

THE CANAL
BY
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"It's not fair. Valos gets anything he asks for!" Peri was grouching again. "Just because *they've* named him successor --"

"And Valos must go to extra lessons, and study more history, and compose stupid essays that are picked apart by Master Arvo. Would you want to do that?" asked Draius, Peri's cousin.

"But Valos likes that stuff." Peri's older brother was strange. When Peri would rather be outside, riding or running about the streets, Valos would be inside some dank and dark archive, studying those silly papers written by the Royal Academy of Sciences. "I would think *they* would pick someone -- someone less studious."

"Never stick your nose into matriarchal business." Draius used a superior tone to quote the well-worn saying, and Peri hoped she wasn't going to start lecturing. She was only two years older than him, after all.

But Draius was distracted from her lecture by the arrival of two more cousins, although the term "cousin" loosely applied to anyone within the Meran-Viisi lineage. Nonni was a year younger than Peri, but she was fearless in her curiosity. Voima was oldest, being ten years, but while he was named after the legendary Tyrran king and explorer, he was slow and rarely showed initiative. Peri doubted that Voima would ever be considered for successor; Voima was probably a disappointment to the matriarchy, considering his name.

Nonni had already decided how they were going to spend their morning, before they attended afternoon lessons.

"Let's go up to the north canals, where the water's fresh and cold." Nonni jumped up and down with excitement, her silver-blond hair floating about her shoulders. She had left her hair unbraided today and looked younger than her age of six, almost seven, years.

Peri glanced at Draius, but she was looking at the morning sun.

"It's going to be hot today," Draius pronounced, as she flipped her blond braids over her shoulder. "It's a good day for a swim." Peri's heart sank.

Voima nodded, and they were all running through the market square before Peri could think of anything better to divert them. He followed along reluctantly. He was a good swimmer, but the north canals bothered him. They were deep, and their waters were frigid near their lowest depths. The feeling of cold water twisting about his ankles and tugging him, holding him, had woke Peri yet again this morning. His recurring dream always left him gasping and sweating, twisted in his linens.

Merchants setting up their booths in the square nodded and smiled as they raced by. They weren't the only children about the streets this morning, trying to have some fun before their lessons. Peri looked about the square for one of the Phrenii: the creatures were often here in the mornings, hoping to meet with children, and vice versus. But none were to be seen this morning.

In the Tyrran sister cities of Betarr Serin and Betarr Serasa, no one considers the possibility of an adult harming a child. Every adult knows the Phrenii roam the streets to watch over children, and no adult could ever face the Phrenii for harming a child. The Phrenii do not kill, but insanity can occur for adults that get too close to the creatures, or harm their charges --

A dirty hand snatched Peri aside as he trailed behind the others. He staggered sideways and turned to face the beggar, sitting in the shadows at the mouth of the alley.

"Let go of me!" Peri pulled backward, but the grip on his upper arm was tight, and the man pulled him closer. Peri wrinkled his nose: something smelled bad in the alley, and it was either the beggar or the food beside the crate he sat on. Perhaps both were rotting.

"Rich enough to have lessons, aren't you? Got any coin for lesser beings, boy?" Only the man's face showed through the ragged blanket that was over and about his head and shoulders. The man's face was wrinkled,

almost wizened, but his light gray eyes were bright in the low light of the alley.

"I'm sorry, ser, but I'm not carrying any coins." Peri tried to be polite. Now both claw-like hands gripped him tightly, and he couldn't break free. His heart pounded.

"Leave him be. He's Meran-Viisi!" Voima finally noticed that Peri wasn't following behind him, and had come back into the alley. Voima, much taller than Peri, grabbed one of the beggar's hands and pulled it off Peri's arm.

Peri winced at Voima's words. There was no sense spouting out their lineal name, because this man was obviously *nunetton*, one of the forgotten nameless. Leave it to Voima to make the situation worse. While Voima pulled at Peri's free arm, the grip on Peri's other arm tightened painfully.

"Meran-Viisi, huh? You going to be King one day, boy?" The man's eyes were bright, almost feverish.

Peri stared steadily back into the ravaged face, which was level with his eyes.

"No," Peri said firmly. "I won't be King."

"But his older brother will be -- so take care, ser." The words came from Draius. She had come back to find their delay, and Peri felt relief. His cousin Draius carried an air of authority that couldn't be found in Voima.

