

Viiibis

“Another humiliation” he thought to himself as he looked in the mirror, adjusting his priestly robes trimmed in gold. The owner of what used to be the highest religious office of the republic reduced to the Magister’s play thing. Answering the call to return to the city and to be paraded at public spectacles in an attempt to show that nothing had changed, when in reality everything had.

The early morning light was beginning to creep into the room around the edges of the heavy curtains usually reserved for the summer when the sun rises early and sets late. There was no point changing the curtains in the ancestral home in the city if he barely used it he always told himself. The light was beginning to catch the painted walls as fill the room with a blue haze mixing with the candle’s light smoke.

The man who looked back at Vibiis in the mirror was middle aged, beginning to show heavy wrinkles around his hazel eyes and thinning dark hair speckled with grey and his waist was beginning to sag. When he’d taken office he had been a young, military fit man in his mid thirties. He let out a sigh as he ensured the golden hem of his robe was even.

“Come now Viibis, it won’t be that bad. One last sacrifice before we head back out of this city and we won’t need to come back for months” came a soft, honeyed voice. His wife, Christiana, was always looking for a positive spin for these visits. She knew as much as him that this role had been all but stripped of all real worth since the ending of the civil war a decade ago. He turned to face Christiana with a wry smile on his face. Age had not hindered her beauty, fiery red hair still flowing to the small of her back, green eyes managing to still gleam like emeralds even in the low morning light that filling the room.

“Unless, of course, I’m called back to the city for another spectacle or senatorial debate where I am rolled out as a show of Manius’ piety to the gods. An exhibition for his own benefit.”

“And if you are invited back, you will accept and perform your civic duty with pride. There is a lot to be said for the stoic type in the face of adversity, our history is full of them and the city of their statues.” Christiana replied.

He could hear that even she didn’t quite believe her own words. A silence fell across the room, allowing the growing sounds of the morning hustle from the great city

of Velhurn. Soon the hum would turn to a roar as the festival of Nocte Damnatio began. Viibis strode to the window and moved a curtain and stared across the city. His family home, once proud, stood atop of a hill overlooking most of the city.

It was a sight to behold, coloured marble from across the provinces glittered in the rising sun, markers of temples and civic buildings that were either in the process of reconstruction or had been completed by Magister Manius in an effort to restore some level of grandeur to the capital that had fallen into neglect as a series of civil wars had fallen over the city in recent decades. The citizen body of the city were stirring, early morning revellers making the most of the holiday and shrewd businesses looking to make the most of the revellers. On the crest of the hill opposite he could see his stage for the day. The grand temple of Voryn, god of nature and rebirth it once stood alone on a proud hill. Now only its bronzed dome was all that could be seen. The rest had been swallowed up by Manius' newley built palatial complex, one fit for a king in all but name. No crown had ruled over the city for over 400 years or so the people were told.

The sky was beginning to lighten, the sun was burning through the morning fog that usually enveloped the city in the mornings at this time of year. He thought of his

schedule for the day, breakfast already eaten he would need to make his way to the priestly college of Voryn to ensure that preparations for today's sacrifice were underway. Prayers said at the right time to bless the sacrificial bull as well as ensuring that everyone present would know their role. As the Empire's chief preist, humanity's communicator with the gods, it was his his responsibility to ensure the favour of the immortal ones was always on the city's side.

He returned to look at Christiana, "Only another day and we can get back to the country" another weak smile across his face "I'll see you before the sacrifice". With this he headed out of the bedroom and down the wooden stairs to the vestibule of his home, light beginning to pool from the open roof above him. It was beginning to illuminate the walls here too, showing the faded family tree with his proud heritage which included leaders of the republic, priests, and generals who expanded and defended the republic's borders. He followed the tree which lead to the entrance way to the house where there were the funeral masks of these ancestors were placed in alcoves with candles burning behind them. These were meant to impress visitors to the home and remind the present generation of the family history prior to exiting for the day of business which would always hang heavy around the neck of Viibis. He exited the home and climbed into the carriage waiting for him.

The ride towards was long but uneventful, the light grew brighter, the streets busier and louder. He arrived outside the college of Voryn's priests, a red bricked building with columns of local grey stone not exactly in keeping with the renovations ongoing within the city at the moment. this was one of the last colleges not to be moved to an adjacent building of Manius' home. One of the last refuges from Manius' overbearing presence in the city.

