



a novelette by J. Nelson Leith

I

I am, or I *was* until recently, a grand basseteer. Not that I was grand—in fact I was only a middling performer. I play, or I *played*, the grand basset, which is like the basset you may be familiar with, but larger, longer, and of a deeper sound.

But, I have not played the grand basset in years. Not since I met Yankro, fled from the Delkhite, and abandoned my gods.

I have not even spoken to my gods since then, much less prayed or sacrificed to them. I am not sure they would welcome me back. But, I can live with that. I have new gods and they have taken good care of me.

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As I write this, in a theater in Ghessardy where a local playwright has elected to put Yankro's story on the stage, it occurs to me that my old gods might be watching. There will not be any grand bassets in the accompanying music, since that is not a popular instrument in Ghessardy, but there will be music.

The playwright, Safario, is busy with the carpenters, painters, and clothiers who will build the set. He has been rather obnoxious about authenticity, in not only the dialogue but the appearance

of the scenes. He insists I work on my personal account at the theater while he works on the play, so he can have *u axeso*.

Access. To me. Even if I am busy writing.

His play and my account are thus at war. So, the war gods I adopted from Yankro would also be watching.

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My grand basset is carved from two pieces, the upper shaft of red clemence and the lower shaft from dohla, a darker wood. You may not have heard of those trees, although *white* clemence is often used to make bexolos and contrapunts, and various viols are made of *black* clemence. Red clemence and dohla are trees found in Metluk, where the grand basset is actually a very common instrument. In fact, it was from a Metlun trader in Ghessardy that I bought mine.

This may make it sound as if I frequent Ghessardy. In fact, I have only been there twice. Once, on a pilgrimage to the temple of Donica Ghessardine during which I purchased the grand basset. And now, on a contract with the acclaimed Safario da Ghessardie to provide witness for his latest play, the *Traxedia da Yancro*.

It is perhaps ironic that, on my second visit, I am estranged from Donica and no longer play the grand basset.

It is a fine instrument, to be true. The two woods give it a range of mood that I do my meager best to use to effect. Or, I *did*. When my breath was soft, the upper shaft of red clemence sang sweet. When my breathe was strong, the lower shaft of dohla rumbled like thunder. If I was cautious, or when I was caught in the spirit of Donica and Stirlos, a subtle combination of moods would sound forth from my exotic basset.

I can even do animal calls. This had occasionally come in handy when I was performing for a play. And more than once, during lean times, when I let myself be hired out by hunters.

The Metlun trader told me, in broken Ferrisian, that the basset is dedicated to the god Tlehui. It has symbols and animals carved into its sides that supposedly tell the story of how Tlehui charmed the sun into mating with the moon, who later gave birth to the stars all in a litter.

Apparently, the sun and moon are thought to be lions of a sort in Metluk, while Tlehui is an antelope. The basset was supposed to represent an antelope horn, but there are no antelope carvings on it. Just two cats staring at each other and a lot of exotic Metlun writing. And, a lot of stars.

I prayed to Tlehui for a while, but I do not think he (or she, I never asked) listened. Perhaps, Metluk is too far away for my prayers to be heard. To be true, given my meager talents at the grand basset, Donica and Stirlos never answered my prayers, either, although I often stood right in front of their images while I prayed.

II

As I told Safario, I met Yankro when I was playing the grand basset for hire at a private feast at the house of a squire of Asperse, on the occasion of Winterstand. The feast was confined to the main hall, garlands of redholm draped across the doorways to the private spaces, but the main hall was more than adequate for the town dignitaries gathered therein.

A pair of long tables held red glass plates of roast duck and Metlun hen, vinegar chard, and pears, with candles and bottles of wine, ale, and mead spread out like siege towers on a battlefield. There were also bronze bowls of milk punch. Between the tables, aimed toward the door, was a long, scarlet-and-buff rug with dancing deer, rearing lions, and birds of prey. There was an enormous cooking hearth along one wall, decorated with redholm, spruce, and gold-and-silver ribbons.

Not real gold and silver, mind you. The squire of Asperse was not that wealthy. He did lay out a nice holiday spread, however.

I was performing Winterstand hymns and chorals with a viol plucker, a bexolist, and three singers. I do not remember any of their names. They were only about as good as I was, but there was enough wine and milk punch going around that nobody cared.

Everyone was eating, opening the squire's gifts, singing, and wishing Father Joy and Mother Hearth a warm welcome. A few of them were getting a bit too familiar with each other for public morals, but it *was* Winterstand, the end of the year, and nobody took notice or called for a vicar. The vicar, indeed, was standing by the fireplace, draining a glass of mulled wine.

One fellow, whom I had not seen before in Asperse, was sitting near the vicar near the hearth, drinking straight whiskey. He did not have a Winterstand face. And, he was not dressed like a settled townsman, his jacket a bit too rugged and his boots a bit too worn. He had a look of the road about him.