"Where's your brother now, boy?"

"He's studying." Peri had last seen Valos this morning rummaging around the Meran-Viisi study and calling for the Royal Historian. Valos was only five years older than Peri, but he now seemed as set in his ways as any other adult.

"He's not playing about the streets, nor seeing the people? Is that left for you to do, boy?" The beggar's grip loosened.

Draius lightly put her hand on the man's arm. "Ser," she said quietly. "Leave him be, while you follow the path you have chosen."

The man's hand dropped, but his face twisted as he looked at Draius, whose right sleeve was in the sunshine, while her face and left side fell into

the shadow of the alley. His eyes squinted as he focused on her.

"If you think I have *chosen* my path, ser, then you're not as clever as I took you for -- or are you training to be one of *them* when you grow up? Will you carry the title of Lady some day?" The man started coughing, then hacking. When he finished, he spit a gob of something between Draius' feet.

Voima exclaimed and pushed forward, but Peri put a hand on the older boy's chest, stopping him. While the beggar had addressed Peri as "boy," the beggar had taken care to address Draius as "ser." There was no disrespect intended in the man's behavior.

Draius put her hands on her hips and frowned. For a moment, Peri thought his self-confident and logical cousin was nonplussed. Then she reached into the pocket on her doublet, scooped out a coin and flipped it down in front of the beggar.

"Play your games with someone else, ser." Her tone was cool and she stepped away from the beggar, motioning for them to follow her.

"Yeah, old man," jeered Voima, but he stopped as Draius shook her head.

They were well away from the alley and had rejoined the impatient Nonni when Peri tugged on his older cousin's elbow.

"Did he speak the truth, Draius? Lady Nuora says that all *nunetton* can come back -- that they choose to be nameless."

Draius sighed. "Even though we make fun of Master Arvo for being such a dry stick -- he's still right about some things. Words can be tricky. That man didn't say he *hadn't* chosen his path, but he didn't say he *had*, either.

"But why would someone choose to be a beggar, living off thrown coins and garbage? But otherwise, how could Lady Nuora be wrong?"

"She's not wrong," said Draius, "But she doesn't speak of the consequences."

"His lineage would feed him, give him clothes, and a place to work." Peri thought of the rags and the dirt that clung to the beggar like skin.

"And they'd choose everything for him, even contract his wife. He'd

have obligations to his lineage, and maybe he doesn't want that. Remember cousin Ihana?"

Peri remembered Meran-Viisi Ihana, who turned nineteen a few years ago. She was beautiful, headstrong, and had no head for numbers or economics -- as Tyrrans say, "men have the passion for politics, but women for business." Ihana proved unsuitable for Meran-Viisi governance positions or management, and then refused to marry any of the contracts offered her by Lady Nuora. She had packed up the few belongings that she could petition the lineage for, and left Tyrra by ship. She was going south to Illus, which was a city in a strange country called Sareen. There had been no news of Ihana since she left, or no news that had trickled down to the Meran-Viisi children.

"Some people want the freedom to make all the decisions in their lives," Draius said. "But the rest of us will do what we should, for the lineage. Look at Valos -- they say he will make the ultimate sacrifice."

Peri shook his head. He couldn't comprehend a life where he had to make everything happen himself: whom would he marry, where would he live, and how would he make a livelihood? How would he raise and educate his children, without Meran-Viisi support? But Valos had been behaving strangely, ever since the matriarchy had named him successor. Valos acted like he already had the whole world on his shoulders, yet their father was still healthy and only fifty years old. The previous King Vaelta, Peri's grandmother's father, had lived to 123 years and had produced children until he was ninety. Valos might never attain the kingship -- but he acted like he had such responsibilities already.

"Valos has become such a stick! If we do put the lineage first, as Lady Nuora says -- "

"Lady Nuora's *always* right, by the Horn!" Voima broke in. He had been trotting behind them, listening to their conversation.

"You shouldn't swear, Voima," Draius said automatically, but they were all distracted by Nonni's shout. They had intersected a broad street that ran beside one of the two northern canals. To their right, a graceful marble

bridge arched over the canal. Nonni was ahead of them, dancing about near the blue-green canal waters. Here, on the northern side of Betarr Serasa, the canals were still clean and clear, fed by the cold waters of the Whitewater River.

