

I first saw you when you rode out of the forest, past the cluster of tall, bulge-eyed offering stakes that mark the edges of the forest, your horse at a walk. You rode beside Mawat, himself a familiar sight to me; tall, broad-shouldered, long hair in dozens of braids pulled back in a broad ring, feathers worked in repousse on gold, his dark gray cloak lined with blue silk. More gold weighted his forearms. He was smiling vaguely, saying something to you, but his eyes were on the fortress of Vastai on its small peninsula, still some twelve miles off: a few two and three story buildings surrounded by a pale yellow limestone wall, the ends of which met at a round tower at the edge of the sea. On the landward side of the wall sat a town's worth of buildings interrupted by a bank and ditch. Gulls coasted over the few bare-masted ships in the harbor beside the fortress, and the gray water beyond, flecked white with the wind, and here and there a sail. The white stone buildings and more numerous ships of Ard Vuskitia were just visible on the far side of the strait.

Mawat--and Vastai--I knew, but I had not seen you before, and so I looked closely. Slight, and shorter than Mawat--it would be a wonder if you were not, the residents of Vastai eat so much better so much more regularly than the peasant farmers who were your likely origins. I suspected another reason, but at such a distance I could not be sure. You had cut your hair close to your scalp, a single arm ring and the haft of the knife at your side the only gold on you, your trousers, shirt, boots, and cloak solid and sturdy, all dull greens and browns. The hilt of your sword was wood wrapped with leather, undecorated. You sat stiff in the saddle, even at a walk. Possibly because you'd woken early to a summons and then ridden for three days with only what rest the horses required, and likely before you became a soldier you had very little experience riding.

"Is that Vastai?" you asked. "It doesn't look as large as I'd imagined." You winced then, and tensed in the saddle. It's difficult to guard your speech when you're sore and exhausted, isn't it. "I mean...it's still so far away. My lord."

Mawat gave a quick laugh. "It always looks smaller when I come back from somewhere," he said. "We've made good time, it seems, and the Instrument is still with us, or there'd be black flags on the tower, and lots of movement in the tower yard. And even if there were, we don't have to rush now. It would be easier for you--and the horses for that matter--if we went the rest of the way at a walk, I think." And then, at the expression on your face, "What is it?"

"It's just," you took a breath. It's clear that you trust him, more than you trust a lot of other people in the world, or I suspect you wouldn't have been there, riding beside him. And you must have concluded that he trusts you. Though perhaps his is a more confident trust, he had so much power over you, and you none over him. "My lord, people usually don't just...talk about that." People generally don't, even in Vastai. The Raven's Lease himself does, and his heir, and his close family.

And their servants, of course. People so often forget the servants.

"I haven't said anything secret," said Mawat, "or anything I'm not allowed to say."

Was it strange to hear him talk of his father's impending death so blithely? For the death of the Raven's Lease of Iraden would be the necessary consequence of the Instrument's death. And as heir, Mawat would step into his father's place, commit himself to die when the next Raven's Instrument died. Mawat's father's rule as Raven's Lease had fallen less harshly on the common people of Iraden than it might have. Which wasn't to say he'd been particularly generous, or the peasantry noticeably happy during his tenure, but he could have been worse, and

a new Lease was an unknown quantity. Accordingly, the people of Iraden generally only spoke of Mawat's father to wish him long life. You're young enough for that to have been as long as you've been alive.

You both rode for a while in silence, sheep-dotted fields to either side of the road, two ravens high above, swooping and soaring, black shapes in the blue of the sky. Mawat frowning as you rode, until finally he said, "Eolo."

You looked at him, your expression wary. "My lord."

"I know I promised I wouldn't pry. But when I'm Lease, I'll be able to ask for things. I mean, anyone can, but there's always a question of whether or not the Raven will listen, and there's always a price. The Raven will at least hear me out, and the price is already paid. Or it will be. I can ask for some extra favors. The Raven is a powerful god. He could...he could make it so you could..." he gestured vaguely. "So you could be who you are."

"I already am who I am," you snapped. "My lord." And after a few moments of silence, "That's not why I'm here."

"No, it's not," replied Mawat, affronted, and then recollecting himself. "You're here because that's not why you're here." He gave an apologetic smile. "And also because I ordered you out of your bed and into the saddle. And you've ridden three days without complaining, even though you're not much of a rider and I know you must be sore by now."