I also noticed that he not only never sang along, but he never once smiled as we started a new song. When the singers pleaded their throats and we took a rest, I whispered a word to Donica and Stirlos, and set myself to work this stranger out.

"You are not in the Winterstand spirit?" I was trying to be playfully blunt. "Sir...?"

He set his empty glass on the floor and squinted at me.

"I'm not a knight," he said. "And, I don't like music much."

It was an intolerable insult to disparage a man's gods. Particularly during the good will of Winterstand. He did not look like the sort of man I wanted to confront on the matter, however.

He nodded at my basset.

“But, at least that’s not a flute.”

In fact, among musicians, the grand basset *is* considered a type of flute. But again, I was not ready to confront him on the matter.

“It is a grand basset. From Metluk.”

He shrugged and glanced at the empty glass on the floor before turning his eyes back to mine.

“Can you perhaps play something... more martial?”

“Martial?”

A gloom came over him. “Do you know the *Lament of Abbey Groring*?”

I grimaced. “That is a truly sad tune. Not exactly something to play at Winterstand.”

“It happened at Winterstand.”

He was not completely wrong. The Battle of Abbey Groring took place two days before Winterstand, but the lamentations that followed no doubt dampened the holiday itself.

I nodded at him and went to talk it over with the other musicians. The viol plucker was opposed, and the bexolist noncommittal, but the singers thought it would be a good way to get all eyes and ears on us before moving on to our final quartet of merry chorals. The vote was won.

I sounded a deep, rough note—like the call of a red elk—to announce the music was beginning again. The note was also a key cue for the singers, who began unaccompanied:

“‘Twas two nights be-fore Winterstand, upon the Groring Plain.”

Conversations stopped, and every face had turned to us. Some in admiration, many in surprise. The rugged stranger still did not smile, but he nodded at me.

“A bitter snow had fa-allen, and winter come a-gain.”

In the quiet between lines, just before the instruments were to come in, heavy hooves beat on the frozen ground outside the squire’s house. The candles around the hall burned low and red. Even the fireplace dwindled to licking flames.

All eyes were on the door. The musicians, including me, took a step back in silence.

“Not again,” the stranger hissed.

The immense sound of a horse’s snort set the floorboards to shaking.

I turned to the stranger. “What?”

He stood and drew his sword. Several of the gentlemen in the hall followed that lead.

“I’m not ready,” the stranger said.

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All of that dialogue I make sure Safario gets right. Those words are burned into my memory. The stranger was indeed Yankro himself, a name I only learned later.

The playwright wants to include the entire *Lament* before the arrival of the Delkhite at Asperse. I will not have it. Groring Abbey had also been besieged by the Delkhite. He features in the song, albeit by a more poetic name, the Axeman. Not to assume that I know better than the acclaimed Safario da Ghessardie, but it would seem absurd foreshadowing to make that connection clear so early in Yankro’s play by including the entire *Lament*.

But, I learned later, Yankro had known it when he requested the *Lament*. It was dwelling on the Delkhite that had dampened his Winterstand spirits. Indeed, dampened his spirits every day since the siege of Groring Abbey.

He had been there, had taken sanctuary with the monks of Groring when the Delkhite had found him for the first time. The Axeman smashed open the west gate of the abbey, plowed through the monks, and forced Yankro to flee through the east gate.

Yankro escaped in the company of a monk who knew of another sanctuary, the manse of Isbeck. It is, perhaps, ironic that the monk had been a hymnalist. That monk, whose name I had learned in another context but do not now remember, wrote the *Lament* as he and Yankro fled to the Isbeck Manse, where the Delkhite again found Yankro.

And, so it went, sanctuary after sanctuary, until Asperse.

III

At the squire’s house in Asperse, after our music stopped and the gentlemen drew their arms, we heard boots hit the frozen ground outside like masonry falling from a broken wall. Then, the door burst open, frame and all, in a shower of boards, nails, hinges, and splinters.

Everyone not holding a weapon retreated to the far wall, myself included. I had only my basset.

There was just a hole where the door had been, darkness and snow billowing through it. What stepped into that hole was a nightmare.

The Delkhite had the form of a man, but greater than any man I had ever seen. He stood half again as tall as I do and his frame was as broad and solid as a windmill. From neck to toe, he was clad in torn black leather, and a cloak of gray hung over his shoulders. His skin was as white as

ice and, in the root-like fingers of one hand, he held an iron axe the size of a well-born calf. On his head, he wore an iron helmet with seven horns, six to either side like those of a steer, and one straight up at the top like an obelisk. His beard was as black as coal, his eyes as hollow as those of a skull and glowing thin blue like twin stars of ill omen.