Voima pushed past Peri, and joined Nonni on the short quay. They started stripping down, taking off their doublets, sleeves, and breeches. Peri noted neither Voima nor Nonni took care to fold their clothes, so Master Arvo was bound to scold them for their wrinkled appearance when they arrived at lessons.

Nonni was in the water first, making a fearless and beautiful arching dive into the deepest water of the canal. Peri froze, holding his breath. But she popped up, her free hair clinging to her head like a helmet. Voima followed, jumping feet first.

"Come on, Peri." Draius was laughing and holding his hand. She pulled him toward the water.

"Fine, but I can't go deep." Peri followed slowly. How could he explain the dream, where he was deep underwater, looking up at the light above but despairing in the depths? In his dream, the cold current licked at his legs and ankles, holding him down. He knew he could breathe, if he only went upward -- toward the light. But every time, despair held him and he chose the depths, until he work up in bed, gasping and shivering.

"Now who's the stick?" Draius was laughing at him while she worked at the ties of her sleeve. She already had her boots off. "Are you always going to enter the water like an old man?"

Peri didn't reply, concentrating on getting his own laces undone. He and Draius heard the ringing at the same time, their heads jerking up to look around. Nonni and Voima didn't hear; they were splashing at each other and shrieking.

Peri saw them first: two spiraling horns appeared over the gentle rise of the bridge, followed by translucent bodies about the size of deer. The magical ringing was clearer now -- tones that couldn't be replicated by any man-made instrument. Two of the Phrenii were approaching over the bridge,

surrounded by other children.

"It's Mahri *and* Dahni!" Peri saw the colors of their eyes. Adults would scold children for using their names: the Phrenii were not individuals; when you spoke to one, you spoke to all. But no adults were about.

This was too good a chance to pass up; rarely did one see two of the five Phrenii together. Draius and Peri raced for the bridge, not wanting to wait for Voima and Nonni to climb out of the canal.

Touching the Phrenii felt so *good*, but there was no way to describe the sensation. The creatures looked translucent, yet were hard as marble. They were neither hot nor cold, yet tingling sensations came to your hands. Touching them was like rolling in sweet, newly cut grass -- but without any stickiness or itchiness. Wrapping yourself in their manes made all your troubles go away...

There were children all about, of all ages below thirteen or fourteen years. Children petted the creatures, swung from their tufted tails, hugged their legs -- but no adult could come close enough to touch them. Even Valos had changed, perhaps a year ago. He had extended his hands and looked rather sick, backing away in spite of Peri's pleas.

I will never back away from the Phrenii; I want to always be able to touch them. But Peri knew he might as well resolve to never grow up. Everyone lost the ability to touch the Phrenii. Then their eyes would glaze over when the Phrenii came near, their gaze would slide over the creatures and never meet the faceted eyes directly, and they would mutter to children, "Don't touch them if you don't want to."

Draius was burying her head into Dahni's mane, losing herself in the scent, but Peri had questions that had to be answered. And since Dahni's element was water -- there was no better time than now.

"Dahni, I have a question." Peri had to shout over the other voices. He jumped up and down in front of the creatures, causing them to stop on the crest of the bridge.

Both horns dipped and one answered; Peri wasn't sure whether Mahri or Dahni answered him, in the melodious, but neither male nor female, voice.

"We know you, Meran-Viisi Perinon, son of Ilves and Soitto."

Peri struggled for the appropriate words. The Phrenii are immortal, and they cannot lie. But everyone knows their answers to questions are obtuse and even though the Phrenic Circle can be prescient, the creatures often confuse the future with the past.

"Dahni, I keep having a dream -- a terrible one." Peri blurted out his troubles. "Am I going to drown?"

Dahni cocked its head to observe Peri fully with one faceted, green eye. Its gaze seemed thoughtful.

"We cannot burden a child with a reading." Mahri answered for the Phrenii, while Dahni remained quiet.

So that was all he would get. Peri's eyes blurred and he closed them. He felt, rather than saw, Dahni lean down toward him.

"When dreaming, the Sight may present itself to anyone. Yet you should not burden yourself with this possibility." He opened his eyes. Dahni's head was very close to his. The great jaws were near his cheek, and the razor-sharp spirals of the creature's horn passed close by his left ear -- but Peri couldn't be afraid of the Phrenii.

