

**Titan Solar Year 101044**  
**Or,**  
**27th Year of the 8th Cycle of Mercuran Patronage**

### **1. "*Seat Dolse*"**

"Do you remember how to tell your stars?" said Farseer Daz, "and strip a carcass?"

"I do, father," said Van the Scribe.

They sat together on a rocky bluff up the beach a ways, watching the sun set over the ocean. It was a scene they'd shared many times and a privilege enjoyed only by Nemians belonging to the tribe of Dolse, for no other tribe made their home near the sea. Where they sat on their rock they were a mere hour's walk from Seat Dolse, though in recent years they made the trip only on days that were warm and dry, when Daz's joints were merciful to him. The seasons would soon change and the rains would come, which meant fewer trips to the beach—but Van would be gone by then anyway.

Sitting next to his father, Van reflected that he was now the taller of the two, a recent change and one that filled him with both adolescent pride and an awareness of the man's mortality that felt uncomfortable and uninvited. Though small as a child, Van now stood at a height of almost six feet, but at the start of his growth spurt last spring he'd heard a rumor that Daz had actually shrunk an inch.

"Then you will do fine," said Daz, his eyes fixed on the pastel bloom of the horizon, "but the day after tomorrow you must remember to say 'I do, chieftain.'"

"But I have heard it said that people die on the pilgrimage," said Van, his excitement causing his voice to jump back and forth between a child's shrill and a man's baritone. He ignored the twitch in Daz's brow caused by his failure to acknowledge the command he'd been given.

"People die in all sorts of places for all sorts of reasons," Daz said. "In my youth I saw a man slip and die at our fishing pond, for no reason other than because he forgot how to place his foot on a wet stepping stone, and your mother died in her sleep in our very home simply because she forgot how to wake up."

"I want to succeed," said Van. "I want to bring honor to our tribe. I want to bring honor to you."

"You want to bring honor to yourself," Daz whispered harshly. Van hung his head, stung.

After barely a moment, Daz put a comforting hand on his son's shoulder and sighed deeply

"I promise you, Van the Scribe, so long as you do not become overproud you will do fine. Be nothing more or less than the best version of yourself."

Van wanted to pout, but knowing he'd soon be away he chose to smile instead. He helped his father up and they made ready to return to the Seat. Van noticed Daz was smirking and cocked his head inquisitively.

"And watch where you put your feet."

Daz winked at him, and Van started to laugh.

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They arrived back home some time after nightfall. To help them navigate the darkness Van made a torch from found wood and oilcloth, lighting it by striking flint against the knife he now carried. These were new skills for Van but he'd been practicing, knowing they might come in useful on the pilgrimage. As they neared Seat Dolse the light of the community's many bonfires became sufficient to guide them, but he kept the torch lit for the benefit of the local rangers, that they might distinguish Van and his father apart from encroaching wildlife.

Seat Dolse, the ancestral home of the chieftain, was the oldest and largest community maintained by the tribe. There were many hundreds of clay huts of various shapes and sizes, the favored architectural style of the tribe, and convenient due to the abundance of soft earth in their lands. There were also many dugouts, some framed with wood or stone, where people gathered to share meals, teach crafts, and celebrate fortuitous occasions. Seat Dolse also had a single grand amphitheater with a large wooden stage, where Van knew Farseer Daz would spend much of the day on the first morning of the pilgrimage, greeting the delegates of other tribes as they arrived. His throne had already been moved to the front and center of that stage, which was where he would sit, orate, and accept gifts.

Van had only ever seen him on his throne once before, when he was very young. That was nine years ago, the last pilgrimage year. Being only six years old at the time, Van was too young to go then, but another nine had come and gone and now the pilgrimage was to be undertaken again. All members of all tribes that were of age would go, Van included. The youngest of them would be just twelve years old, having come of age on the very year of the pilgrimage, and any unfortunate enough to have been only *eleven* years old on the last pilgrimage year would now be grown men and women in every way except the one that mattered.

