

One

There was a land with two skies. Stars marched the first's length in stately procession. It had had no day for years, opting instead for endless, luminant night. A tear split its expanse, a kiss that marked and burned black, its edges fuzzed as though viewed through wet glass. Its depth yawed.

The royal purples of the sky were a princely court in a ballroom, shifting hues moving across the expanse. Blues intermingled with it – a visiting entourage of diplomats – the youngest cyans, the most ancient naval hues. A thumb over the bristles of a paintbrush, flecks of white sprayed across the backdrop. Constellations. The land sat in a star-forming cradle. An argent sphere held the highest point, another following it, lagging in unhurried pursuit. They glowed with their authority. Where there was no purple, no blue, no pinpricks of white, black held sway, and it swallowed the eyes of all that looked at it. The stars blinked, shimmered, dimming and strengthening, according to some grand equation that committed to paper, would fill libraries. This was the first sky.

The great desert of sand and salt beneath it was an affront to nature. It too an expanse, yet orderly in that the baking-hot of its surface was split by perfectly straight rifts, dividing the lands into an endless checkerboard going far beyond what the eyes could see. Variegated blocks of sand and salt stood at a man's height, stacked like cubic bricks, arranged by something characterized only by the fact it was once present and now it was gone. The blocks formed walls that encased nothing, towers that overlooked nothing; any orderly structure they seemingly took was a bias of the observer. And there was wind, and it cut like a scythe from the side, a guillotine from above, and a dagger in the back. The cubes fortunate enough to not be trapped in the ground chipped under the ravishing of the elements. Out here in the Stacks, all that lived was dead.

The Strider sat in his element. He put water to flame.

The black habit of his order clung to the scaffolding of his frame as a flag draped against the wreckage of a ship. His arms were flesh, his hands carved from white marble-chalk, and at their union was old armlets made valuable by age. He was barefoot, the floor smooth and cold, his room lit through the glass tile in his flat roof. The room was lit by his knowledge of it, able to find anything with eyes shut. And his eyes were indeed shut, as he dwelt in corpse-like nonchalance towards all that existed around him. Silence hung heavy. Before him, a low yellow flame, heating gradually a steel cylinder of water. He gifted himself sight. His hands in view, he studied them endlessly as though there were anything else he had known for longer. White. Carved from white. They chipped, flaked, cracked. When tapped on metal, the metal shattered.

The Strider was of a kind that had flung himself against the world and had the world flung against him. He had flown – great – distances, across the mighty second Sky – the inter-regional Sky – that spanned from the cot of his birth to the horizon of his death. His eyes had been a blanket that covered and swaddled. His hands had been hammers that subjugated and broke. His legs, had walked. They too were carved from the white. The white that was his air and his flesh and his power and doctrine. This white was Chalk, and even years since he had casted a ritual, he still tasted the bland, prickling sharpness of powdered glass on his tongue. There had been war, he had fought it and won it the sense that there were graves dug and he had done the digging, but none of the final resting. And then he turned and

found himself midstride across a gaping maw, a divide between a world that did not need him, and a world that no longer wanted him to exist.

An arrow embedded itself in his gut, piercing his reverie. The boiling draught screamed at him. The joints of his marble fingers grated as he flexed them, unsure when last they had moved as much. Likely for the same thing the day before; brewed petals of the few tetragonal-leafed vegetation that grew in the Stacks. Steadily, the move practiced, he decanted the tea into the glass that had been at his side longer than friends and brothers. It steamed timelessly. He drank deep of it. It was bitter.

He longed for the Wellsprings.

Three sharp taps rang from the door. Puzzlement. Incredulity. He stood to his full height, stone grinding as he did, powder detaching from his frame. The raps came again, doubled in amount, tripled in intensity. His eyes roved. They came to rest on the door. He whispered. The raps came again, followed by the jostle of the door handle. This was real. He glided over the smooth floor, past the low table where he lived his final days, past the door that contained his legacy, past the shrine to his oft tested doctrine, that had stood ever strong, a pillar of steel amidst the sand, the salt, and the chalk. His hands came to rest on the crossbar that held the door shut, shifting with sinewy complaint as it moved from its resting place. A singular knock. He pumped the handle.

A figure stood in the purple twilight, lit from the front by something aged and yellow. Their – her – face was clear, familiar, and could not possibly be what stood before him. Stone grated. His voice escaped him as steam spewing from rifts in the tectonic crusts.

“Professor Hygen.” He said. It was a lone key on a grand piano; not nearly enough.