Yankro sheathed his sword and rushed past me. The other men wielding arms stepped forward past the tables, all swords, axes, and daggers. But I, being armed with only a large flute, believed it prudent to follow Yankro toward the rear door.

I saw, over my shoulder as I ran, the squire of Asperse rush forth. He was cleaved in two like a twig by the Delkhite's axe, but with more blood and squeals from those in witness than one might expect from a cloven twig.

Yankro tore through the redholm garland blocking the rear doorway and disappeared into the unlit private spaces of the house.

More gentlemen surged forward, but I was gone from the main hall as they noisily met their fates behind me. Soon, Yankro and I were through a window he had smashed open, and running toward a stable in the falling snow.

He was a warrior, like those fighting in the house. As a dutiful man of another profession, I was confused.

"Where are you going?"

He grunted at me, annoyed.

"Where are *you* going? Why are you following me?"

I persisted with my thought: "Why are you not—"

"Why are *you* not?" he growled.

"I am a basseteer!" I held the instrument out as proof, then nodded at his sheath.

"You are a swordsman."

He threw open the doors of the stable and stared rage at me.

"I'm not ready for him."

That was the second time he had said that. They were words burned into my recollection, which I dutifully retold to Safario.

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“The stable is a problem,” Safario is saying to me.

To be honest, he just said it to me. He interrupted my account, we had a conversation, and now he has returned to the carpenters as I return to my account. But, permit me to write this as it occurred. You are reading this later than I am writing this, and I write this in the middle, as Safario and I discuss what came even before.

“How so?” I say.

“It is a new building, but it only features for—” he checks the notes on his sheaf of papers, “five lines of dialogue.”

“Alright,” I say. I want to get back to my account. The playwright’s meticulous attention to balancing authenticity and staging is tiresome. “Put all of the dialogue in the house, before we escape through the rear window.”

“You will,” he snaps his fingers, trying to think of the words. He retreats into his own tongue. “*Testificarás dau autenticidade?*”

I muster my meager understanding of Ghessardine.

“My dearest Safario, I will indeed attest to the authenticity. It is just a change of scene. The words are true.”

“Yes, yes!” he says, grinning. “*Si, just a change dau escena!*”

IV

I stole a horse. It was the only time I have ever stolen anything, on my life. I hoped that the belongings I had left behind at the tavern next to the squire’s house justly compensated the owner.

Yankro and I fled Asperse to the south, driving our horses as hard as we could until they began stumbling from the effort. He guided us to a grove of spruce, laden with snow, a gap in the middle revealing the open winter sky, alight with stars. He sent me gathering firewood as he set up camp.

Soon, there was a small fire going and a canvas shelter he had set up from his saddle bags. He had skewers of vegetables on the flames, likely also from his saddle bags. He had even arranged stones for us to sit on.

“Who *was* that?” I said, after a long silence spent eating.

“The Delkhite,” he said.

That word meant nothing to me at the time. He might as well have told me it was the Murdiddle or the Glomsarom. It was just a string of sounds.

“You *know* that man,” I said.

“Not a man. A demigod. They are the heralds of the Lord and Lady of Death.”

“They?”

He poked at the fire with a stick.

“The Axeman is only one. The Bhudite carried a club. The Skrowdite carried a spiked mace—”

I shook my head and waved my hand. These were nonsense words to me. I was never a very good student of mythology.

“There are four,” he said. “They’ve been doing the work of Hrandal and Aia since those two rose to the throne.”

Those were names I knew. The god and goddess of death, brother and sister. I was familiar with the image of the Throne of Death, Aia draped incestuously across Hrandal’s lap. They had an alcove in the Allshrine of Ikhtishan, which I visited on a pilgrimage to pray before my own gods there. I did not know much about the siblings, except that they had jointly inherited their father’s throne when—unbefitting of a god, particularly a god of death—he had died.

“You said you are not ready.” I looked at him until he looked at me. “What do you need?”

“I know not,” he said, “yet.”

That was not much help. This is when I decided that we should know each other.

“I am Erik of Koyle,” I said.

“Yankro,” he said, “of many places.”

I attempted to be light, despite that this had not turned out well the last time I tried it with Yankro.

“Lately of Asperse.”

He glared at me while tending casually to the fire.

“Yes,” he said. “I need to find another place to hide out.”

“He hunts you?” I said. “The Axeman.”

He nodded, staring into the flames.

“I was—” he started. “There was a *prophecy*. Four boys born to defeat the four Heralds of Death. I am one. The last one.”

“The others?”

“Oh,” he shrugged and huffed a sardonic chuckle. “They *fulfilled* their prophecies. The other three Heralds are gone.”

There was another long silence as he poked at the fire.

“I have fled the Delkhite from sanctuary to sanctuary,” he said. “The first being Groring Abbey.”

