

Vincentius

Chapter I “Black Bird”, Version 1.0.

A storm was brewing; on the spire of the castle keep hidden by dark clouds, the old warrior stood steadfast, screening his domain from his sole eye. The spot where the other should have been was covered by a dark patch, which did not fully hide the traces of a straight scar running down the leathery face. It must have been a vicious blow bringing darkness to half the warrior’s world. All the while on his watch, he seemed to be brooding over a particularly puzzling problem, unmoving and undisturbed by the passage of time. Suddenly, the man spoke as if to no one in particular: “*How is the boy doing?*” In the silence that followed, one could hear a rat scurrying about, and time stretched thin as a razor-sharp blade, and eons passed. Yet, no time had passed as the raven resting on the left pauldron, the intricate ornaments dented by uncounted battles, begun to weave a story about a young farmer, living a peaceful life on the hilltop of a small island in the gulf of a silent sea.

A new day was dawning when Vincentius rose to the first creaky call of his raven. He was already standing on his feet, when the cock offered an offended crescendo, as if to make up in volume for being late to the black bird. There was no love lost between the cock and the raven, but Vince lost no sympathy on the latecomer – he had found the raven as a fledgling with a broken wing and had nursed him back to health. Since then, the raven repaid this kindness by keeping his kin far from the fields. While compassion brought the two companions together, pragmatism kept the relationship alive and thus Vince named the bird after its colour, “*Cola*”.

And Cola called Vince “*Craah*”.

Today was an important day for the farmers on Lavacia: market day. The cart with the merchandise had already been prepared by the day before, as expected of the iron discipline with which his father Octavius Opacus approached farming. The potatoes, pressed dry on the cold mountain slopes in an age-old procedure would not putrefy for eight years and were valued as the staple ration for the armies of the Sa’ba.

Vince needed only grab his short Sword, his father would not let him leave without, and the cart to take off and go down the hill to the village. Since the market would attract the traders hailing from all over the world, most sailing from Midar, Vince was eager to hear tales from distant and dangerous places like the golden capital of the Sa’ba, protected by their legions. The city on the slopes of a burning mountain, where the Sa’bia honour their dragon lords, was known to be second of size to none other. Or, if Vince was really lucky, a merchant might have been to the city of Khumpolis and lived to tell of the city called the Eye of the Night and her temples of knowledge. Only on one earlier occasion, when he was still a child, Vince had seen a haggard soul who recalled in hushed tones the endless libraries of Khumpolis, where the enslaved scribes never slept, never ate, never dreamt, and never died, always copying the new texts written by their magister lords, eternally. From this traveller, Vince had learned the sigils of the seven Princes, ruling Khumpolis with their dark powers for millennia past. And most important of them all, the sigil of Khumpolis itself, the seven-spiked star for the signifying the Princes, united under the dome of wisdom and shining the ray of insight on the earth. Travellers in search of knowledge were protected in the city, as long as they travelled under this sign.

Oh, how Vincentius dreamt seeing these places with his own eyes!

Exited to meet with his only connection to the world waiting beyond their tiny speck

of land battered by the stormy and sea bearing the same name as the harbour city located in the south of the island, he hurriedly harnessed the hinny to the cart he had prepared with his father in the evening before and set out on the road. He did not urge the mule, fittingly named Tardus by Vince's father, to charge forward, for the descent into the village was steep and treacherous, and Vincent trusted Tardus to go at a good pace so that he would peacefully reach the market in time.

Down the city, Vincentius went.

And as he set out, the clouds gathering around the heights of the mountain towering behind the farm, were gradually glowing in a faint red tone. Glowing in a fuller red were cliffs of the mountain, tearing through the clouds in some spots, to be swallowed by them in other places. The Red Mountain was a rare wonder of nature, astonishing even veteran visitors who have spent their lives exploring the farthest reaches of the world. Soon, only the mountain would retain its colour, and the clouds would be veiled in shades of gold by the rising sun. And Vince would reach Lavacia when the gold has been vanquished by the light of the day.



