

Tales from the Wanderer I

Raan Ket slowly approached the Wanderer, who lay on his back beneath the balet tree. A simple bamboo pole was held negligently in the crook of one arm, and a thin line of woven cord ran between the first two brown toes of his right foot. As always, he was dressed only in coarse, undyed trousers, his nut-brown skin broken here and there by light scars, thin and muscular as a shellfish diver.

From this distance it was impossible to tell whether his eyes were slitted open or fully closed, and she had no intention of waking the man if he rested. Although outwardly amiable, there was a deep undercurrent of something darker in his bearing which always made Raan Ket approach the Wanderer with a healthy respect.

Some of the other children her age (approaching the much-anticipated 10 springs next month) saw nothing of the sort in the adult who would occasionally stop by their village and tell them tales of places so far away they might as well be on Holy Luanath's moon, Tsaurem. Unfortunately for Raan Ket, some of these stories sparked a fierce curiosity in the girl, leaving her feeling as if the Wanderer had put a small amount of sand in her dark black hair. He seemed to create itches that she needed scratched. And since he was the one who would occasionally place the sand in her hair (in a manner of speaking), she felt he should be obligated to help her out.

She wasn't sure he would see it this way, and although she loved hearing his fables, she definitely didn't want to get on his bad side. Not that she'd ever *seen* his bad side, but it was something the man surely had, although few others could sense it as well as Raan Ket herself. Meijen, the shellfish diver, sensed it too, but in his usual quiet manner, he wouldn't say much more than that. At least not to someone he saw as little more than a child.

The Wanderer hadn't moved since she had first seen him on the riverbank, so he was probably sleeping. The girl decided to get within twenty feet or so, and then, if he still hadn't moved, she would seek him out later in the day. No one woke up from an afternoon nap in a good mood, even on a perfect spring day, with the coolness of the river gently leeching away the sun's strength in the blue sky.

“What do you need, girl?” the Wanderer asked in a clear voice that said he hadn’t been sleeping. It wasn’t an inviting kind of question, but it didn’t seem designed to send her on her way either.

“Luanath’s blessing, fisherman,” she began formally. “I, um, I was there when you told the story of Ashenheart.”

“One of her stories, yes.” He opened his brown eyes, and she saw again the darkness, or perhaps anger, that lurked just below the surface, and she froze mid-step. Perhaps she shouldn’t have disturbed him after all.

She watched his eyes dart like a swooping bird to her raised foot before leaping back to her slightly startled features. He then brought his legs up with a sigh as he sat up into the lotus position, loosening the cord from his toes as he did so and weaving the bamboo pole under one knee to keep it braced in case of a bite.

“My apologies.” He gestured to the riverbank beside him with an open hand. “Please join me.” A wry smile touched his lips. “I promise to behave.”

Raan Ket approached slowly as if the Wanderer was a carabao, hoping she could get her itch scratched without getting metaphorically trodden on by the man’s...well, not temper exactly. He was never *cross* with anyone. At least she’d never seen or heard tales of him being anything but kind. She was just certain she wouldn’t want to be around when he *did* become cross.

“And what about my tale of Avenger Ashenheart did you find of such interest?”

She regarded him carefully, then slowly spread her long maroon skirt out and lowered herself to the ground. The scent of the fig tree mixed pleasantly with the slowly moving river and the plants in the area, giving everything a sense of...rightness which the girl of nine springs—almost ten—couldn’t articulate but sensed with the same certainty that she felt when Shaan Tejj sang her songs in Luanath’s temple. This, this place at this time, this was what a perfect spring day should be.

The Wanderer gave her a gentle smile and a knowing look that said he felt it too, but chose to just let the moment sit rather than say it aloud. For some reason, that eased the tension in her slight frame, and she relaxed with a shy smile of her own. He raised an eyebrow and nodded, indicating she could now begin.

“When you told the story yesterday, you said that Ashenheart was a...um, Vansic? And when Ishin Tal asked what that was, you just said, um, well, you said it was just the name of

Ashenheart's tribe. But, well..." She lowered her head but looked up at him through some stray locks of hair that fell over her face.

"You believe I was not fully truthful in my answer?"

Raan Ket stuck her lips out and shrugged her shoulders exaggeratedly, holding them up for a few beats longer than necessary until the Wanderer chuckled gently.

"I see," he finally said. "You are a seeker of truth, and you could tell that my words were little more than a deception to protect my narrative from being led astray from the path I was attempting to walk it down."