Residents of the community gathered near the fires stood and bowed to the chieftain as Van helped him through the streets and up to the house they shared, where he shed the majority of his clothes and allowed Van to assist him getting into bed.

"Before you sleep," said Daz, shifting in his hammock and pulling a fur over himself, "I want you to see that our guests are settled."

Van frowned. "I checked on the dark girl earlier and she was asleep," he said, "but father, I don't like Simon of the Mists. He cares only for sexmaking."

Daz waved his hand dismissively. "You should care more yourself for sexmaking. You're soon to be a man by rite of pilgrimage."

"I don't care for sexmaking!" Van said, and he stormed from the hut. Of course, he would obey and check in on their guests, as his father knew he would.

Both guests had arrived some time last year. Simon of the Mists had washed up on the beach, and it was Van that had found him. He was wearing flamboyant, heavy clothing that was brilliantly colored and (by Van's estimation) poor for swimming in. Like all folk from across the sea he was strange, physically as well as in speech and manner. His skin was sickly looking, pale like tanned rabbit hide, and he had large, long ears that ended in points. He was frail—nobody could tell how he'd survived childhood until he later demonstrated his skill with magic. After being nursed back to health he made no attempt to return to his own lands, but rather, in exchange for food and a hammock to sleep in, he assisted the Seat's laborers through the use of his spells.

"Where did you come from?" Van had asked him, the first time his alien eyes opened, in the medical hut last year.

The foreigner stared at Van for a moment, then traced a pattern in the air which seemed deliberate and said, "Try again."

"Where did you come from?" Van repeated patiently.

"Better you don't know."

"What are you called?"

"Simon," said the stranger, "but children can call me *Mister* Simon."

"What happened to you?"

"I died."

Simon of the Mists never seemed exactly happy or exactly sad. Some of the more adventurous local girls did sexmaking with him.

In truth, Van was curious about it. Since his growth spurt started he'd felt occasional stirrings when he chanced glimpses of the village girls working or bathing. He'd felt stirrings looking at some of the men, too. But this was the year of the pilgrimage, and sexmaking was not a skill that stood to serve him in his coming trial, so he chose instead to learn the blade and the bow.

Their second guest, a girl, had been found by his father's rangers alone and naked in a burnt field on the outskirts of Ikanni lands. Physically she was the exact inverse of Simon, right down to the detail of her gender. Her skin was the color of fired charcoal and her hair was white as alabaster, but she had the same pointed ears. The tribe's shamans and medicine men had urged Farseer Daz to send her away or have her killed, even more urgently than when Simon turned up, but with both guests he had refused and commanded they be taken in and cared for. Many Dolsers feared that when the delegates of the other tribes arrived they would cry heresy and call for the chieftain's exile. Contact with foreigners was forbidden to all Nemians, but Farseer Daz was chieftain, and at least to other Dolsers his word was final. Van had pleaded with his father to let him at least hide their guests on the day they were to host the tribes, but Daz denied him even this concession.

"All will be fine," Farseer Daz said to his son. "Trust in your chieftain."

Van heard a commotion as he approached the hut gifted to Simon of the Mists by the tribe, and stood clear of the entrance as a massive shape emerged from it. He was surprised to see not the foreigner, but his tribe's own First Ranger step forth from the dwelling and look down on him.

"Van the Scribe," said Otep Acrearms, smiling and greeting him warmly but in hushed tones.

Otep Acrearms was the son of human rangers of tribe Dolse, who were by all accounts of normal height and girth, but it was said that the blood of giants was in his ancestry and known to skip a generation or several. Looking upon him one found it difficult to challenge the claim. He was seven feet tall at least and had skin that was the color and texture of sandstone. Parts of his face stuck out farther than they should, and some found this made him look threatening, but Van knew him to be one of the kindest people he was ever likely to meet, and on the year of the pilgrimage—being First Ranger—he was probably the most important Dolser alive after the chieftain.

"Otep Acrearms," Van said, returning the greeting, clamping his mouth shut as he saw his friend raise a finger to his lips.