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Meanwhile, a critical reader might pause to wonder, why a farmer’s boy was carrying a blade, but one would be hard pressed to find any adult on Lavacia unarmed. The local lords established that any able soul be ready to defend against the harrying of the Hrid hailing from Midar. And Opacus Octavius was not one to leave his son unprepared for such a raid, since it was only a question of the exact point in time when it would happen.

Every day, except on market day, he would practice swordplay with Vince. And Octavius maintained many ingenious devices and traps around the farm, confident that he and Vince would be capable of defending themselves. His beloved wife lay buried on this farm, and Octavius would be a cold corpse, before some petty thieves would desecrate her grave, even if these thieves happened to be the most feared warriors in all the lands they could reach with their longships.

While leading the cart through the downtrodden path, Vince was whistling the “*Willful Widow*”. Just as he got to his favourite part of the little tune, he was interrupted by a rasping voice calling his name:

“Vincentius! Leaving this frail damsel in distress?”

Upon which Vince stopped the cart at once with a sharp click of his tongue.

“Fair lady, no frail dame could live alone on these hills, but your honoured company would surely soften these feral paths.”

“Hush, boy. Learned manners from father! Oh, made me ‘member tha’ olden days. Foolish! That I was. Flouted my appearances... Many a lad never resists my charms. Now not a corpse will wage war over my old bones. Help me up.”

Vince offered his hand, and the Lady of the Woods took a seat, and she sat as if she was the Queen of the forest. And that she was.

With a second cluck and a slight tuck of the reins, Tardus trotted onwards. Vince barely waited, before he started firing his questions at Hulda – if his deductions were correct, then the town would have exceptionally interesting visitors.

“Why are you going to town? Is another Nornir visiting? Is a merchant from Khumpolis coming?”

“Wait, boy. Hurry not, I will not run. One question, one answer,” Hulda answered, a transient smile flowing over her weathered skin, vanishing only to remain engraved a hundredfold on the wrinkles of her face.

Vince carefully pondered his next question, to get the wording right. He would not miss the chance of getting a Nornir’s answer to his greatest problem: *“If I only have a single question, then tell me how to convince father to let me see the world!”*

“Worry not, boy. Fate won’t wait. Dangerous roads await. Are you prepared?”

Vince was surprised – usually a Nornir’s answer to one’s questions would be more cryptic. It was known that they could see the threads of fate, and some even believed that they could spin weaves in the pattern of time. They did not openly admit to their abilities and were mostly known for their healing skills and knowledge of herbal remedies. On rare occasions, they gathered and met, but it would always take a Nornir to

know another. However, Octavius had told Vince, that a Nornir could be found near any settlement of import, if one inquired hard enough. The Nornir were the complete opposite of the magician's guilds who built their highly visible towers so that they could communicate with pillars of light.

He spent the rest of the journey prying for more details on Hulda's prediction. However, Huld was in a sombre mood, and soon the first fragrances of Lavacia could be smelled, long before the city came into view. It always took Vince a moment to adapt to the pungent mixture of human and animal excretes smothering the aromas of the wilderness Vince was used to.

The first visible sign of Lavacia was the wooden bridge, spanning over the river to the city. The bridge was divided into two parts by a mighty watch tower, where the travelers to the city would be screened. Already, a long line of all manner of folk was forming – the guards took their job very seriously. Vince groaned at the prospect. Already in the early morning light, the roofing tiles glistened orange, and after absorbing the full power of the sun, the tiles would begin to glow red and continue to give off their light and warmth into the depths of night. Trade in Lavacia flourished not only because of the conserved potatoes, but also through the export of these special roof tiles. As far as Vince knew, the special soil used to make the tiles was not found anywhere other than in the mines under the Red Mountain towering over the island of Lavacia. Even the special potatoes produced by the farmers only grew in the soils near the mountain and were of higher quality than other crops. For that reason, trading was very lucrative for Lavacia, and the city's defense displayed that wealth.

