinned. "Having different names everywhere is way too much work for me. I'm Myrtle here, like everywhere."

She laughed at his startlement—he was always startled by her boldness, even after all this time—then raised an eyebrow at him.

"What about you?"

"Elwin."

Myrtle started laughing immediately. Not a polite laugh, not a small laugh—a deep, genuine belly laugh that made her bend over double, her whole body shaking with mirth.



"I thought it sounded normal and forgettable," he protested, though he could feel the corners of his own mouth twitching. "I am trying to stay unnoticed."

She finally stood back up and wiped her eyes, which were still twinkling. "You are probably right. That name is so moronic no one will remember it."

He started laughing too. He couldn't help it. Myrtle had a way of bringing that out of him—of finding the lightness even in the darkest moments, of reminding him that joy and sorrow could exist in the same breath.

"Come on," he said, raising his hand. "Let's go dance."

She took it, setting her mug of ale down on a nearby tree stump, and a smile of pure joy lit up her face.

They chose a spot near the woman he'd been watching.

The music had shifted to something slower now, a melody that wound through the crowd like smoke, pulling dancers together in pairs and small groups. He kept Niomh in his peripheral vision as he and Myrtle moved together, their bodies remembering the rhythm of dances they'd shared across more years than most people lived.

"What's her name?" Myrtle asked as they turned. "And why are you watching her?"

"Her name is Niomh." He said it carefully, like handling something fragile. "And she's incredibly important for everything that's going to happen. Even more so, her daughter will be important."



Myrtle wiggled her eyebrows at him. "Her daughter? She doesn't look pregnant."

He laughed despite himself and caught her in his arms, spinning her around him the way they'd done a hundred times before in a hundred different places.

"The man she's dancing with will be the father."

A note of seriousness entered her eyes. The playfulness didn't disappear—with Myrtle, it never fully disappeared—but something deeper rose beneath it.

"That means the baby is going to be your sister, doesn't it?"

He nodded, and for a moment the joy he felt was genuine, untainted by the grief that ran beneath it.

"She is. I can't wait for you to meet her. She's so beautiful, strong, and intelligent."

He felt the sadness close in again for a few heartbeats. The weight of knowing. The terrible privilege of having seen what was coming.

"But her mother has to go on her journey of sorrow first."

Myrtle looked at him—*really* looked at him, the way only someone who had known you for centuries could look.

"That's why you're actually here, isn't it?"

She glanced at Niomh, who was still dancing with the man. Still laughing. Still looking at him like he was the answer to a question she hadn't known she was asking.



"I saw the way she looks at him," Myrtle said softly. "You don't have to do anything here. You're just watching and getting all muddled up inside because you're you."

She pulled him closer as the music slowed further, her cheek against his, her voice gentle.

"You're here to witness it. To carry it. Even though no one asked you to."

He didn't answer. He didn't have to.

She kissed him on the cheek again as they swayed together, and he laid his forehead against hers, breathing in the familiar scent of her—pine and woodsmoke and something indefinably *Myrtle*.

"I don't like seeing people I care about getting hurt," he said quietly. "Especially my family. Those I love."

"I know, farm boy." Her hand found the back of his neck, steadying him. "But we live in the real world. Love always comes with pain too."

She looked into his eyes—ancient eyes in a young face, holding more sorrow than anyone should have to carry.

"How will her daughter be so important?"

He finally smiled a little. This part, at least, was worth the weight.

"She will be a Weaver. A strong one."

Myrtle blinked a few times, processing, and then she laughed—surprised and delighted, the way she always was when pieces fell into place.



"I just realized something! They're the woman and child on the ship, aren't they?"

He nodded and looked at Niomh again.

She was kissing the man now.

They held each other close, dancing slowly, two people at the beginning of something that felt like love. Her hands were in his hair. His arms were wrapped around her waist. They looked like any other couple at the celebration—young, hopeful, certain that the world was kind enough to let them keep this.

He watched them, and felt everything at once.

Sadness for what she would lose.

Love for the sister who would come from this pain.

Happiness that Aife would exist, would *matter*, would help save them all.

And sorrow—deep, bottomless sorrow—for every terrible thing that had to happen first.

Myrtle's hand found his and squeezed.

"She is indeed," he said quietly, watching Niomh smile against the mouth of the man who would break her. "Everything Rosalie becomes depends on those two."

The music played on.

The fires burned bright against the winter dark.



And somewhere in the celebration, a woman who didn't know what was coming fell in love with a man who didn't deserve her.

He watched.

He witnessed.

He carried it.

Because some things had to happen.

Even when they shouldn't.

