

Chapter 1.1

An Old Song

Anarand'aris, Year 4.310 in the Age of Last Hope

7th of Yumtal in the Windy Season

D'al Vorat, County of Amalay, Realm of Kiriador

I sprinted towards the song, summoning all the strength I could muster. The distant melody filled the air, heady, melancholic, laced with invisible threads that tasted of longing and fear. Ahead, the nocturnal forest unfolded like a half-forgotten dream, its shadowy branches clawing at the air like the restless hands of nameless phantoms. A cold wind swept past, brushing my face with whispers of long-forgotten promises.

♪♪♪ *dan liadáros tir sána k'álano, ru sal radíani 'míi ke 'viléno* ♪♪♪

♪♪♪ *o átri soróno galáti eléda esíed 'iradánno* ~♪♪♪

“Come, beloved, and gaze into my eyes,” the melody crooned. “They hold the colour of a sapphire sky.”

The words resonated in my mind, stirring echoes of memories long buried. A tender invitation, laced with subtle, yet irresistible command. The very air pulsed with their meaning, drawing me towards the source, tempting me to uncover its secret.

Ahead, a dim scarlet glow pierced the darkness. Where the light seeped through, the twisted silhouettes of the trees resembled a blood-drenched gateway to Aartókh-Dággaras.

♪♪♪ *dan liadáros tir sána k'álano, ru báo lánsa 'mína ke 'binádo* ♪♪♪

♪♪♪ *o átra per 'innog éнно ása uláni 'tamádol* ~♪♪♪

The melody deepened, weaving ache and yearning around my thoughts until I could no longer tell them from my own. Its words curled through the air like a lover's caress. Inescapable. And with them came a power that wasn't mine, filling me, strengthening me.

A final barrier loomed ahead – a wall of tightly entwined branches and brambles. Without pause, I plunged through.

The forest vanished behind me as I emerged into a clearing steeped in otherworldly beauty. Across the dense carpet of moss, jagged stones and gnarled roots jutted from the earth like ancient, weathered bones. The air hung thick with the scents of damp leaves, tree sap, and freshly disturbed soil. Mist clung to the ground, catching the scarlet glow in droplets that shimmered like freshly-spilled blood.

♪♪♪ _dan liadáros tir sána k'álano , ru ása salísuni 'míi ke 'násmao ♪♪♪
♪♪♪ o átri bógnu galáti eleda álerid 'karídan ~♪♪♪

The melody was inside me now, resonating in my bones with a promise I couldn't ignore. Just as I couldn't ignore the light ahead. Its source was deceptively small – no larger than a closed fist – yet brilliant. It appeared motionless, but within it, a scarlet core pulsed like something alive.

A crystal orb.

It hovered atop an altar at the heart of the clearing, its surface worn smooth by centuries of rain and wind. The colours of the world drained around the orb's glow. The trees, the stones, even the sky – everything faded to washed-out grey shadows. Only the scarlet light remained.

It seared into my vision. It called to me.

♪♪♪ _sána azúr 'din énno liadár 'min , ru kalít 'din énno ~♪♪♪
♪♪♪ _sána méeru 'dína énno liadár 'min , ru róshta 'dína énno ~♪♪♪
♪♪♪ _sána dan rée 'védeo éste 'móritan ran 'álano ~♪♪♪

The song whispered of life and death, of passion and pain – a tapestry woven from threads I dared not unravel. Dreadfully familiar. It had always been there, hadn't it? Unseen, unknown, waiting in silence for me to remember it all.

To remember *her*.

With effort, I tore my gaze from the orb – only to meet her still, motionless figure.

She knelt before the altar, draped in heavy scarlet robes. The melody, once vibrant, now spilled from her concealed lips as a soft, wordless hum. Sensing my eyes upon her, she rose with an ethereal grace and turned towards me. From within the shadows of her hood, unseen eyes locked onto mine.

Every instinct screamed for me to turn back. Yet my feet moved of their own accord, bound to a will beyond my own.

I took a step. Then another.

