





# Praznik na Vrani

Feast of Crows



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"Životnata sila na Kievan e i vo korenot i vo krvta.

The life force of Kievan is in both root and blood."

-Kievan Saying

**N**oma opened her hand slowly, allowing the handful of dirt to fall through her fingers.

It was dark soil, rich with centuries of decay, the kind that only formed in the deepest parts of Sumadusi where the Great Trees grew so thick that sunlight never touched the ground. It smelled of rot and life intertwined—the essence of Ciklusot made manifest. The Cycle. Birth, life, death, rebirth. Everything the Kievan believed, everything they were, distilled into a handful of loam slipping through a grieving daughter's fingers.

The last of it fell, and Noma was left staring at her soiled palm, her vision blurring with tears she refused to let fall.

It was the first day of Praznik na Vrani.

The Feast of Crows. A week-long celebration of harvest and connection, when her people honored the forest that sustained them and the cycle that gave their lives meaning. Somewhere beyond this clearing, the rest of Kievan were gathering in Proslava, the great ceremonial space where bonfires would burn and voices would rise in the old songs. There would be feasting and dancing, the telling of stories, the blessing of the harvest. Children would run laughing through the trees while their elders poured libations into the soil and gave thanks.





Noma was alone.

She blinked, and the tears she'd been holding back escaped down her cheeks, falling to join the dirt at her feet. Her grief and the soil of her father's grave, mingled together. Perhaps that was fitting. He had always said that the soil remembered everything—every tear, every drop of blood, every whispered prayer. The forest kept records that no Vesterka could read.

Her father had said many things that the Vesterka did not approve of.

She looked up from the fresh grave, following the massive trunk of the Great Tree she'd chosen until her eyes found sky. It was an ancient thing, this tree—older than the Kievan themselves, its bark carved with symbols that no living person could interpret. Its roots went deep, drinking from underground springs that connected to every other Great Tree in Sumadusi. When her father's body returned to the soil, this tree would drink him too. His essence would travel through those roots, spreading through the entire forest, becoming part of everything.

That was the Kievan way. That was Ciklusot.

But his spirit—that was supposed to journey to Kanraphim, the realm beyond the veil, where the dead found peace. And a Vesterka was supposed to guide it there.

Noma looked around the empty clearing, fresh tears burning her eyes.

Where were her sisters?

She was Vesterka herself—a mistress of death, trained since childhood to guide her people through the passages of birth, life, and dying. She knew the rituals. She knew the words. She could have performed them alone if she'd had to.





But she wasn't supposed to have to.

When a Vesterka lost someone she loved, the others came. That was the sacred compact between them. They were sisters in service, bound by oaths older than memory. When one of them grieved, the others held her. When one of them faltered, the others carried her. When one of them buried her father—

They were supposed to be here.

The clearing remained empty. No footsteps in the undergrowth. No voices calling her name. No arms to hold her while she wept.

They had abandoned her.

Because of him.

Noma's jaw tightened as she stared at the fresh mound that covered her father's body. Kashchei. That was the name they'd given him—not his birth name, which had been erased from all records, but the name of condemnation. It meant "the deathless one," and they'd meant it as a curse. A mockery. A man who sought power over death when only women could truly understand Ciklusot.

To most Kievan, only those who could birth life had the gift to comprehend its end. All Vesterka were women. It was their way, the center of everything they believed. A man practicing krovcara—blood magic—was not just forbidden. It was blasphemy. It was madness.

They called him Kashchei the Mad.

But he had called her ptashka, "little bird."





The memory rose unbidden—her father's voice, warm and low, calling to her across the years. *Come here, little bird. Let me show you something.* She had been six years old, maybe seven, and he had been kneeling in his garden, his hands buried in the soil. She had run to him without hesitation, because that was what she did. He was her father. He was safety and warmth and the smell of herbs and the sound of laughter.

*What is it, Tata?*

*Watch.* He had pulled his hands from the earth, and in his cupped palms, a seedling was growing. Not slowly, the way plants were supposed to grow, but visibly—unfurling leaves, stretching toward the sun, becoming more with every heartbeat. *Do you see, ptashka? Life and death are the same thing. One cannot exist without the other. The Vesterka understand death, but they fear life. They fear what it means to hold both.*

She had watched the seedling grow into a flower, white petals opening like a tiny miracle in her father's hands.

*Is that krovcara, Tata?*

*No, ptashka. This is love. Krovcara is just the word frightened people use for things they don't understand.*

He had tucked the flower behind her ear and kissed her forehead, and she had felt like the most precious thing in all of Innatraea.

The memory faded, leaving Noma alone in the clearing with a handful of dirt on her palm and an ache in her chest that felt like it might swallow her whole.





He had been mad to most Kievan. Cursed. Damned. Hated.