“Adven Ventura.” The visitor said in response, a second hand settling at the scale. She wore clothes that resembled sackcloth, brown, ragged, the ends a curious, sickling purple. It tainted her bare feet as well, cut, calloused and awakening an old warmth in him that had been choked under the dry weight of his resolution to die. But her face wore a smile, and even though she stood before him, worse dressed, worse for wear, torn and chipped at all corners, she radiated like the life-filled streams of the Wellsprings he had delved in long before.

When humanity failed him, he had doctrine.

“You have travelled a long way.”

“I have.” She said, her smile never breaking. “You look like something that should be in a coffin.”

“You are correct.” Adven Ventura concurred. “Get in here and let me wash your feet.”

Two

He bent to the task without difficulty.

Even though he had not performed the rite for anyone in ages, he had not forgotten how. More water boiled over an open flame nearby, a box of salves, tinctures and cloth at his side. He attended to his visitor's feet with a craftsman's discipline; precise, decisive, the depth of his learning in every stroke of his hand. The purple dissolved into the basin before him, revealing clean flesh beneath, lighter than the rest above the ankle for the same reasons as his. He poured the scalding water and did not flinch, taking in the verdant scent of the various herbs mixed within. They filled the room with moisture and heat. He began uncorking a flask of oil when she spoke at last.

"You have an interesting place."

He paused. The lights were on now, yellow flames encased in glass, fueled by chalk rituals. They cast a clean glow over the space. The room they occupied he had allotted for receiving guests, and it was dominated by a recessed rectangular space in the floor, slanted gently towards a line of steel drains. A brazier sat next to a squat cistern of cool water. From it, he scooped another bowl into the pot over the fire. A shelf leaned against a basalt-black wall, built of wood that age only strengthened and matured, adorned with boxes, bottles and jars of all kinds. His visitor sat on a low stool, legs outstretched, feet in his lap.

"I've not seen it before."

He hummed in agreement. "When last you visited, it was the old one in Hyacinth." A pause, reminiscing. "By the orchard."

"New Valkyjria." She said. He hummed again and echoed it.

"New Valkyjria."

Hyacinth and Valkyjria. Places. Words he hadn't heard in ages. They lingered on his tongue like foreign spices. He redoubled on the task, applying an oil to her feet. This he felt, it's menthol chill forever a surprise. She shivered. A hand on her ankle, a stare that met hers, stilled her.

"This is particularly harsh sundering." He remarked, a hand dipping into the pooling purple below. It swirled, oily malaise, sharp to the touch like acid. "Did you fall into the depths?"

"Nearly. There is a Veil between here and Dustarin, I'm sure you recall."

He nodded.

"I had a Drifter bring me and others, but he was an amateur, and I did not have my equipment. We were almost torn to shreds by a flux storm, and it flung us right against the Veil. I was already looking at the inverted sky before he was able to wrench us from the pull."

It was a harrowing recollection. He hid his concern. "And I was just about to ask how the roads are."

"Dreadful. Worse than they have ever been." She pressed a foot against him, asking that he looked up. He did not. "When last did you Stride, Ven?"

He did not reply, producing a bandage instead. He bound the whole of the foot in the linen cloth, cutting and shaping the bends in it as he went. Cream-colored tape held it's ends intact. He stood, clothes soaked, muscles burning, creed renewed.

"You are welcome, Opal." He said, proffering a hand. She took it, her flingers too flecked with the white. His eyes lingered on them for too long, and though she noticed, she said nothing. He led her to the next room, the one that had served as his coffin. A low table awaited them, a singular cushion at it. He retrieved another from a cabinet recessed in shadow, placing it at an angle to his. She sat as he set about a collection of tables at a far wall. From a chest he retrieved bread, from another, cold butter. He placed them both on a long, black slate, flecked with crystal that shimmered as he turned and moved. A finger drew a white circle around both, streaks of chalk, heat emanating from it when he was done. He moved to another chest, a click opening its recessed lid, streaks of more white on it's rim, soon hidden away in the avalanche of rime that cascaded outwards over his fingers. From it he retrieved fruit and a box. All he placed in a tray, carried easily in both hands to the table.

"You're doing well for yourself." She concluded, seizing a knife from the silverware. He did not comment as she buttered a slice, eating it without as much as a glance elsewhere. He set about cutting fruit, the juice spilling in rivulets down his hands, pooling on a plate below. He lay the slices and set about the next when her had grabbed his.

"Stop."

He raised an eyebrow.

"You eat as well." She said, raising the slice she had already taken a bite from. He watched it as though it might bite.

"I am not hungry."

"I don't care." She said, shaking the slice, insisting. "What did you have last?"

"Tea."

She shook her head. "That isn't enough to handle the news I bring, so eat."