On entry to the building he was greeted by an elderly, hooded, priest called Junius. He held on to a long staff, both a sign of his office as a state priest and a balance aid in his declining health. "Good morning Hierarch" wheezed Junius. "Good morning Junius, I trust you're ready for today's festivities and all is in order?"

"Ah, of course sir, this will probably be my last of course but I've prepared everything as if it was my first" Junius chuckled to himself as he walked by Viibis' side.

"Come now Junuius, you've said that each of the last 7 would be your last and you're still as fit as the bull you select each year!" Viibis replied, although it was true that Junius had been saying that it would be his last for each of the 7 years he could not help but notice his mobility had become even more impaired since he last saw him,

and he was becoming even more of a burden on the staff than he had seen before. Retirement was not an option for priests, death in service to the gods was all you could guarantee when you were elected to a priestly college.

Viibis slowed his walk to ensure he kept pace with Junius, ensuring the old man did not need to exert himself more than he already was to keep pace and conversation around the events for today. "Of course, the whole thing is a lot grander than we're used to this year a longer day of games and feasts prior to the grand sacrifice of course as ordained, and sponsored, by the Magister" Junius explained.

"Yes, fine. With the honours bestowed on Voryn this year, the god must bless us, although the daylight hours don't change and the sacrifice must be completed before the sun sets" Viibis coldly replied. Sponsored by Manius echoed in his head, "The state will go bankrupt before the Magister" he thought to himself.

Viibis managed to do the rounds, greeting newly elected priests of the college and reviewing today's timetable of events. In the hours that this took the noise of festivities began to echo. Wind pipes and drums were sounding along with the screams and yells of revellers enjoyed feasts in the street as well as the free flowing wine. Eventually the noise reached its peak, meaning the

citizens were outside the college lining the path to the domed temple of Voryn hoping to get a glimpse of the parade. It was time to inspect and bless the bull before beginning the parade.

Viibis walked to the pen on the internal court yard of the building, as he exited into the open air the noise of the celebrations became crystal clear just beyond the double gates that would open up onto the road the procession would follow. The junior priests began to light their incense holders, soon smoke and the sickly smell of it would fill his senses. He placed the hood of his robes over his head and began to walk towards the bull.

It was one of, if not the largest he had seen, pure white with clear blue eyes, a marker of of Voryn's blessing according to the religious books. The fate of such a beautiful animal was a shame, soon to be dead at the feet of thousands with its entrails examined for indications of the year to come.

Junius ambled next to him with a bronze bowl of salt, which he pinched in his hand and scattered over the prize animal's back. This was an ancient ritual passed down the generations, blessing the sacrificial animal in order to ensure it would reach the gods and be an ample enough trade for a succesful year before the nights grew longer again.

Vibiis circled the bull twice, once clockwise and once anti clockwise and ended at the bulls head with its nose ring and rope ready for him to lead on procession. Now one of the junior priests approached with the prayer book held open at the right page.

Vibiss bowed his head and began to read.

“Great Voryn, lord of vitality. We present to you, in humble supplication, this noble beast of purity. Its strength a testament to your bountiful grace.

As the cycle of life demands its essence shall return to the earth, nourishing the soil and, if it pleases you, ensure your continued abundance in the new year.

We offer this, not in cruelty but in reverence to you and the sacredness of life. May its offering bring blessings upon our fields, our flocks, and our own souls”

Now the prayers were completed he turned to see the priests and civil magistrates of had taken their position behind the bull ready for their procession. He drew a deep breath in before turning himself and leading the bull by the rope towards the gates. They were opened by yet more junior priests of the college and as Viibis

caught his first glimps of the crowd, and they of he, an explosion of cheers erupted.

He awaited the priestly caravan to take shape and then began his longer than usual journey through the city, the incense bearers and dancers lead the way ahead of him and the bull. Other priests muttering prayers stayed behind, a combination of joyous expression and celebration with the solemn religious element that was at the heart of this parade. As the column made its way through the city those lining the streets played the drums harder and blew the whistles louder, the bull was becoming slightly restless but still under his control.

The crowd that the procession passed would then wait for the last priest to pass before joining the procession and before long he was now leading a throng of thousands, a writhing mass, towards the glittering bronze dome of Voryn not just those sanctified in the God's ways.