He then told me of the siege of the abbey, the siege of the manse in Isbeck, and of every sanctuary from then to Asperse. He had been a mere handler in the stable of a lord when the prophecy named him in the last of four quatrains of song from an oracle in Staurence. He had fled his master to keep his house safe, hoping that the monks of Groring could pray a cloud of obscurity around him.

But, the Delkhite had tracked him. Death is, or *was*, a master hunter. There was no stopping the Axeman.

Yankro was quiet for a long time after his account, elbows on knees, staring into the fire.

“You are not ready,” I finally said. “You need something. A weapon?”

“A weapon,” he said. “Something.”

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“The dialogue at the campsite,” Safario intrudes. *Intruded*. Again, I am writing this shortly after the intrusion ended.

“Yes?”

“Did he not tell you how the other heralds were defeated?”

I shrug and feel my mouth tightening.

“He did not.”

Safario glances over his shoulder at the actors who would portray myself and Yankro. The man standing in for me is a bit short, and balding. The man standing in for Yankro is about three stone too slight.

“The story of their defeat would be very interesting,” the playwright says. “For... *paru publico, paru audiensia.*”

I nod.

“I understand. But Yankro said nothing about it. Just that the other heralds had been defeated.”

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I knew of a hermitage near the village of Chopard, on the edge of the wild provinces. It seemed remote and untraveled, the perfect place to hide out from a Herald of Death. Yankro agreed that a sanctuary on the frontiers of civilization would be a good place to hole up for a time, while he worked out a way to defeat the Delkhite.

So, we set out for a hermitage near the wild provinces, a wasted land of abandoned cities and failed ambitions.

From the road at dusk, the hermitage looked like a church window leaning against the rocky hillside, fire-lit cells carved into the stone looking like panes of yellow glass with rough, dark paths crisscrossing like a lead mesh between them.

There was a gate of sorts at the base of the slope, two stone pillars, a dancing deer carved on the left and a rearing lion carved on the right. The lintel overhead, high enough that we could ride the horses under it, had some kind of bird carved into it, claws extended.

The hermits showed us to an empty cell near the top of the hermitage, just large enough for the horses and riders not to get burned by the fire. During our stay, the hermits brought us rice and water in the afternoons, donations from the villagers of Chopard, but otherwise left us on our own. The weather also mostly left us alone, being cold and cloudy, but not wet.

The hermits never spoke. They were devotees of Lith, the androgynous deity of silence. When we arrived, one of them had pointed at my grand basset, on which I had been playing a traveling song, and shook his head. I was not to play it. I nodded and apologized to Donica and Stirlos. We were in another god’s space. And, as Yankro was disinclined to speak, we mostly kept the hermits’ silence.

We camped at the hermitage for two weeks, Yankro brooding quietly over how to defeat the Delkhite. The hermits were kind, even occasionally bringing us firewood in addition to food, and always smiling in silence.

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Safario hates this scene.

“There is no dialogue!” he protests. “The audience will murmur and lose interest.”

I can only shrug.

“We did not speak much. I would ask Yankro what he needed to defeat the Axeman. He would grunt and wave me off.”

Safario spits dryly at that and shakes his head.

“*Sertamente*, some words were said?”

“Yankro’s gods were gods of action, not words like yours. Not music like mine.”

V

After a fortnight at the hermitage, when Yankro and I were both weary of rice, a storm came. The yellow glow from the fires in the hermit cells downhill from us were dampened in the falling snow. The sky lost its stars and became a tapestry of blackness and swirling white flakes.

After taking in the gloom of the blizzard, I retreated to the warmth of the fire to consider my place. How had a basseteer found himself in a hermitage dedicated to silence? I had chosen it, indeed suggested it to Yankro, whose gods of battle he would not honor against the Delkhite. We were both in a low place.

Yankro stood at the open entrance to the cell, fire-light on his back, snow and darkness billowing around him. He turned suddenly.

“Ready your horse.” He moved quickly to his own.

I felt my heart jump. “Did you see him?”

“I *feel* him. My gods speak to me.”

The light of the fire grew dim and red. I stumbled to my feet and heaved my saddle onto the horse I had stolen.

“Your gods could have given us more notice,” I said.

Yankro growled at me. Then, we heard the thunderous snort of a horse far down the hillside. We pushed ourselves into saddles and kicked our horses out of the cell.

Down the hillside, the light of the other cells had waned red in the night. The snow, too, waned, and we saw him. Astride a monstrous black steed just inside the stone gate. He would have had to duck beneath the lintel to keep from losing that horned helmet.

A black-clad arm like an oak lifted the great axe toward us.

“You,” came a voice as heavy and hollow as a waterfall.