His conceded, buttering bread of his own, taking some slices of fruit. The cylinder whistled and he poured tea. She drank. He drank to match her. She nodded approvingly. Purple and white shone in through the skylight. The windows shook with the repeated fists of a particulate storm pounding outside. Serenity like a bird of prey, enveloped them in its wings. He set down his cup moments after she dropped hers. She took it, sliding the tray down the table, leaving an empty space for them.

"You mentioned news." He said, and she proffered an empty hand in request. A tap under the table revealed a drawer, sliding slickly on perfectly oiled wheels. In it, perfect white crystal wrapped with brown cloth, long as a finger. He took one and placed it in her waiting hand. With a delicate, ceramic crack, she broke an end with her teeth, chewing down the piece. Color filled her face. She set about drawing. A circle, a triangle cutting it at a point, another circle, smaller and concentric with the first. He watched the work in silence, it was nothing he hadn't seen – hadn't done – many, many times before.

His hands bore testament.

The lines she drew glowed and shivered, rearranging themselves, coiling into new shapes, moving as though flicked by invisible fingers. They grew thicker, forming black paper, and it too grew thicker as it extended, folded once, and additional sheets filled the space between the folds. The last of the glow faded as the pitch-black file formed, its top adorned with gold, calligraphic script. He did not bother reading it, focusing instead on the setting sun depicted at its center. This too he was familiar with.

She spoke.

“Dustarin collapsed,” she began.

This was expected. The region was held together by the resolve of its Striders alone. The Wellspring it hinged upon had been bled dry, the nearby uninhabited region shattered beyond salvage. The last he had seen of it, he had advised her and their friend, another professor, to leave. Gather up what they still had and take the jaunt to New Valkyjria while the winding down chaos of warfare kept security loose and diligence at a low. They had refused. Dustarin was home to them.

“and Ceraun Hatria has made his final passing.” She finished.

And the silence that had been disturbed by the knocks at the door, the splashing and boiling of water as he washed her feet, and the tinkling of silverware as they ate returned once more, redoubled in weight and thickness, pushing him down until his forehead touched the table, arms crossed to cushion them. He sat like this until he felt her hand on his back, hesitant – immensely so – ready to withdraw at any moment. He did not reject it. There was a time he would have, when he didn’t live in this aged stone box, counting the passing of the argent spheres above, drinking tea, eating, sleeping, brooding, kneeled at this singular table on the threadbare pillow, hearing the rattle of the glass outside, feeling the grate of his fingers against each other, seeing himself in the reflection of his daily draught and confirming that yes, he was dead, and the rest of him simply hadn’t caught up with this elementary fact.

And yet he was dragged from this stupor by the file that lay before him, and the news it brought, and the old friend that held it. Even if only to mourn, though he was unsure if he could do even that. Nothing pricked at the edge of his eyes, or stirred particularly in the pit of his stomach. This too was another draught of tea, sipped by a corpse. When humanity failed him, he had doctrine.

“How?”

“By choice. We were evacuating Dustarin when the Psychitects told us we had days to go at best. I worked with Hatria, some of his students, some acolytes from the Conclave as well. We got as many of the Grounded off-region as we could, and then Hatria said,” she paused, a fingernail beginning a rhythmic tap on the table, “he said that we should go on without him.”

He nodded. This was a comfort. Striders were afforded many things, but in the last few years, the choice of how and when to make the final passing had not been one of them. Hatria had chosen to live by the old doctrine.

“He was old.”

“Very.” She agreed. “Many, many years past what we’re given, and a couple more past what we expected.”

“Who executed the rites of passing?”

She tapped the folder. "I did. If you had been there, we would've done it together." She pushed it in his direction. "And I handled it to the height of my capability."

"I have no doubts you did." He said, pushing it back in her direction. A finger of hers held it in place, pushing it back towards him.

"He wanted you to keep it."

"Why?"

"We both agreed you valued things like this more than either of us, and that you would treat it well."

Another chord deep within, pulled. "I am honored. What did he leave behind?"

"Everything too big to carry was smashed to bits in the initial shocks that broke Dustarin. Everything else, his research, Relics, all his life's work," she placed a hand on her chest, "are here with me. These clothes on my back are the only ones I brought."

"I doubt I have anything you'd find suitable to wear."

A wry smile from her. "I didn't plan to dress like a dying monk while I was here anyway."

"Unnecessarily harsh, Opal."

"He left you something private." She said, redirecting. From the file she produced a brown envelope, stamped with Ceraun's office, signed by him, a sticker at a corner addressed to one Adven Ventura, out in the region of New Valkyria. It was sealed with chalk, a soft touch revealing his friend's handiwork. Another string plucked.

"He said you should read it once you are ready to leave the sedentary lull you are no doubt still in by the time you receive it."

His smile was shy, and betrayed him.