After a while you said, "I don't know if that's something I want."

"No?" asked Mawat, with surprise. "But why wouldn't you? It would be more convenient for you, if nothing else. You wouldn't have to trouble yourself with bindings under your shirt, or hiding anything." And when you didn't answer, "Ah, now I *am* prying."

"Yes, my lord," you said, voice tense despite the mildness of your tone.

Mawat laughed. "I'll stop, then. But if you decide...well."

"Yes, my lord," you replied again. Still tense. You rode the rest of the way to Vastai in silence.

#

Vastai is small compared to cities like Kybal, source of the silk in Mawat's cloak. Or far-off Therete, that probably no one in Iraden has even heard of. Or Xulah for that matter, that wide-conquering city in the warm and arid south. Compared to these cities--compared, even, to Ard Vuskta across the strait--Vastai is no more than a town.

But no matter its size, Vastai has paved streets, and strict laws about the placement of wells and latrines, and the disposal of refuse. This is just common sense, of course, but more than one small god has built a reputation as a mighty vanquisher of disease while spending no power whatsoever, merely by advising worshipers to refrain from shitting near their drinking water, and suggesting they wash their hands once in a while. It's amazing how many problems can be solved by such practical means. Less amazing how many gods then take credit for it, and grow strong and powerful with prayers and sacrifices as a result.

You rode behind Mawat through the narrow stone-paved streets of Vastai town. People in homespun dull greens and browns, and even one or two in brighter, finer clothing cleared out of your way, pressed themselves against the yellow limestone walls without a word, looking down at their feet. You would have no cause to realize this, but the streets of the town were far more empty than they ought to have been, given the unseasonably warm, sunny day, given boats in the harbor.

Mawat didn't seem to notice. I think he had been tense and uneasy since before you both

rode out of the forest, though he concealed it. Now I thought his mood sharpened, his thoughts bent inexorably to his double-edged purpose in coming here: to see his father die, to step into his father's place. He did not stop or slow, or turn to see if you followed him, but rode, still at a walk, down the main, widest street of the town and, unchallenged, through the broad fortress gates and into the tower yard. You started as a raven swooped down to land on the pommel of your saddle.

"Don't worry," said Mawat. "It's not him."

The raven made a churring sound. "Hello," it said. "Hello."

As you stared at the bird, Mawat dismounted. Servants ran forward to take his horse. He looked up at you and gestured you down, so that other servants could take yours. "Glad to be out of the saddle?" he asked as you dismounted, his voice good-humored, a smile on his face, but an edge to it.

"Yes, my lord," you said, with a small frown. The raven sat placid as the servants led your horse away. I thought you were going to ask some question, but then a flurry of green and red silk caught your eye, and you turned your head to watch a tall woman stride by with a basket of carded wool on her head.

"Oho," said Mawat, watching you watch her go by, her skirts swirling with the briskness of her walk. "Someone caught your eye?"

"Who is the lady?" you asked. And then, perhaps covering your discomfiture, "She seems very..." You failed to complete the sentence.

"She *is* very," Mawat replied. "That's Tikaz. She's Radihaw's daughter."

You knew that name, likely it had been in Mawat's mouth more than once since you'd met him and besides, it's likely nearly everyone in Iraden has heard of the lord Radihaw, the

senior member of the Council of the Directions, the highest ranking of all the advisors to the Raven's Lease. One of the most powerful men in all of Iraden. "Oh," you replied.

Mawat made a short, amused noise. "We've been friends more or less since we were children. Her father has never given up hope that I might marry her, or at least get her pregnant so he can have a chance at a grandson on the Lease's bench. I'll be honest, I wouldn't mind. But Tikaz..." He gestured, perhaps waving away some thought. "Tikaz will do as she pleases. Let's go to the hall and see if we can..."

He was brought up short by a servant in the loose black overshirt of a Tower attendant. "Lord Mawat, if you please," said the servant, bowing. "The Lease desires your presence."

"Of course," Mawat replied, with slightly forced geniality. You frowned, and then, likely realizing that here in Vastai you would need to watch every word, every twitch of expression, you put on a look of bland inoffensiveness. "Come with me," Mawat said to you, shortly. Not a question, not a request. He did not wait for your response but turned and strode across the pale yellow stones of the tower yard. And of course you followed him.