There was just one building higher than the watch tower, and that was the Tower of the Magi. It was also the only tower to sport a white roof, displaying the mage's colour instead using the locally produced tiles. As the forest receded, Huld jumped off the cart with a flexibility betraying her age and left Vincentius with the ominous words:

"Be wary. Watch the raven's flight."

Vince was pondering the statement, while he queued up in behind the other people trying to get into city. Luckily, youngling Wystan was on guard duty today. Vincentius, Wystan and Ulfric were united in their quest to leave the shores of Lavacia, but Wystan was as bound to succeed his father as the captain of the guard, as Vince would become a farmer. Both friends knew better than to envy Ulfric, who was a foundling and grew up in the care of the orphanage. Because of Ulfric's wolfblood, he would never be able to follow in the steps of the almoner in his function as the caretaker of the orphanage. Neither would anybody else take Ulfric as an apprentice, and therefore he reluctantly sold his inborn skills as a tracker and hunter.

When Wystan discovered Vince in the line, he leaped off the merchant's carriage he was inspecting and ran to Tardus as fast as his armour would allow. In front of the mule, he stroke a threatening stance and called "*Stop!*" in his strong voice. Then, he opened visor to reveal a beaming face, confirming that for once, the ordinary was not ruling the town.

"Look at this, Master Opacus is gracing our little village with his presence. Is he finally abandoning his barbaric ways and coming to live in the city as a civilized man would?"

Vince knew better than to respond to Wystan's remarks. His friend's tongue had brought them in many a troublesome circumstance, but just as often, he had talked the three out of such situations. Even clad in steeled armour, as Wystan was, words

Chapter I “Black Bird”, Version 1.0.

were the weapon of his choice. Instead, Vince asked: *“What’s going on, who’s visiting the town?”*

Wystan’s grin widened, as he continued: *“You’ll never guess. It’s an armed Hrid dragon-boat, and it’s commandeered by a beauty with fire-red hair.”* He leaned closer to Vince, before he whispered: *“I think, even the most upstanding married man in town, in his capacity captain of the guard, fancies her.”*

He finished with: *“At first, we did not want to let them into the port, but when they behaved very unusual for Hrid warriors – they did not attack anything, the guilds decided to let the ship land. Since then, the guild leaders locked themselves with the Hrid commander and my father in the port stronghold. In any case, I don’t think them here to trade, armed as they are. Ulf is trying to figure out more. I’ll come to get you, once I am finished here.”*

With this wordy assault, Wystan waved Vince to pass through the watch tower onto the second part of the bridge, leading into the heart of the city where a big plaza would begin to be filled by the farmers and merchants offering their wares. When they first started their farm, both parents and little Vincentius would pay the merchants guild for the permission to open their own little booth to pitch their produce. In the beginning, people were very suspicious of the farmers bearing a name of their foreign overlords, but with time their family’s story could be established: After serving in the Legions of the Sa’ba, the veterans would be awarded with a plot of land to guarantee their subsistence. Usually, the soldiers would want land near the capital or their hometown, but the Opacii believed that the mystical properties of the Red Mountain would be beneficial for Vince’s mother. Octavius rarely talked about her, and he would never speak of the exact nature of her illness, but Vince gathered that her live on Lavacia was in fact much longer than expected. Once they were accepted, if not outright trusted, the farmer’s guild took them in and started buying their wares directly. This meant, that Vince just had to drive to the market, deliver their wares and was free to explore as soon as he was finished purchasing additional material for the farm. Presently, he decided to take care of that afterwards and left Tardus and the rest in the care of the guildsmen and went to the port in search of Ulf and the Hrid.