With each pace, the air grew heavier, dense with unspoken promises, thick with a presence that pressed against my skin. Suffocating. Vast. Intimate. A slow-churning web of crimson tendrils coiled around us, threading reality into something else.

And then – somehow – I stood just a breath away from her.

Without a sound, the robe slipped from her shoulders.

Before me stood a vision of impossible beauty, her bare form radiant with a grace that could only have been sculpted from the fabric of the most sacred of dreams. Every curve, every delicate line, every secret spot shimmered beneath the mist as a living poem bound in flesh.

My gaze ascended, tracing the cascade of luxuriant crimson hair that flowed down to her waist – and then halted in bewilderment.

A mask, pale and flawless, concealed her face completely. It bore neither features, nor markings. Only the cold geometry of a white ceramic oval, with two narrow eyeholes and a slightly wider opening at the lips. Its pure, absolute blankness unsettled something deep within me.

My hand rose – slowly, instinctively – gliding across her damp, silky skin, towards the hollow of her throat. There it hovered, trembling, suspended in aching stillness. The space between us pulsed, charged with desperate yearning.

And I reached for her face.

A voice shrieked within me, pleading with me to stop. But something primal and unrelenting insisted that the answers I sought lay behind that mask. That all the truth I longed for began there.

My hand moved. My eyes never left hers. My heart thundered as I tore the mask away.

The spell shattered.

Like a lumin-crystal struck by lightning, the enchantment holding me collapsed. A scream tore through the trees – raw and discordant – and it wasn't mine alone. Two voices, interwoven: one filled with horror, the other with pain and rage.

The sound surged outwards, fractured the air—

—and ripped open the silence of my bedroom.

For one vertiginous instant, I hovered between worlds. The darkness around me shifted; it writhed, swelling beyond control, ready to burst and drown me in its waking nightmare.

My pulse thundered. Sweat trickled down my brow, stinging my eyes. Madness clung to me like a second skin. I could feel the ghost of her lips against my neck. Her scent lingered in the air, and from somewhere beyond the waking world, the fading echo of her song still called to me.

“By Azur's light,” I muttered, dragging a trembling hand across my face, as if that could wash away the nightmare.

Even without the adrenaline coursing through me, the night remained oppressively warm. The silk sheets clung to my damp skin – smooth, clammy, and stifling. A sensation all too familiar, carrying with it the echo of her embrace... and all that followed.

Passion. Pain. Violence. Death.

I threw the sheets aside. Even upright, the walls pressed inwards, towering and suffocating. Air. I needed air. My legs carried me towards the balcony in uneven strides, past the lumin-crystal lamp on the nightstand. I didn't want its light; all I needed was Ria's silver glow, pouring generously through the wide windows, eager to guide my steps.

The night wind enveloped me like a shroud of salvation.

Still strong for the tail end of the Windy Season, it carried with it the familiar scents of the city – fish and brine from the lake, the acrid tang of fresh tar, and the distant hum of the northern harbour. It didn't silence the echoes of my dream, but it gave me something else to hold onto.

I leaned on the stone railing, letting my gaze sweep over the countless lights of D'al Vorat sprawling beneath the castle. From here, I could see the city in full – serene, ordered, and eternal. Even on the most ordinary of nights, this view brought peace to my mind: the comfort of being home, where everything was in its place.

Tonight, I cherished it more than ever.

“Ra'maen.”

Her name escaped me unbidden, and with it came a flood: anger, hatred, longing... and an old ache that hadn't dulled enough in ten years. A shiver found me, unearned by the warmth of the night, and left something bittersweet clinging to my lips.

“Ra'maen... why do you haunt my dreams again, after all this time?”

No answer came. Of course not. And yet, for one treacherous heartbeat, I yearned to hear her voice again, just once. The silence offered nothing. My fingers traced the scar at the base of my neck, and recoiled, as if the long-healed wound still burned.

“Why now?” I whispered into the dark.

The question hung there, empty and absurd, before the wind swept it away.