"Otep Acrearms," Van repeated, this time in a soft whisper, "I came to see that our guest Simon of the Mists was looked after."

"It is already done," said Otep, patting Van affectionately on the head with a hand the size of a potter's wheel. "I fed him moon's milk, and shared stern words with him. It has been made clear to our guest that the days to come are of great import, and that his cavorting will not be tolerated."

"Then come to the bonfires and speak with me of the pilgrimage!" Van said, excited to be rid of his duties, but remembering to keep his voice low.

Otep smiled and led Van away from Simon's hut.

"I would enjoy nothing more, Van the Scribe," said the First Ranger, "but it is late and the bonfires are already being put out. All of us are going to be very busy starting tomorrow."

Van knew this was true, but he felt restless. He had spent the entire day practicing his hunting skills with the Seat's rangers, who spoke little. As much as Van enjoyed the comradery, it often left him starved for simple conversation. Only after returning from the woods and helping to prepare evening meal for the tribe had he found time to relax by meeting his father to watch the sunset. He hadn't seen Otep since yesterday, and was in a mood to take in his company, but the giantkin managed to convince Van of the virtues of rest, and he retired to his bed of furs in the chieftain's hut.

Van tried to allow his father's snoring in the next chamber to lull him to sleep with its rhythmic regularity, but sleep refused him. Outside, Seat Dolse grew dim and quiet, but not completely dark. Through a window Van watched the moon tilt past zenith and toward the next day, and still at least one bonfire remained lit somewhere, or so the faint orange glow across the threshold seemed to suggest—barely visible, creeping in from under the ornate drape that hung in the entryway.

Sleepless and curious, Van got up again, slipped on his sandals and went back out into the village, drawn by the light. He heard voices as he neared its source, or rather just one voice, orating monotonously instead of sharing conversation. Van found this strange until he realized the light

belonged to the bonfire of the Teaching Circle. He startled several young children when he dropped into the dugout unceremoniously, all looking severely sleep-addled, and he recognized the aged speaker as none other than one of his own childhood teachers and (more notably) this year's Pilgrimage Guide representing tribe Dolse–Ghan Mudcatcher.

"Why, if it isn't our chieftain's own son," Ghan said, pausing his lecture to look disapprovingly at the newcomer. "Why are you here at my Teaching Circle?"

It would have been a fair question even during normal waking hours. Van had graduated from the Teaching Circle years ago, having finished the lessons of early childhood. Most children never returned once they were no longer made to, but Van was curious why the space was being used so late at night. Only the tribe's rangers ought to be out and about at this time, watching the village and the fields beyond for signs of danger, which there rarely was.

"Why are the children awake, Ghan Mudcatcher?" Van said. "It is late, and all of us are going to be very busy tomorrow."

He thought he might impress the elder by arguing logic, as Otep had with him earlier. This proved foolish.

"Because, boy," said Ghan Mudcatcher, rising from his seat and pointing an accusatory finger at the gathered children, "the mothers of these young fools came to me two nights ago and told me they refused to sleep when it was time for bed."

Van didn't follow, and conveyed this to the elder by silently maintaining his imperious expression and unbroken eye contact. Ghan elaborated.

"These children all came of age this year—" *Ohhh*, thought Van, "—and will soon embark on the pilgrimage. This will be the second night I refuse them sleep, that they might better learn its benefits and the importance of its schedule. To keep them from dozing I am teaching them the histories of the tribes."

He punctuated his words with a loud hiss, upsetting enough in and of itself, but particularly effective coming from Ghan because he was wildborn. The man looked very nearly like a person-sized snake, but with arms and legs. Hearing the reptilian hiss the children stirred, some of them recoiling, an untested self-preservation instinct asserting itself over their drowsiness. Tired as they were, they wouldn't close their eyes in unsupervised proximity to Ghan Mudcatcher.

In Van, childhood mysticism had died long ago, and so he was unafraid of the snake-man. He knew Ghan to be kind, if terse, and as one of the venerable elders of tribe Dolse it was his sworn duty to protect the children of the tribe. Somehow he understood that in this moment, that meant denying them sleep and frightening them.