Hermits stepped out of cells all along the hillside, standing with their backs lit red, staring down at the Delkhite. I heard Yankro sigh beside me.

“Go back inside!” he shouted.

One of them, *just one of them*, turned to look at Yankro and put a finger against his lips.

Yankro yanked his reins. “Lith is a stupid god. Let’s go.”

The Delkhite kicked his horse to a gallop, the huge axe high over his head. The hermits simply stood outside their cells, blocking the crude paths up the hillside. I snapped my reins to catch up with Yankro.

“Go where?”

“Into the hills.”

“There is nobody there,” I said as we made a gallop. I looked over my shoulder to see the Delkhite driving through the hermits with axe and hoof and blood. “There are no sanctuaries there.”

Yankro did not look back as we crossed the ridge, leaving the red glow of the hermitage behind.

“Maybe no sanctuary is what I need.”

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“I do not know how to make this scene,” Safario protests.

The playwright is becoming even more tedious. It is not my contract to make the scenes work. It is *his* work, his carpenters’ work, his painters’ and clothiers’ work. I tap my quill in the inkwell and set it on the table.

“You cannot build a hillside? It does not need to be strictly representative. Three tiers of cells at most.”

He pinches his thumbs and fingers together in that Ghessardine way.

“But, *Seyor da Coile*,” he shakes his head. “Horses. On such a structure. It is very... *perigosa*.”

I sigh. It *would* be dangerous. I can see his point and his angle. He wants me to agree to another compromise between staging and authenticity.

“I can see two ways.”

He grins and gestures toward the quill. I nod and hand him a blank sheaf of paper. He takes both in hand and dips the quill in the inkwell.

“You could restage the hermitage as all-on-a-level,” I say, “simply stretched across the stage. The gate on the left and our escape on the right, with cells in between.”

I know that playwrights, in the south at least, prefer action to move from left to right.

Safario scribbles notes, but he is shaking his head.

“But, *Seyor*,” he says, “everyone knows that the hermitage of Chopard is on a hillside. The tales of *Matanza dau Hermida* are ... as you say ... notorious.”

“Yes, so the second way.”

He holds quill poised over paper.

“You already removed the stable scene,” I say, “so just take out the horses. Put us all on foot.”

He smiles wide and starts scribbling, nodding. He squints at me, conspiratorially, and glances over his shoulder. The actors, musicians, carpenters, clothiers, and painters are all clustered on stage, drinking coffee and babbling.

Safario winks at me. “I have been wanting to dismiss the horse handlers. *Tang caro*. You play a sweet song to my financiers. If I take the horses out, you will attest to ... *u autenticidade?*”

I nod. The horses are a minor point in Yankro’s story. Safario hands me the quill.

“Perhaps,” he says, “you can add your basset’s song? Your presence in the accompaniment would be an attraction *paru audiensia*. My financiers would like that, also.”

I think about the instrument, packed away in a locker in a nearby tavern. I think about Donica and Stirlos, glaring at me from the heavens for having abandoned them for Yankro’s gods. I do not want to talk to my old gods again. Other gods had kept me safe when my life was on the line.

I shake my head.

“I have put that all behind me.”

VI

Yankro and I fled until dawn, until Yankro’s gods spoke to him again. They told him the trail was cold and we should make camp. I was grateful. I was tired and so was my stolen horse. Yankro and his horse seemed to have no bottom to their store of spirit.

The sky was a thin blue as we laid out bedrolls beneath a shelf of rock next to a meager fire, the horses tied to a nearby spruce. There was a stream a short walk down a scrubby slope and, beyond that, meadows and woods long untouched by the hand of man.

We were in the wilderness, specifically Racosia, once a frontier province of the Ferrisian Empire. Those days were long past. The kingdoms of the Valdarians and then the Arondigos had followed in the Middle Years, but then the wilderness had reclaimed the land, all civilized peoples retreating north and east.

There were no sanctuaries there. No towns, no abbeys, no hermitages. Only hills and fields and woods. Also, monsters lurking in the darkness of caverns and forests, ghouls haunting ancient tombs, and beasts hunting everywhere.

The Delkhite only added to a long ledger of dangers. I was too tired to consider them, however. The rock shelf was on the north side of the hill, which provided a reasonable semblance of dusk in its shadow, even in high morning. Before I had even a passing thought for the hunger that waged war with my weariness, I was asleep.

When I awoke, in the failing light of the same day, my hunger for food was again at war, but this time with a curious desire to play the basset, as if Donica and Stirlos were speaking to me.

Yankro was already awake and preparing a rabbit on the campfire. I neither knew nor cared how he had taken it. I took my portion before digging through saddle-bags for my grand basset. As I drew it out, I heard Yankro grunt.

“Don’t waste your efforts on weak and useless gods.”

I sat beside the fire, a skewer of rabbit in one hand and the basset in the other.