Suddenly, I needed a drink. Something strong. Di'erae with a bitter flavour, perhaps. I had just the one in mind from *Karrte & Sons* in my study. It was far too early for alcohol by my own standards, but... what harm could it do?

With that thought, I turned and strode purposefully towards the door.

The sudden flap of wings overhead stopped me mid-step. I froze, my gaze snapping upwards.

The stars were sparse tonight, scattered across wide patches of darkness – ample space for a predator to hide, to manoeuvre unseen in the endless expanse above. Years had passed since the last gah'ardar attack, but the chaos and destruction that creature had wrought left marks not easily forgotten. People still glanced at the sky with unease. And in my current state of mind, I half-expected to see that winged horror descending on the castle once again.

For several tense moments, I scanned the night. Then I saw it: a vague silhouette gliding high above, resolving into a bird. Large, swift, and unmistakably headed for my balcony. As it dipped low enough to catch the light of Ria, its feathers burst into a soft, amber-gold flame.

An Amber Hawk. Not an ordinary bird. A viliehar. A messenger.

The hawk descended towards the stone railing, wings beating slow and steady to check its speed. The wind stirred by its descent brushed against my face, carrying the scent of wild air and distant stormfronts. I closed my eyes for a moment, letting it wash over me. When I opened them again, its talons had already found purchase on the railing. Its wings folded with a faint shiver.

The hawk tilted its head, inspecting me with one unblinking eye – then the other. A soft, expectant cry escaped its beak.

“Viliehar v'alano,” I murmured and extended my right fist. *Welcome, messenger.*

The hawk stared a moment longer, its amber eyes sharp and fearless, then hopped onto my arm. Its talons gripped my bare skin but didn't pierce it – this was part of its magic. A small black box was fastened to its left leg.

“Is this for me?” I asked quietly, though I already knew the answer. Viliehari never err in finding their intended recipient.

The hawk let out another cry, sharper this time, impatient.

I smiled and carefully unfastened the box. “Thank you. You are free to hunt upon my lands.”

The hawk gave me a final cry as if saying goodbye and, with a few powerful strokes of its wings, melted into the night. And I stood still, gripping the box until its edges bit into my palm. What if the seal bore no crest at all, but something older, something scarlet?

Sentimental fool, I scolded myself, staring at the small object. *You know full well where she is.*

Even so, it took more effort than I expected to open my hand and examine the seal. A moment later, I exhaled in relief. It bore the crest of my brother, Arin Vorat. Still... it was strange. Arin

had never sent a viliehar before. I hadn't even known he possessed one. Why not use a comm-disc, as he usually did?

I broke the seal with my thumb and unrolled the note, my fingers not entirely steady. Ria's moonlight was enough to make out the contents. Arin's familiar handwriting filled the single sheet, each word concealed with encryption. But what caught me off guard was the cipher my brother had chosen.

The dream and the thought of di'erae fled my mind.

Arin had used the most intricate cipher known to the Vorat Family. Unlike him, I needed the codebook to decipher it – a task that would demand focus, time, and clarity. I hurried back into the bedroom, seized the first robe within reach, and all but bolted for the study.

The spiral staircase wound upwards, fifty steps, perhaps more, each one a small eternity beneath the fever of my impatience.

I burst into the spacious oval room.

The book I needed was secured in the small vault beneath my desk. With a sweaty hand, I unlocked the mechanisms and hauled open the heavy steel door. Lumin-crystals embedded within flickered to life, casting a cool glow over the contents: documents, a casket of gold anarandi, another of precious gems, several rare artefacts... and at last – the Vorat Family codebook.

I reached for it. But something else caught my eye.

A small pouch of pale leather lay nearby, its strings hanging loose where they should have been tightly bound. Through the opening, I glimpsed what lay inside: a nearly transparent crystal orb, no larger than a hen's egg, faintly pulsing with a scarlet glow at its core.

My outstretched hand went numb.

"By Kalit's oblivion... she awakens," I whispered. The floor vanished beneath my feet. I staggered back, gripping the desk for balance.

The nightmare that had jolted me awake was no longer merely a dream.