"Be a child, Peri, while you can," continued Dahni softly. "We cannot see your end, but *in this we are certain*, you will not die by water." The creature stamped one cloven hoof, causing the stone bridge to ring and vibrate. Many of the younger children squealed and clapped their hands.

Peri's eyes widened. "In this we are certain..." was a phrase only used when the Phrenii were sure of their Sight. He sighed. Just because he dreamed of something, it wasn't really going to happen.

Peri felt as if a heavy pack had been taken off his shoulders. The Phrenii continued over the bridge, and Draius pulled Peri back to the quay.

"Come on, Peri, let's go swimming."

The Phrenii passed and they went back to their original entertainment. Nonni and Voima were back in the water, while Peri stood in his underclothes on the quay, hesitating. Draius offered her hand, but Peri shook his head. He watched her step backwards a few paces, then take a running dive into

the center of the canal. He waited until he was sure she surfaced...

Peri backed up to take a running jump, but his throat swelled in fear and he couldn't breathe for a moment. He could dive into ponds, but he couldn't face those cold waters headfirst. He swallowed twice, hard. Then he took a running jump, as far as he could into the canal. His heart pounded as the water closed overhead and he sank like a rock. He was thrashing his arms and legs immediately, feeling the cold, deep waters grab at his ankles and feet.

This was different from his dream: he desperately wanted to go upward to the green light, to the air, to breathe. As Peri kicked and pushed himself upward, he knew he would *never* stay down there in the dark green depths. This was not his dream.

He burst through the surface, into air, into warmth, into life.

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Perinon nearly fell out of his chair, gasping for air.

"Sire, are you all right?" The physician grabbed Perinon's arm and pushed him back into the chair. "Speak to me, Sire, please."

Perinon struggled to use his voice and his tongue. The smell of his smoldering clothes filled his nose, and he felt the wet linens the physician had used to control the heat generated by walking the Void.

"I'm fine, man. I'm sane." But Perinon's voice sounded thick and strange, even to his ears.

The physician glanced across the room, apparently needing another opinion.

"Perinon has bound himself to the Phrenii. He has walked the Void, and has returned without harm to his mind. Go tell the news to the women that wait: for the first time in our memory, a King is in rapport with the Spirit of the Phrenic Circle."

Perinon didn't have to look to see the source of the melodious voice, neither loud nor soft, but a voice that carried across the large room. He could *feel* Mahri. He looked down at the large ring on his finger, where a shard pulsed with a gold light. Gold was the light of Spirit, Mahri's element

and color. When Valos had worn the ring, it had pulsed with green light, because Valos had been in rapport with Dahni.

Valos. Perinon closed his eyes. His older brother's body lay cold and still in his apartments, waiting for the pyre. Valos had been only twenty-two, and had just been contracted for marriage. They had brought his body back from the hunting trip, from the disastrous accident in the Whitewater River, where the Phrenii couldn't be near enough to save him --

"Leave us!" Perinon said sharply to the physician. "Go tell Lady Nuora that I'm fine."

The man bowed and left quickly, his eyes darting between Perinon and the creature across the room. Perinon saw wisps of pity and loathing in the physician, mixed with envy, but the Phrenii weren't close enough for Perinon to read him well.

"You showed me that day at the canal. Why?" Perinon directed his question, challenging, to the Phrenii.

"We did not. You *chose* to re-live that day." Mahri came to stand within a couple of paces, but kept its distance. Perinon was only sixteen, but he had fully developed the normal adult antipathy toward the Phrenii. Had he not just experienced, again, that day by the canal, Perinon probably wouldn't even remember his childhood feelings when touching the creatures.

So much had happened since that day. The Fevers had come, taking almost one fifth of the Tyrran population despite the healing efforts of the Phrenii. Both Voima and Nonni were gone, dying with all the others. Bodies had lain in their beds, or the streets, for days -- there hadn't been enough of the living to light the necessary pyres. Perinon hadn't seen Draius since the Fevers, since their childhood had so abruptly ended, but he knew Draius had lost her mother. And he and Valos had lost their father, King Ihlves, and Valos had assumed the kingship, long before he should have done so.

"You *knew* that day -- you knew I'd be here, binding myself to you." Perinon's eyes were wide and blinking. He shook his head; he refused to cry.

"Yes." Mahri's horn dipped.