But he had raised her with gentle hands and patient words. He had held her when she cried and celebrated when she succeeded. He had taught her to read the patterns in tree bark and to hear the whispers of the forest. He had been proud of her when she was chosen as Vesterka, even though it meant she would be taught to condemn everything he believed.

*I will always love you, ptashka. No matter what they teach you to think of me.*

And she had loved him back. Even when the other Vesterka looked at her with suspicion. Even when they whispered that she carried her father's taint. Even when they made it clear that her place among them was provisional, contingent on her proving that she was not like him.

She had tried so hard to prove it.

And now he was dead, and she was alone, and her sisters had abandoned her because they could not bring themselves to guide a blasphemer to Kanraphim.

*Was I not enough? The thought cut through her grief like a blade. Did my years of faithful service mean nothing? Am I still just Kashchei's daughter to them?*

She was Vesterka. She deserved their support. She deserved their love.

But they had given her neither.





And now, kneeling in the dirt beside her father's grave, Noma felt something shift inside her. A question she had never allowed herself to ask was rising to the surface, demanding an answer.

What if her father had been right all along?

A sound in the trees made her freeze.

Something was moving through the forest. Not a person—the footfalls were wrong, too light and too strange. Not a normal animal either. Noma rose slowly to her feet, her heart suddenly pounding, her Vesterka training screaming at her to identify the threat.

Then it emerged from the shadows, and her breath stopped entirely.

A Katyogei.

She had heard stories, of course. Every Kievan child grew up hearing tales of the Sacred Folk who dwelt in the deepest parts of Sumadusi. The Katyogei were among the rarest—winged deer with the heads of great owls, creatures of immense spiritual significance. To see one was a blessing. To be approached by one was... she didn't know what it was. The stories never covered that.

The creature was larger than she had imagined. The tales spoke of deer-sized beings, but this Katyogei stood easily twice her height, its body powerful and graceful, its wings folded against its flanks like banked thunderclouds. Its owl face turned toward her with a slow, deliberate movement, and its eyes—

They were like looking into the sun through deep water. Golden and luminous, ancient beyond comprehension, filled with a light that seemed to see through her skin and into the very core of her being.





Noma forgot to breathe.

The Katyogei took a step toward her. Then another. Its hooves made very little sound on the forest floor, as though it existed slightly apart from the physical world. Its feathered head tilted, rotating at an angle that should have been impossible, studying her with that penetrating gaze.

*What does it see?* she wondered. *My grief? My anger? My father's blood in my veins?*

Without conscious decision, she raised her hand.

The Katyogei came closer still, moving with a patience that felt like ceremony. When it was near enough to touch, it lowered its great head and pressed its feathered forehead against her outstretched palm.

The contact was magic, like lightning or thunder.

Images flooded through her—not visions exactly, but *feelings* given form. Roots spreading through dark soil. Blood flowing through living veins. The forest breathing, one vast organism connected by systems too complex for mortal minds to comprehend. Life and death intertwined, inseparable, each giving meaning to the other.

*Your father understood*, something seemed to whisper, though the Katyogei made no sound. *The cycle is not what they taught you.*

Then the creature lifted its head, leaving her hand suspended in empty air, and regarded her once more. Its eyes held something that might have been compassion. Or might have been challenge.





It turned and walked back toward the trees, its movements unhurried. At the forest's edge, it paused and looked back at her, releasing a series of soft twittering chirps—almost musical, almost like language.

Then it was gone.

Noma stood frozen, her hand still raised, her mind reeling.

Why had it come to her? She hadn't prayed to Sumadusi. She hadn't sought the Sacred Folk. Even if she had, the Katyogei chose their own paths—they did not come simply because someone wished for them.

Had it sensed her need? Had something in her grief called out to powers she didn't understand?

Or had it seen something else in her? Something growing? Something her father had planted long ago, waiting for the right moment to unfurl?

Slowly, Noma lowered her hand and turned back to face the grave.

The grief was still there. The loss of her father was a wound that would never fully heal. But something else was growing alongside it now—something harder, sharper. The tears that had been threatening to fall seemed to have dried up, replaced by a heat in her chest that felt almost like anger.

No. Not almost.

It was anger.

Her sisters had abandoned her. The Vesterka who were supposed to be her family, her support, her guides through this darkness—they had left her alone because her father's beliefs made them uncomfortable. They had punished her for his choices. They had proven that their sisterhood was conditional, their love contingent on her conformity.





And now a Katyogei had come to her. A Sacred Folk creature of immense spiritual power had sought her out, touched her, shown her something that felt like truth.

*The cycle is not what they taught you.*

Noma placed her hands on the Great Tree's bark, feeling the life pulsing within it. Somewhere in this forest, her sisters were celebrating. Dancing. Feasting. Honoring Ciklusot while she stood alone in the dirt with her father's body.