Eventually they reached the bottom of the hill with Voryn's temple on it. The hill had been quarried out to allow a grand set of steps made of an exotic, black, marble speckled with shards of different colours within it. The altar of Voryn covered in painted carvings of blossoming trees and fruits of all seasons stood at the bottom of the steps. A pile of hay stood next to it,

symbolising the ground needing to be blessed by the sacrifice now that much of the city lacked open ground grass in its heart, and to also serve as a method of soaking up the blood that would soon be running. Resting on top of the alter itself were the sacrificial blade, curved in order to assist slashing the flesh around the animal's throat and a golden bowl with a green powder in it.

At the top of the steps beginning to come down was Manius followed by the leading senators. Manius as Magister had the right to oversee sacrifices on the state's behalf however very rarely would the Magister traditionally get this involved, meeting the crowd as it arrived and participating in the sacrifice.

Vibiis began to tie the rope to the anchor point on the Altar. And looked up towards the steps again, Manius was now clearly in view, his dirty blonde hair poking out from his hooded robe gilded in purple with a fair complexion and rippled skin visible underneath it. A sign of an upbringing in remarkably illhealth. Behind him many senators walked, heads bowed in reverence. Christiana, veiled but face towards her husband rather than bowed could be spotted in her blue dress from earlier. As Heirarchess she was an important part of this ceremony, a healthy happy couple symbolised the fertility that this sacrifice would also bring to the year.

As Manius left the final step the crowd fell silent, and Vibiss turned towards them ready to say the final, state prayer before turning to sacrifice the animal now resting on the hay underneath it. He drew a sharp intake of breath to begin before feeling someone brush past him, Manius.

He stretched out his arms as if welcoming the crowds before him to dinner at his home. He then started to speak in soft tones to the crowd. Many would not hear him, although that likely benefitted him given he wasn't even a middling orator of this generation of politicians.

“Citizens of Velhurn, I hope you have enjoyed today's festivities” Manius began. “Today marks the longest night, and the sacrifice of this magnificent beast and your collective prayers to Voryn will be sure to ensure the battle of light and dark tonight is won by the Sun and light will begin regain control of the skies”

Manius droned on and Viibis looked to the sun. It was setting. By the ancient books the bull needed to be dead by the time the sun had finished setting and the entrails read in the last of the light to announce a positive year ahead. He turned to look at his wife, still veiled looking for some sign of what he should do. He looked back towards Manius who showed no signs of stopping,

praising his own actions in the civil war. He looked back to the sun which seemed to be setting quicker than normal, was it the gods deciding to punish the selfworshipping or was it always this quick at this time?

Lastly he turned to Junius, the most experienced priest of all given his years. Junius made eye contact back with Vibiss and made a motion across his throat indicating that time was of the essence.

Viibis began his prayer underneath his breath, not loud enough for the crowd to hear but he was hoping Manius would hear. It appeared to work, Manius looked towards the setting sun.

“Ah I cannot deny the Gods their due any longer. They wait for no man, and who am I other than a man who fears them as much as the next, Heirarch. Prepare for the sacrifice!”

He stepped forward, level with Manius and the bull from his position behind the Altar and repeated the prayer from the courtyard whilst Manius bowed his head and the youthful priests freshly elected raised the bull to its feet.

He walked as he finished the prayer and grabbed a handful of the green powder and sprinkled it above the

now raised bull's head, serving as a natural sedation for the animal in order to ensure there were no victims of the throwing of limbs as the animal clung to life. After this was applied to the head of the bull he turned to get the curved blade, uttering the final words of his prayer, he shot his eyes towards the sky, darker now than he had ever done the sacrifice before. Grasping the blade and approaching the bull he called out at the top of his lungs.

“May this animal be acceptable to you, oh great Voryn. Bless us with your light and abundance!” As he completed he drew the blade across the throat of the bull which, although sedated screamed and rasped for breath. Its blood splattering the ground and the hem of his robe. It slumped to the floor and the crowd erupted. Now it was over to the college of Seers to inspect the entrails and pronounce the findings to the crowd.

This coven of elderly women from all edges of the empire crowded around the fallen animal and opened its stomach. There was an instant smell of rotting from the inside. Vibiis stayed at the head of the animal and looked down to see the women pulling out into silver bowls and platters nothing but decaying internal organs with hushed voices. Never had he seen this before, he looked towards the sky, the sun had set.