Ulf was nowhere to be seen, but one could hardly miss the massive crowd gathering in the proximity of a folded sail made of blue cloth. The mast ended in a sleek wooden boat, and Vince estimated that the boat was almost forty steps long. He counted 36 shields hanging on the rim of the ship. Children were shouting excitedly and used the grown-ups as obstacles to improvise a game of hide-and-seek after losing interest in the unmoving men standing behind the shields. The silence on the ship stood in stark contrast to the noise radiating from the crowd, and Vince felt an unnatural chill in his spine as he approached the sea. However, a queasy feeling would not stop a friend of a wolfsman! Vince continued to edge nearer, when it hit him: The beards of the Hrid were frozen white and he could even notice tiny icicles forming on their garments.

The warriors did not seem to notice the cold nor did they react to the crowd that had formed around their ship. They stood unmoving behind their shields as the ship was slowly heaved by the waves, keeping watch and waiting. Vince decided that they won’t move any time soon, and left the harbour in deep thought. He had heard many stories of the capabilities of mages to control weather, but he did not remember hearing anything about a mage keeping an area constantly cold as ice. As far as he knew, that would have required a mage channelling for all the time – and he did not see any mage on the boat. It was not surprising that this was the main topic for gossip he heard

while returning through the market.

Vince was headed nowhere in particular, he knew that Ulf would be able to sniff him out without fail. Therefore he browsed the market stands to pass his time and listen to the buzz. Already the reason why they were here gave room for much speculation, as it was neither the time for much trade nor the time for raiding. Some thought, it was connected to rumours of a war against the giants, but most did not believe that theory. After all, how are you supposed to fight beings with the height of ten grown men?

The merchant selling Vince's wares, fat Francis, seemed to have forgotten that he should be selling the goods and was engrossed in a deep discussion of the visitors with a small crowd when Vince arrived at the stand.

"... and have you seen the cold surrounding the ship? Why are they bringing their cold magic into our town? This will only spell trouble with the magicians' guild, when this uncontrolled magic is freely allowed into our state. I tell you, the council should have never let the dragon anchor in our town!"

Into the accepting murmurs of the crowd, Tombil objected: *"Maybe, but they did not come in search of battle – and we are a free state, not subjects of the Mages guild, even if they would like that."*

"You should be more careful of what you say, old man, the Mages surely have their eyes and ears everywhere. And I tell you, they won't like these visitors, that's for sure. And what else do these Northerners do, if not raiding or other dishonest dealings?"

On this question posed by Francis, the people started to opine on the goal of the Hrid. Some thought, they were searching for a valuable artefact, others said that the young Hrid in search for glory journey to the end of the world, and since they were obviously using magic, another popular theory was that they would be looking for a very powerful magic. Whatever the reason for the Hrid to set sail was, none could offer a plausible explanation for what they were trying to achieve in meeting the city councillors.

A sudden gust of wind blew through the narrow market road where the merchants were appraising their wares and a red hat flew over fluttering tent roofs. The wind caressed and carried the hat over the slight hill rising behind the harbour and reached to the city keep erected on the highest point. There, Ulfric was balancing upside down under the castle roof. He was using the main beams to hold himself by his feet and with his superior hearing, he could listen to the voices of the city council. The air carried a hint of Vince mixed in the flavour of produce and a crowd of humans. For a short while, Ulf turned around to look in the direction of the market, where the wind had to come from. It was difficult even for him to single out individual scents from the total, but his friend always stood out, even in the biggest crowd. He had often pondered if it had anything to do with him being a foreigner, or if it was because the Opaci lived near the red mountain, but now the thought of the colour red forced his attention back to the council receiving the leader of the Hrid ship.

She may have had the looks of a beautiful woman, but to his nose, she did not smell human at all. If he had to put it into words, then he would have said she carried the fragrances of a burning battle and the deepest winter. Contrary to the dissonance in her scents, she had presented her requests in a mellow voice betraying the terrifying content of her words. It is not that Ulf completely understood, why the councillors were cowed by statements of Hildr – that was the name she gave, but the rancid smell of fear proliferated through the air and filled Ulf's nose. Only Wystan's father was

Chapter I “Black Bird”, Version 1.0.

angry instead of afraid, and it seemed that his patience was at end as well.