She looked up at the sky one last time.

The tears did not come.

Resolve did.

She didn't know yet what her father had truly discovered. She didn't know if the Vesterka had lied to her, or simply failed to understand. But she was going to find out. She was going to learn everything her father had learned, follow every path he had walked, uncover every secret he had died protecting.

And if it turned out that her sisters had been lying to her—if it turned out that they had kept her from the truth out of fear or jealousy or simple small-minded adherence to tradition—

She would make them pay.

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Sovniya surveyed the great clearing of Proslava and allowed herself a hidden smile.

No one would see it, of course. Her sodiba covered her face completely—the owl mask that marked her position among the Vesterka Carici, carved from sacred wood and painted with symbols of wisdom and foresight. She had worn it for so long that she sometimes forgot what her own face looked like. The mask had become her face, in a way. The symbol had consumed the woman.

But beneath the mask, she was still capable of joy.

And there was much to be joyful about tonight.

Proslava was alive with celebration. The clearing stretched wide and ancient at the heart of Sumadusi, ringed by Great Trees whose canopies formed a natural cathedral overhead. Bonfires blazed at regular intervals, their flames casting dancing shadows across hundreds of faces. The smell of roasting meat and fresh bread filled the air, mingling with the sweeter scents of honeyed wine and autumn flowers.

Her people moved through the celebration like water finding its course. Children chased each other between the bonfires, their laughter rising like music. Young couples stole moments in the shadows between firelight, their whispered words promises of futures yet to unfold. Elders sat in places of honor, their weathered faces soft with memory as they watched the next generation carry forward traditions older than stone.

The harvest had been good this year. The forest had provided abundantly, and now the Kievan gave thanks in the way they always had—with food and fire and song.





A hand touched her shoulder, warm and familiar.

Kajsema.

Sovniya didn't need to turn to know it was her. They had been friends since before either of them wore masks—since they were young girls learning the first mysteries of Ciklusot together, sharing secrets and dreams in the darkness between lessons. They had risen through the ranks of the Vesterka side by side, had taken their places among the Carici in the same ceremony, had held each other through grief and celebrated each other's triumphs for more decades than Sovniya cared to count.

There were only ever nine Vesterka Carici—the Empresses of Death, the highest authority among the Kievan. They were the ninth generation of their bloodlines to hold these masks, which meant new women would hold the masks after they were both gone. New inheritors of a lineage that stretched back to the founding of their people. Of all her fellow Carici, Kajsema was the only one who truly knew her. The only one who remembered her old name.

"The celebration goes well," Kajsema said quietly, her voice carrying only to Sovniya's ears.

"It does." Sovniya let her gaze drift across the clearing, watching a group of young Vesterka performing the traditional blessing over a table laden with the first fruits of the harvest. "Ciklusot turns, and we turn with it."

"You sound almost peaceful."

"Almost." The smile beneath her mask faded slightly. "There is always something, isn't there? Some shadow at the edge of the firelight."





Kajsema's hand tightened on her shoulder, a silent question.

And then the cold came.

It swept over Sovniya like a wind from an open grave—not physical cold, but something deeper. Something that touched the part of her that could see beyond the veil of the present moment. She knew this feeling. She had felt it perhaps a dozen times in her long life, and each time it had heralded something terrible.

Fate had shifted. Something had changed.

"What is it?" Kajsema's voice was sharp now, alert.

Sovniya was already scanning Proslava, searching for the source of the disturbance. Her eyes moved over faces and bodies, seeking anything that might explain the dread that was coiling in her stomach.

Then she found it.

A figure was stepping into the clearing out of the forest—a woman, young, her face uncovered and her eyes red from recent weeping. Sovniya knew her immediately. There were only ever eighty-one Vesterka among the Kievan, and she made it her business to know each one.

Noma.

Kashchei's daughter.

The girl who had buried her father today, alone, because the Carici had decided that no Vesterka could guide a blasphemer's spirit to Kanraphim.





Sovniya had agreed with that decision. Had argued for it, even. Kashchei had been dangerous—his experiments with krovcara threatened the very foundations of what it meant to be Kievan. To honor him with the traditional rites would have been to validate everything he had stood for.

But looking at Noma now, watching her step into the firelight with grief carved into every line of her face, Sovniya felt the first stirring of doubt.

The girl's eyes were wrong.

Grief, yes—that was expected, that was understandable. But beneath the grief there was something else. Something harder and colder. Anger, barely contained. Hatred, perhaps. And beneath that—

Resolve.

The kind of resolve Sovniya had seen only a handful of times in her life. The kind that preceded great change. The kind that burned in the eyes of those who had decided to tear down the world and build something new from its ashes.

"Sovniya." Kajsema's voice was urgent now. "What do you see?"

She tried to answer, but the words wouldn't come.