#

The Raven Tower is only a tower in comparison with any other nearby building. It stands on the farthest point of the tiny peninsula on which the fortress of Vastai is built, three broad, circular stories of the same yellow stone the rest of the fortress is built of, its roof surrounded by a parapet. A single broad entrance on the windowless ground floor, through which you followed Mawat. The guards flanking the door did not look at him, didn't move as you both strode in. The ground floor was paved with yet more yellow stone strewn with mats of woven rushes, a single guard standing at the foot of the stairs that ran up the curving wall to the next floor. He raised a hand to halt you both but Mawat ignored him, and strode up the stairs, face forward, shoulders

square, stepping determinedly but not hurriedly. You trailed behind, glancing back at the hapless guard, some fellow-feeling perhaps for his dilemma, but you turned to face Mawat again after only a moment. As you ascended your frown occasionally showed through your carefully blank expression. You didn't grow up surrounded by the sort of maneuvering that's so common in Vastai, you clearly hadn't had much practice at it, though I'd say you were doing a creditable job, all things considered.

There is a sound in the tower, a constant low, barely audible vibration. Not everyone hears it. I thought maybe you did--you looked down at your worn boots, then toward the wall to your right, tilted your head just the slightest bit as though trying to catch some faint noise. Then the stairs reached a landing, and you came up into the wide round chamber on the next level, and Mawat took three steps into the room and then abruptly stopped.

Here was a dais. A wooden bench, carved with a jumble of figures, stylized reliefs of leaves and wings. Beside the bench knelt a man in a gray silk tunic embroidered with red. On the other side of the bench stood a woman in dark blue robes, her thick gray hair cut short. A man sat on the bench between them, wearing all white--white shirt, white leggings, white cloak, the sort and amount of perfect, unstained white that can only be achieved by a god's intervention, or else the labor of dozens of servants with no other work than bleaching and laundering.

No doubt you assumed that the man on the bench was the Raven's Lease himself. No one else would have dared sit in that seat, not and survived the attempt. Every Iradeni knows that sitting on that bench--and living--is the last, final proof of the Raven's acceptance of a new Lease. You had never seen it before, but you surely recognized it the moment you set eyes on it.

Likely you knew who the kneeling man was by the angular lines of his face, having seen his daughter just minutes before, but even if that didn't tell you, you would certainly have

realized that this was the lord Radihaw of the Council of Directions. Who else would be so close to the Lease? And the woman, then, would be Zezume, of the Silent. Away from Vastai, meetings of the Silent are little more than an occasion for gossip and feasting by the old women of the area, but they began as a secret religious association. Those village sessions of the Silent still include rites meant to feed and propitiate gods long absent from Iraden. In Vastai, though, the Silent have an essential role to play in the affairs of the Raven's Lease.

Before the dais, facing the Lease, stood three Xulahns, bare-legged, in short cloaks and tunics and open-toed boots. A fourth person, dressed more sensibly in jacket and trousers, was speaking to the Lease. "Only to cross the strait, good and generous one. It is only these three Xulahns and their servants, who have come from the far south on their way to the north."

"That is a long journey," observed the lord Radihaw. "And there is nothing in the north but ice and stone."

"They wish to see places they have never seen," said the person in jacket and trousers. "When they have seen enough, if they do not die first, they will return home and write down an account of their travels, for which they expect to receive the esteem of their fellow Xulahns."

You were watching this, staring by turns at the white-clad Lease, and at the party of half-dressed Xulahns. You'd surely already heard of Xulah. Every now and then goods from Xulah will make their way over the mountains, into the hands of the Tel. Or onto a ship. Any sizeable ship sailing between the Shoulder Sea and the Northern Ocean must pass through the strait, and must perforce pay a fee to the ruler of Iraden and Ard Vuskta. So the Lease, and the Council of Directions, and the prominent members of the Silent, wore silk, drank wine, and even, on occasion, ate figs preserved in jars of honey.

Mawat also stared. Not at the Xulahns, but fixedly at the Lease himself, and then

blinking, disbelieving, at Radihaw and, frowning, at Zezume, and back again to the Lease.

"Mawat," said the Raven's Lease. "Welcome home." Mawat did not move or speak.