“It is absolutely unacceptable that you position an armed force within our walls! First and foremost, we are an independent state and the city guard is fully capable of guarding against any raider. If it is really true that the Jötunn will attack, then the Guild of the Magi will assist us and send a call for reinforcements to our allies. The Sa’Ba will not idly stand by when we are attacked, they gain too much from the trade with us, and one of their citizens lives on our island. And one citizen will be reason enough to send their Legions.”

Hildr did not waver and continued completely unfazed: *“The time of Fimbul comes, only Winter’s Guard will stand true. You will regret this blind day! Remember your consent to warn your subjects. And I shall speak to this Sa’Ba, may he see more reason. Where will I find him?”*

None of the other councillors wanting to answer, Wystan’s father continued, *“Cross Mountain Bridge and follow the road and you will find a rich farm with the Dragon’s flag. But I doubt your talk of war will change the determination of Octavius. He was a Legionnaire...”*

They continued, but Ulf had stopped listening and was already climbing through the forest of beams – he had to warn Vince that the Hrid wanted to talk to Octavius! His nose told him that Vince still remained at the market and so he made his way there.

Meanwhile the merchants and their customers were still discussing their unusual visitors, but the large crowd had dispersed and Vince was idling next to fat Francis. Thus, with everybody preoccupied yet, nobody expected the warning light of the tower of the Magi to be lit: A bright red pillar of bright light reaching to the sky, warning from a powerful magical beast approaching.

Later, this day would become the talk of many an evening story around the hearths and inns of Lavacia, now nobody had the time to process what was happening as a deafening roar was heard only after a large shadow had circled the red light twice before disappearing over the small sea in front of the town: A dragon!

“A life dragon!,” Vince thought, as Ulf appeared around another market stand. *“Did you see the dragon,”* Vince asked his friend.

Ulf nodded gravely, more because he was still absorbed in his thoughts. As he did not move to reply, Vince continued: *“What did you find out about the Hrid? Is their leader really a beautiful women, as they say?”*

Ulf drew nearer to Vince, before he answered after a moment’s pause: *“Who can say if she really is human, or beautiful, for that matter. But she wants to visit your father. And the dragon too, did it not fly in the direction of your home?”*

Vincentius never thought of the ominous prediction by the Nornir in the morning, as he shouted to Ulf that he should take care of his carriage and the mule, and he started running home; even he knew that his speed could not best the winged beast but it would not be for the lack of him trying, that he thought.

Just as Vincent took off, cola shook his wings and took flight, leaving a black feather slowly drift over the roofs of Lavacia shining in the heat of the afternoon sun. His

ascent would have seemed strange, if not unnatural to any careful observer, moving in a straight line while a strong westwards wind was blowing. Almost as if the bird followed another current. But with all the eyes searching for a dragon, not a single sight was wasted on a raven. And could anyone have seen what followed as the raven broke through the cover of the clouds, he might have had reason to wonder why the magician's alarm did not light much earlier. Not only did the air of plumpness that surrounded the bird follow a metamorphosis to become that of a dangerous predator, the raven also grew in size until he would have dwarfed an eagle. Soon after, the raven completely vanished from the sky over Lavacia and was approaching the spire of a castle keep, hidden by dark clouds.

There, the old warrior stood, waiting. He was unmoving and undisturbed by the passage of time. Suddenly, he spoke as if to no one in particular: "*How is the boy doing?*" In the silence that followed, one could but hear a rat scurrying about, and time stretched thin as a razor-sharp blade, and eons passed. Yet, no time had passed as the raven landed on the left pauldron, and begun to weave a story about a young farmer, living a peaceful life on the hilltop of a small island in the gulf of a silent sea.