Because the Gatanje was taking her.

It came without warning, as it always did—that altered state of consciousness where the boundaries between present and future grew thin as gossamer. Her vision split, doubled, showing her both the celebration before her and something else. Something that hadn't happened yet but was reaching back through time to make itself known.





She saw Noma standing at the center of a vast web of roots—but they weren't roots, not really. They were tendrils of power, dark and hungry, spreading through the soil of Sumadusi like a cancer. They pulsed with stolen life, growing stronger with each heartbeat, drinking deep from sources that should never have been tapped.

She saw blood.

So much blood.

It welled up from the ground like water from a spring, filling the clearing of Proslava, rising past ankles and knees and waists. The celebrating Kievan tried to run, but the blood caught them, held them, pulled them down. Their screams echoed through the forest as they drowned in crimson.

And at the center of it all stood Noma.

But not the Noma she knew. This Noma was wrapped in shadows that moved like living things, darkness made manifest and draped across her shoulders like a mantle of power, where crows perched like guardians. Her eyes blazed with a light that was somehow also darkness—a terrible radiance that saw everything and forgave nothing.

She was smiling.

*This is what you made me, that smile said. This is what you created when you left me alone.*

Then the vision collapsed, and Sovniya found herself on one knee, gasping for breath, Kajsema's hands on her shoulders keeping her from falling further.

"Sovniya!" Her friend's voice was tight with fear. "What did you see?"





It took several breaths before she could speak. Her heart was racing, her hands trembling, her mind still reeling from the horror of what she had witnessed.

"Dark hungering roots," she managed at last. "A lake of blood. And hatred that will doom us all."

Kajsema was silent for a long moment. When she spoke again, her voice was carefully controlled.

"Her? You're certain?"

Sovniya lifted her head, searching the clearing until she found Noma again. The young Vesterka had moved into the crowd, was standing near one of the bonfires, speaking with a small group of Kievan. From this distance, she looked almost normal. Just a grieving woman seeking comfort among her people.

But Sovniya could still see the shadow of what she would become.

"I am certain of what I saw," she said. "As to why, or even if these things will come to pass... that I do not know."

Kajsema helped her to her feet. "She is Vesterka. One of us. Even given the difficulties with her father, I cannot believe she would truly harm Kievan."

"I pray you are right." Sovniya steadied herself, forcing her trembling to stop through sheer will. "But we must tell the others what I have seen."

"Now? During the festival?" Kajsema hesitated. "You have told me before that things seen within Gatanje are not necessarily true. They are possibilities, not certainties. Perhaps we should keep this to ourselves until we are certain?"





It was reasonable counsel. Under normal circumstances, Sovniya would have agreed. Visions were tricky things—they showed what might be, not what must be. To act on them too quickly was to risk creating the very future you sought to prevent.

But she could not shake the feeling that this was different.

"Normally I would agree with you," she said. "She is Vesterka, and we should not condemn her for things she has not yet done. But there is the anger surrounding her father's death to consider. The isolation she must be feeling." She paused, choosing her next words carefully. "We left her alone today, Kajsema. We abandoned Noma to her grief because we could not bring ourselves to guide Kashchei's spirit to Kanraphim."

The unspoken question hung between them: *What if we created this?*

"We must tell the others," Sovniya said again, more firmly this time. "Too much is at risk. If there is even a chance that what I saw could come to pass, the Carici need to know."

Kajsema nodded slowly. "Then we go now?"

"Now."

They turned away from the celebration, moving toward the private grove where the other Carici would be gathered. But Sovniya could not resist one final glance back at the clearing.

Noma was still standing by the bonfire. From this distance, her face was unreadable. She might have been taking solace in her friends. She might have been fulfilling her duties as Vesterka, offering guidance and comfort to those who sought it.





Or she might have been planting seeds.

"Do you think we made a mistake?" Kajsema asked quietly as they walked. "Leaving Noma alone for her father's passing?"

Sovniya sighed. It was a question she had been asking herself since the moment the cold had touched her.

"I do not know. Being Vesterka, she is our little sister in all things and deserves our support. But we could not guide a blasphemer to Kanraphim. To do so would have been to validate everything Kashchei believed."

"And yet, by refusing..."

"Yes." Sovniya's voice was heavy. "By refusing, we may have pushed her toward the very path we feared."

They walked in silence for a moment, the sounds of celebration fading behind them.

"It is a complicated web to unravel," Kajsema said at last. "Let us hope that Ciklusot is still in balance."

"Indeed, my friend." Sovniya thought of the vision—the roots, the blood, the terrible smile on Noma's face. "Let us hope. Yet plan for the worst."

She wanted to turn back one more time before the celebration disappeared from view. Wanted to look at Noma again, to search for some sign that the future she had seen could still be averted.

But she didn't.

She was afraid of what she might see there.