“Gods are never weak and useless. They are gods.”

He chuckled and gnawed a last bite of rabbit from his skewer.

“Can your gods save your life?”

“Of course. Gods are stronger than men.”

He chewed, swallowed, and tossed the empty skewer into the fire.

“Which is why men have gods. Other men have other gods. Are your gods stronger than their gods?”

I had never thought about it that way. Were Donica and Stirlos, the divinities of song, stronger than the gods of war and death? I felt my skin grow warm. I was ashamed. I held the basset out and looked at it.

“Are your gods stronger than Hrandal and Aia?” Yankro said. “Or their heralds?”

As I regarded my basset, its twin woods of Metlun design, I found my anger. I wanted to defend Donica and Stirlos, but the carvings on the basset were the tale of another god. I wanted to defend my music, which I had surrendered to Yankro’s martial sentiments at the squire’s house in Asperse.

He had been fleeing the herald of Hrandal and Aia, fleeing the Delkhite, long before we had met, long after the other heralds had been defeated. Where were his gods to aid him then? And, he dared to ask if my gods are stronger than the divinities of death?

“Are *my* gods stronger than Hrandal and Aia?” I spat. “Are *yours*?”

He chuckled and leveled his gaze on me. The campfire glittered bright in his eyes.

“Hvathlon is the god of war. His bride Maurizza is the goddess of victory.”

He grabbed a stick in the fire and poked.

“If we are to survive the Delkhite, they will be the ones to do it.”

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Safario sits, but says nothing. I tap the quill dry in the inkwell and set it on the table.

“You are on the wilderness scene,” I say.

“*Si*,” he says, “but the scene is good. The dialogue is good.”

He shrugs and waggles his head in that Ghessardine way.

“Maybe, the set could use more,” he says.

“More?”

“I would like to have marks in the stone,” he says, “like from *garras*. Eh... claws?”

“There were no claw marks.”

“Feathers?”

“No feathers.”

“A skull,” he says, “of a deer?”

I am familiar with his Ghessardine distractions. The people in Ghessardy have a round-about way of getting to the point, probably from the days when their formerly Ferrisian province was ruled, in the Middle Years, by Gassarh barbarians with rough manners. He was dancing around what he really wanted.

“My dear Safario,” I say, “I will not contest the authenticity of those details, for the sake of ... *u simbolismo*.”

He grins and nods. Playwrights love their symbolism. For musicians and warriors, hitting the precise mark is more important.

“But,” I insist, “an *elk* skull.”

“An elk,” he says, with a squint. “A large deer.”

“Yes,” I say. “A very large deer.”

He points at me and nods. Then, the finger lifts into the air.

“Something else?” I say. Of course, there was something else.

“*Si*. The actor who is to be you. He is to play the grand basset. *Paru autentisidade*.”

I think I know what he is about to ask. I am not comfortable with it.

“Would you be so kind,” he says, “to let him play the very instrument?”

His smile is apologetic. The way a Ferrisian in a crumbling empire might smile at a new barbarian king. I feel embarrassed.

“You want me to loan you the grand basset.”

He nods and shrugs.

“*Paru autentisidade*?”

VII

“I can mimic the call of the red elk,” I said.

Yankro leaned back against the stone wall.

“With your instrument?”

“Yes.”

He looked intrigued.

“That is a grand beast of game,” he said. “You learned this call?”

I nodded. He was really asking me about my experience with the sort of hunter who would challenge such a “grand beast of game.”

“I was under hire with fur-traders. They were hunting gazelles and spotted deer.”

He grinned.

“*You* convinced them to hunt the red elk?”

“With my instrument.” I picked it up and held it out. The twin woods glowed in the campfire, the carvings sharp in shadow.

“That animal does not die easily,” he said. “Hunters get gored.”

“One of the hunters I worked for did.”

He laughed at that. It took me a moment to get over the memory, but I laughed with him.

“Griffins also hunt red elk.” He suddenly had a serious look on his face.

“They do,” I said. “Few beasts do, but griffins do.”

“Were you not afraid you would attract griffins?”

I leaned back.

“This was in Colland. There are no griffins there.”

He nodded.

“Of course.” He glanced at the night sky beyond the rock shelf. The horses tied by the spruce. A dark and starry sky over the shadowed fields and woods of the wilderness.

“There are griffins here,” he said, “in Racosia.”

I nodded. There were, indeed, griffins in Racosia. I felt he was trying to intimidate me. To steal the victory I had won telling him I could call red elk by bringing a greater threat into the story. He was talking to his gods, the divinities of war. They wanted him to shame my gods.

“You know of their origin?” he said. “The griffins?”

“I do not,” I said with tight lips.