"You knew that Valos would die early, didn't you?"

"Yes."

Perinon waited; there was nothing more from the creature. The Phrenii didn't lie, but they didn't waste words, either.

"And you knew what my dream meant." Perinon whispered around the lump in his throat.

Perinon now knew how much his brother Valos feared, and loathed, the responsibilities of the kingship. Poor Valos. He'd much rather been a scholar than a leader, and he couldn't stand to watch his people die, with no way to help them. In desperation, Valos had opened up Tyrra to the rest of the Mapped World, hoping to find a cure for the Fevers. But no hope came from outside Tyrra and the Fevers had to run their course.

"Peri -- Sire, are you all right?"

Lady Nuora stood at the door, worry creasing her face. Her mask of calm and authority had slipped; she looked more like a concerned grandmother than a lineal matriarch. As Perinon watched, she regained her calm and grasped her authority -- almost physically. Because Mahri was near him, Nuora appeared like a transparent shell. The light and dark within her whirled, then calmed into bright sparks and ribbons of light, intertwined with only hints of Darkness. Nuora's Darkness was pride and guilt, but her Darkness was overwhelmed by her dedication to her lineage.

Perinon coughed, hiding his surprise. The Phrenii had told him what their proximity would mean and how he would be able to "see" within others -- but he couldn't be prepared for this.

"Mankind contains both Light and Darkness; this is a continual struggle within each of them." Mahri's voice drifted within Perinon's mind, like a summer breeze coming through a window. Mahri backed away and Nuora began to appear normal: a quite solid matriarch with business on her mind, responsible for the most powerful lineage in Tyrra.

"It's time, Sire." Nuora's tone was brusque. "The magistrates are assembled for the crowning."

Perinon stood, feeling awkward and young again. "My mother?" he asked.

Nuora shook her head. "Soitto is still sitting with Valos. I can't get her to leave his body."

Perinon tried not to show his disappointment. "First she lost Father, then Valos. She's been broken by grief." *And she's been left with only the son she ignored, not the son she adored*, he thought.

Nuora walked over, her aged body tall and straight. She was well over one hundred years, yet her braids still held glimmers of gold hair within the white. She put a hand on Perinon's shoulder.

"You're so young, younger than any Tyrran King before you -- yet you've bound successfully to the Phrenii," Nuora said quietly. "Soitto has her weaknesses; you've always known that. You're strong enough to forgive her, aren't you?"

To his disgust, tears squeezed out his eyes and ran down the side of his face. Perinon wiped them away furiously.

"You mean that I can be as *strong* as Valos?" His voice broke, warbling up to an embarrassing tone, then down to normal.

"What?" Nuora stared at him. Her hand tightened on his shoulder.

"I *know*, and the Phrenii know. I dreamed about it long ago. Valos *let* himself die, by the element of his choosing."

There was silence in the room as the matriarch of the Meran-Viisi locked gazes with the future King of Tyrra. Perinon wouldn't let his eyes drop, until Nuora finally looked away.

"You cannot *know* your brother's mind or his will, Perinon," Nuora said. "You must never speak of this to Soitto."

"But you're not surprised."

"Valos may not have been the best choice -- but at the time, we thought Ilves would live longer and there would be more successors to choose." Nuora's voice was dull, and she looked down. "We couldn't anticipate the Fevers."

"You knew that Valos couldn't handle the pressure?" Perinon's tone was accusing.

Nuora's head whipped up, her gray eyes as cold and unyielding as the

dawn creeping up the Cen Cerinas Mountains. Perinon backed away a step.

"Past decisions cannot be unmade, Sire. *You* are stronger than Valos, even though you come from Soitto. *You* will wear the crown and face your duty, for you carry the ancient Meran blood. *You* will not fail me, Perinon."

Perinon winced. Her voice felt like steel slitting silk.

Nuora's face softened. "We won't speak of this again. A childhood dream is just a dream, and as for what the Phrenii know -- "

Her gaze went over his shoulder to the forgotten Mahri. Her eyes glazed, and then she fixed them on Perinon's face and continued: "What the Phrenii *know* of the past is of no consequence to your future, Sire. You must accept the Crown today, and then officiate at your brother's pyre. Our lives, and our people, must move onward."

Perinon took a deep breath and tried to ease the strain in his shoulders. "Well, then, let's go."

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