"I will stay and listen also," Van declared, and found a seat among the children.

Some of them seemed thankful for his presence. Ghan snorted indignantly.

"If you are awake at this hour on the eve of such an important day," the snake-man said, "then I suppose you had better."

He resumed his oral history of the tribes from where he'd left off, with a deliberate focus on the importance of the pilgrimage that was to begin just two sunrises hence, and was called the Journey of Patronage.

Returning from the Journey of Patronage marked a Nemian's coming of age and the beginning of adulthood, with all its rights and responsibilities. Few Nemians ever made another such voyage in their lives, but all were expected to do so once—traveling to the Seats of the four great tribes, learning each tribe's culture and strengthening the bonds between them.

The second and perhaps greater purpose of the pilgrimage was its function as a contest of skill—a peaceful and cooperative means of competing to determine which tribe was to hold the title of Patron tribe for the next nine years. Countries across the sea made war with one another, or held things called *elections* (or so claimed Simon of the Mists), but the tribes of Nemia simply undertook the pilgrimage as they had for centuries.

Each tribe's champion was called First Ranger, chosen from the tribe's most promising youths in the months or in some cases years leading up to the beginning of the Journey of Patronage. Each tribe's First Ranger would participate in tests of strength, skill, and wit hosted by the chieftains of Nemia when the procession reached their Seat, and whichever champion emerged victorious in the greatest number of such challenges won Patronage for their tribe—the greatest honor a Nemian could achieve in life.

Perhaps emboldened by Van's presence, the children started asking questions, even sleepy as they were.

"How many times has Dolse been Patron?" said a little girl, rubbing her eyes. She was human, like Van, with big brown eyes and long brown hair.

"Not once in remembered history," Ghan Mudcatcher said without hesitation.

The children gawked, looking at each other in disbelief, but Van knew his histories and simply looked away, embarrassed for himself, his father, and his people.

Patronage was almost always awarded to tribe Mercura. The Stewards of the Forest and the River Nym were the largest of Nemia's four tribes. Mercurans were wise and kind, and though their lands were far from those of tribe Dolse, relations between Dolsers and Mercurans were good. Cycles of Mercuran Patronage, therefore, were often felt as times of plenty for tribe Dolse, which Van could

attest to having lived his life to the day under Mercuran Patronage—but many years before Van was born, there had been a cycle of Ikanni Patronage, and though it had lasted just nine years it was said to have been a time of strife and hardship.

Farseer Daz had told his son much about tribe Ikann, and their time as the Patron tribe. He was in his prime then, newly appointed as chieftain to tribe Dolse, and it had required much from him to keep his people fed and safe under the abuse and extortion from their near neighbors, the Stewards of the Plains and Highlands. Even now, under Mercuran patronage, tales were told by rangers returning from the edge of Dolser lands of violent confrontation between the two tribes. There was also the occasional bandit raid in the outlying villages, and many Dolsers held to the belief that the so-called bandits were actually rangers of tribe Ikann, and would return in good standing to their Seat with their plunder.

Van had his doubts that any bonds between Dolsers and Ikanni would be strengthened on this pilgrimage, or any other, but as his father's son he had been raised to hope for a better future.

"Otep will change things for us," Van said under his breath.

Whether the snake-man heard him he couldn't tell, for he gave neither acknowledgment nor rebuttal. The children heard, though, and they looked at Van with eyes full of wonder, like someone was finally telling them the right bedtime story. There had been many clever children born to tribe Dolse in recent years, and Otep Acrearms was as clever as any of them, but twice as large, ten times as strong, and with skin so thick it was said it could turn a blade.

Ghan's lecture on the histories went on, but Van had lost his appetite for company, and finally felt sleep coming on. He stood up and excused himself, leaving as abruptly as he'd come, ignoring the pouty looks the children cast after him. He went to bed moody, unable to reconcile his faith that Otep was as infallible as the coming of the dawn with the elder's visible confidence that tribe Dolse would again serve as attendant to another Patron—perhaps always would serve.