Finally you noticed Mawat's state, his stunned stare, as though, having thought himself safe in secure and familiar territory, he had suddenly taken a blade between his ribs. He seemed paralyzed, unable even to breathe.

"This is my heir," said the white clad man on the bench, into Mawat's silence, the gaze of the Xulahns, variously appraising or mildly interested. "Come, Mawat, stand with me," he gestured behind him. Radihaw and Zezume were still as statues on either side of him.

Mawat did not move. After a moment, the Lease turned his attention to the Xulahn visitors again and said, "I will consider your request. Come back tomorrow."

This seemed to discomfit one of the Xulahns, and then the others when it was translated. Two of them frowned at their interpreter, then at each other. Looked to the third, who turned to the Lease and said, in strangely accented Iradeni, "We thank you for your consideration, great king." The Lease is not a king, and the word the Xulahn used is from Tel, a language that is familiar in the south of Iraden. I daresay you speak it yourself. All the Xulahns bowed low, then, and departed.

"What," said Mawat when they were gone, his voice toneless. "What am I seeing?"

A moment of silence, but for that ever-present grinding, barely audible, more a sensation felt through the soles of your boots than a sound.

"Where is my father?" asked Mawat, when no answer was forthcoming. "And what are you doing in that seat?"

Ah, that surprised you! You had assumed that the person before you was none other than Mawat's father, the man who had been Raven's Lease for all of your life. There would be no way

for you to know it was not.

"My lord Mawat," began Radihaw. "In all respect, recall to whom you are speaking."

"I am speaking to my Uncle Hibal," replied Mawat, still in that tight, flat voice. "Who is inexplicably sitting alive in the Lease's seat, when no one should sit there but my father. Unless the Raven has died and the Lease followed him, in which case this tower should be hung with black, and everyone in the fortress and the town should be in mourning." He turned his head to stare at blue-robed Zezume. "And this bench should be empty until I step up to fill it."

"There was a complication," said Zezume. "The Instrument died just hours after the messenger left for you. Much sooner than anyone expected."

"I am still at a loss, Mother Zezume," said Mawat.

Mawat would not trust you as he does, would not have brought you here with him, if you were not shrewd enough to guess what was happening here. Mawat had known one purpose for all of his life: to step up to that bench when his father died, to rule Iraden and to die in his turn, to bolster the power of the Raven, for the good of Iraden.

The office of Raven's Lease offered many privileges and a share (along with the Council of the Directions) in the rule of Iraden, and Ard Vuskitia across the strait. But there was a price; two days after the death of the Raven's Instrument--the bird embodying the god that called itself the Raven--the person occupying the Lease's office must die, a voluntary sacrifice for the god.

Shortly thereafter, while the next Instrument of the Raven lay in its egg, the next Lease would be secured and pledged. This was a process that took several days, though a raven's egg, even one inhabited by a god (or at least this god), takes nearly a month to hatch. Granted everyone involved prefers not to leave such important matters until the last moment--the reason for Mawat's hasty summons as soon as the Instrument seemed likely to die in the near future--and

matters are nearly always arranged so that there is still plenty of time to be sure things happen as they ought, to be sure the Lease dies as he promised, and to be sure there is a new Lease ready to take his place before the next Instrument hatches.

It was a tremendous honor, though not, you can perhaps understand, one that was much fought for. The ambitious generally aimed at the Council of Directions, or Motherhood in the Silent, positions that would grant one a good deal of power and influence without such a limited lifespan. Leases' heirs were generally born and raised to it--as Mawat was--and despite their privilege and ostensible power, have very few options available should they refuse to step up to the bench.

"A complication, yes," said Radihaw, still kneeling at white-clad Hibal's side. "You could call it a complication, that would be a suitable term."

"Mawat," said Hibal, his voice disconcertingly like Mawat's. "I know this must be distressing. Please understand we would never have done this if we had any other choice. When the Instrument died, the attendant sent immediately for your father, but..." Hibal hesitated. "He couldn't be found."

"Couldn't be found," repeated Mawat.

"My lord Mawat," said Radihaw, "no other conclusion could be reached but that your father had fled rather than pay the lease."

"No," said Mawat. "No, my father never fled."

"He could not be found," said Zezume. "Mawat, I know this is upsetting. None of us could believe it."