“They were the creation of Death and Hvathlon when they were playing as children. They are the children of my god and the Delkhite’s. Part lion and part eagle.”

For all I knew, he could have been inventing this mythology. It did not matter. He was proving that the gods of war and death were the predators of the elk I call with my basset, something I could not deny.

I set the instrument on the ground.

Yankro shook his head and pointed at the basset.

“Pick it up,” he said. “I would like to hear this call.”

“Enough,” I said. “You made your point.”

“What point? You can call up the hunger of griffins. Maybe your gods have a strength I do not know.”

He was mocking me, I was sure. But, what could I do? I had foolishly bragged. At the very least, I had to prove I could mimic a red elk.

I picked up the instrument.

“Do you know the call?” I said.

“I do,” he said, “I have heard it in Anazar, south of Racosia, from when I worked as a tracker. But let’s see if the elk find your mimicry true. They will call back.”

I pushed myself to standing and walked to the edge of the rock shelf. The dark wilds of Racosia were spread out below. Perhaps there would be red elk there to answer my call, perhaps not.

With a glance over my shoulder at the grinning Yankro, I lifted the basset to my lips.

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“Can you show the actor how to call the deer?”

There are no elk in Ghessardy, only deer. I forgive Safario the error and do not correct him. Perhaps one could think of an elk as a large deer? Indeed, are *all* hooved beasts of a family? I am not a naturalist. In any case, the playwright had put the proper term, “red elk,” in the dialogue and that was enough. *Paru autentisidade*.

“I can try,” I say, “but your audience will not know the difference.”

He nods with a frown.

“The gods will know.”

I sigh. I had not expected such vain piety from a Ghessardine playwright. The gods I now pray to, Hvathlon and Maurizza, would not care about the red elk call. They would only care about the scene that followed.

“I can try,” I tell him.

VIII

I breathed hard into the grand basset. A low rumble sounded in the darkness. I drew it up at the end, a little too fast.

The Racosian night whispered only wind and the soft murmur of the stream below. There was no reply from a hooved animal. I looked over my shoulder at Yankro. His face was blank.

“Try again.” He nodded casually.

I turned, put my lips on the basset, and called again. More patiently, this time. More on the mark.

The night was still dark. A moment passed in silence. But then, there was a sound. Not a red elk’s call, but a distant screech.

I glanced back at Yankro. His eyes were wide. Another screech, closer. He drew his sword and scrambled to his feet.

“Is that—”

“Yes,” he said, shoving past me. A third screech, even closer.

Yankro took a stand at the edge of the rock ledge, sword in hand. It was the first time I had seen him take a fighting stance.

“If you have a voice for it,” he said over his shoulder, “speak a prayer to my gods.”

I tried to find that voice, while fearing the griffin and stuffing the basset back into the saddle bag. I was done with the instrument. Done with Donica and Stirlos, who never listened. They had done nothing but call mediocrity and danger into my life. Perhaps Yankro’s gods would listen. So, I turned to the fire, with a glance at the swordsman’s back, and fell to my knees.

A fourth screech, very close, and I prayed. Let Yankro’s sword hit the right note. The right target. Keep us both safe from the claws of the griffin. I might never have a hand to wield a weapon, but I would wield the story of Yankro’s fight. And his victory, if mighty Hvathlon and Maurizza might grant it to him.

I did not see the griffin sweep in from the night sky. My eyes were on the fire. My breath was ragged. I heard the rush of the wings, heard Yankro's shout. Blood splattered on my face. I did not know whose blood it was.

I turned to see Yankro pinned to the ground by the griffin's claws. His left arm and his right shoulder. The great black beak spread, scarlet tongue drawn back. The sword hacked into a scaled foreleg. I grabbed a stick from the fire to defend myself.

The great wings beat the air, cinders spinning from the fire. The horses were screaming.

The griffin snapped at Yankro with its beak and he thrust his sword into its throat. Once, twice, then again, and again. The beast tried to call out, but there was only a wet gurgle. Blood poured from the beak onto the swordsman.

Great wings flapped and the claws came away from Yankro's body. The griffin rose into the air, dripping blood, spun in the air, and fell onto its back.

I heard the sound of rubble scraping as the monster slid down the hillside toward the stream.

Yankro rose to his elbows, panting. He turned to me.

"It didn't get me," he said. "Just bruises."

Griffin blood drained into the rock shelter. The fire sizzled as the dark red flow drained into it.

I stood and caught my breath. Yankro was standing on the rock ledge, staring down at the griffin.

"Is it dead?"

"It is," he said.

"You slew a griffin."

He turned, still panting, the grin on his face lit by the drowning fire.

"I did," he said. "Good prayers, basseteer."

"A child of your god and—"

The thunderous snort of a horse cut me off. The fire flickered red as the blood of the griffin extinguished it.

Yankro stood on the rock ledge, lit by stars and some glow from the east. The rising moon? I could not see from inside the shelter.

"He's here," Yankro said.

I scrambled to my feet and rushed from the rock shelter, toward the horses. Yankro held me back with his left hand.

“I’m ready.”

I slapped his hand away.

“What if—”

“Good prayers,” he said, turning to me. He nodded back toward the shelter. “Good prayers.”

“The fire is dead!”

He grunted at me, shaking his head. I had to confess, I was also not sure why I thought the fire had anything to do with it.

I returned to the shelter, knelt, and began to pray. I heard the hooves beat up the hillside, heard the heavy boots hit the earth with a grinding crunch, heard the Delkhite hiss: “You!”

“Yes,” Yankro said. “Me.”

I scrambled to the edge of the rock shelter on hands and knees. Yankro stood there, bloodied sword in hand. The Delkhite stood a stone’s throw away, next to his horse, staring at the fallen griffin with a raging fascination.

Yankro walked down the slope.

As the Delkhite turned and raised his axe, even the stars and half-moon seemed to dim and redden. Yankro rushed forward, sword over his shoulder. At the last moment, as the axe came down, Yankro rolled past the Delkhite’s ankle and shoved his sword upward into the horse’s heart. It squealed in terror and fell.

Why he did that, I still do not know. But, the Delkhite dropped his guard and his arms. Yankro stepped into the opportunity with sword spinning. He removed the Delkhite’s white left hand, cut through black leather into his belly, and sliced into his white throat. The Delkhite stumbled forward, spilling black blood.

Yankro pointed his sword at the Delkhite’s face.

“It ends here. And now.”

“It does,” the Delkhite gurgled. He swept the axe upward through Yankro’s chest and toppled into the swordsman’s still standing corpse. They both collapsed atop the body of the horse.

I was on hands and knees until my knees hurt. The world was silence and darkness, but for the whisper of wind and the renewed light of the stars and moon.

I stood and shook my head clear. I looked around. The griffin was still dead. The Delkhite and his steed were still dead. Yankro, most certainly, was dead.

The horses, tied to the spruce, were still alive. As was I, Erik of Koyle. The stars and half-moon were also, once again, as alive and bright as before. I whispered a prayer of thanks to Yankro's gods, and an apology to Hrandal and Aia, before gathering the saddle-bags from the shelter and leading the horses back toward Chopard.

And thus ended the account, and the play, of Yankro.

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I hand Safario the grand basset. He smiles enthusiastically.

"You can keep it," I say. "I will not need it."

"No, *Seyor*," he says. "It is worth too much. At least, let me offer you... *coppesación*."

I shake my head. "I have lost faith in the gods of song. I have new gods now. Stronger gods."

He squints at me. "*Seyor*, Yankro's gods?"

I nod.

"You think they are stronger than yours."

I nod again.

Safario smiles. There is something more in that smile.

"You do not know the Middle Hymns?"

I was never a faithful student of my own profession. I knew the hymns and chorals that won jobs. And animal calls. But, the songs of the Middle Years, after the Ferrisians fell and the barbarian kingdoms rose, when the old generation of gods gave way to the new? Not so much.

"Why would I?"

"They are obscure, certainly." He waves his hands in the air. "In the Late Years, we have perhaps become too entranced by the ... *renasemento*?"

"Rebirth," I translate.

"*Si*, the rebirth, the learning again of the Old Years' hymns and also too caught up with writing new ones. But much happened in the Middle Years."

I am certain I do not want to listen to a history lesson on the profession I had left behind. The gods I had left behind. Where were my old gods in Racosia when Yankro defeated the griffin and the Delkhite? They were absent, while Hvathlon and Maurizza had saved me.

Safario leans his elbow on a knee and points at me.

“*Donica e Stirlo* sang a lament to Death so sad, so *triste*, that it made him take his own life. This is how *Rhandalo e Aia* rose to the throne. It is a good story. It might make a good play.”

This I did not know. My old gods sang a song that defeated Death, brought the bird of prey to his own underworld.

“Now,” Safario says, lifting the grand basset in both hands. “Tell me again about the last time you sounded this instrument. I want to get the scene correct.”

I see the carvings on the shaft. How the Metlun deer-god Tlehui sang a song that brought the great cats of sun and moon together to create the stars that lit the night sky.

“The last time?”

“*Si*,” says Safario, “When you called forth the griffin so that Yankro could defeat the Delkhite.”

When I sounded the grand basset with the call of a great deer, to summon the half-lion, half-eagle monster—the griffin who was the child of war and death—the beast that Yankro slew, finally giving him the courage to face and defeat the last herald of Death.

I stare at the grand basset in Safario’s hands, and my mouth falls open.

“My gods,” I say. “They listened to me.”

THE END