"You will take those words back," said Mawat. Voice still tight and even. "My father never fled."

"Your father could not be found," said Radihaw. "Not in the tower, not in the fortress, not in the town. We asked the Raven where your father was--despite, as you must know, the complications involved in talking to the god when it does not have a body to answer with--we asked the Raven what had happened. But the answer was equivocal."

"What was that answer?" Mawat asked.

"The reply was, *This is unacceptable. There will be a reckoning,*" said Radihaw.

"You were still three days ride away, Mawat," said Zezume. "Urgent matters required the presence of the Lease."

"What," asked Mawat, now incredulous and visibly angry, "a ragged party of shivering Xulahns required the personal attention of the Raven's Lease of Iraden?"

"You have been away from Vastai too long, nephew," said white-clad Hibal. "It is to our advantage to have access to goods from Xulah, to have the good opinion of Xulahn traders. More comes from Xulah than wine or silk. They also have weapons, and disciplined soldiers who might be lent or hired to help us against the Tel who press us from the south west, as you well know."

"Oh, and mighty Xulah will lend us an army and then go back over the mountains again, because we ask nicely, out of their goodness and generosity," said Mawat.

"Sarcasm does not become the heir to the Lease," said Hibal.

"No pledges are pledged," said Radihaw. "No deals are struck, no terms even suggested. This is merely caution and good sense. It behooves the Lease to look to the future."

"Indeed," acknowledged Hibal. "And given the last few days, I think you should stay here and become acquainted with such matters, rather than return to your frontier post. Clearly you should have a better understanding of the issues we face here in Vastai. We have warriors

enough to guard our borders; I have only one heir."

"My father never fled," said Mawat again, flatly. "And you are sitting in my seat. I want to ask the Raven now, why you are sitting in my seat. I have that right."

"If it were not my seat," replied Hibal, evenly, "I would not be speaking to you now. There is no need to question the Raven again. My sitting here speaks for itself. I would have died if the Raven did not accept me as Lease. I took that risk, for the sake of Iraden."

"Take a moment and think, Mawat," urged Zezume. "Please understand. We could not have done anything else, and you are still the Lease's Heir. You haven't lost anything by this."

"Except my father," said Mawat. And again, "My father never fled."

"You've just arrived after a long and tiring journey," said Hibal, the Raven's Lease. "And a shock at the end of it. I only wanted to be sure you heard how things stood immediately. Go, nephew and heir of mine, and rest and eat. We'll talk more soon."

"My father never fled," said Mawat again.

Had you seen him like this before? Ordinarily he is all easy smiles. How not? Up till now his path in life had been set, and he had been assured of respect, and every luxury Iraden afforded. But sometimes he seizes on a matter, takes it between his teeth and will not let it go, and when that mood takes him he is grim and implacable. He has been that way since he was small.

If you hadn't seen it before, you saw it then. It startled you, I think, or frightened you, because with your eyes still on Mawat you stepped back, and half-turned and put your hand on the wall, out of the need for support, or else the fear that you would lose your balance so close to the top of the stairs. And you turned fully to stare at your hand against the wall, and then down at your feet, feeling that constant, faint grinding vibration traveling through the yellowish stones.

Could you hear me, Eolo? Can you hear me now?

I'm talking to you.

#

Stories can be risky for someone like me. What I say must be true, or it will be made true, and if it cannot be made true--if I don't have the power, or if what I have said is an impossibility--then I will pay the price. I might more or less safely say, "Once there was a man who rode home to attend his father's funeral and claim his inheritance, but matters were not as he expected them to be." I do not doubt such a thing has happened more than once in all the time there have been fathers to die and sons to succeed them. But to go any further, I must supply more details--the specific actions of specific people, and their specific consequences--and there I might blunder, all unknowing, into untruth. It's safer for me to speak of what I know. Or to speak only in the safest of generalities. Or else to say plainly at the beginning, "Here is a story I have heard," placing the burden of truth or not on the teller whose words I am merely accurately reporting.

But what is the story that I am telling? Here is another story I have heard: Once there were two brothers, and one of them wanted what the other had. Bent all his will to obtain what the other had, no matter the cost.

Here is another story: Once there was a prisoner in a tower.

And another: Once someone risked their life out of duty and loyalty to a friend.

Ah, there's a story that I might tell, and truthfully.

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