"Uh-huh," Raan Ket quickly agreed. "But also, I think you didn't want to answer her question right."

The Wanderer nodded thoughtfully. "Very well, girl—"

"It's Raan Ket," she interrupted politely. "I'll have 10 springs next month."

A genuine smile blossomed on his face, transforming it into something she had never seen previously. It was as if she were seeing who he really was before... before something. The thing that had made him so angry. His face was definitely made for smiling like that, she decided, but didn't think there was a good way to say that. Instead, she just arranged her skirt more carefully, delighting in the way his teeth broke through the short but unkempt beard on his face—like sunlight through the clouds.

"Very well, Raan Ket," he said after a moment. "But Vansernic is what you actually heard me say."

"Yes, that's the word!" she said excitedly, feeling the itch receive its first scratch.

The Wanderer's features settled back into their familiar lines as if clouds once more covered the sun. "All right, then, Raan Ket, who has almost ten springs, I will tell you of the Vansernic people."

"They don't look like us, do they?" she asked quickly.

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, if they did, you could have just said so."

"That is true enough..."

"Are they green? So they can blend in with the forest?"

He smiled at her again, but only with his lips.

"They are not. The Vansernic are nonhuman. Do you know what that means?"

“Umm, yeah. They’re like the Enku. They talk like us, but don’t look like us. Right?”

“Just so,” the Wanderer replied with another slight smile. “But there is much more to them than that. The Vansernic are nonhumans who live beneath the mountains far, far away from here.”

“Do they dig holes like mice do, then?”

He held up one hand gently, as if he was aware that she was nervous around him. “I will tell you all, but please, let me tell the tale.”

She nodded, sucking in her lips to show that she was serious.

He regarded her carefully, as if trying to judge how committed she was to learning about this, not realizing how bad the itch could get if it wasn’t scratched.

“The Vansernic can live anywhere in Auren, but are most content deep beneath the mountains where they have established entire cities which are never touched by the sun.”

“But—” Raan Ket immediately closed her mouth again, this time covering it with one hand.

“But how do they see if the sun never touches their cities?”

She nodded vigorously, stray locks of hair bobbing wildly as she stared up at the Wanderer.

“The Vansernic are designed to live in their caverns like a fish is designed to live in this river.” He briefly gave a dark look to the placidly flowing waterway and his non-responsive cord leading into it. “Maybe not *this* river.”

He turned back to his audience of one. “They stand shorter than an average Human and have a slightly rounded back with spinal ribs that stretch across it in long rows to protect them from falling stones. It makes them much more likely to survive any cave-in or tunnel collapse when they are digging new paths through the stone.” The Wanderer used one hand to illustrate the curve and the other to mime stones bouncing off it.

“While digging, although the Vansernic use tools just like we do, their hands have only three thick fingers along with the thumb. And these are so strong they can actually use them to claw through rock and dirt, which they can do for tasks that require a lighter touch.

“Similarly, they have developed three sets of eyelids to help them see in the dark while they work.”

Keeping in mind her promise, Raan Ket raised three fingers, eyes wide, so the Wanderer would better understand her question.

“Yes, three. Their eyes are much more sensitive to light than yours or mine. They can see in what you or I would consider complete darkness with very little difficulty. They can not always make out colors like that, but they can certainly see well enough to get around. Unlike you and me, Vansernic’s eyes can be as blue as a sapphire, as yellow as a citrine, as green as an emerald or as red as a ruby. And they seem to glow in the darkness.”

Raan Ket didn’t know what most of those gems were, but she got the idea. Their eyes actually *glowed*.

“But, of course, they *do* need to be able to make out color, and reading in pure darkness is nearly impossible, so they have ways of making things just bright enough to read by or better discern colors and similar details. Even this feeble lighting is painful to their brilliant eyes, however, so they can close an inner eyelid to give them protection.”

He seemed to sense her confusion, and shook his head slightly. “Sort of like when you shade your eyes with a hand to protect you from the sun and put them into shade, *their* eyes block most of the light and so protect them from going blind from overstimulation.” He raised a hand and held it above his eyes, his forefinger across his brow, as if trying to see something far away on a bright day, and she nodded.

“But even that is not enough when they leave their caverns for the rest of the world. Then a *second* set of eyelids close over their eyes, giving them a black or dark brown look. Most of the world thinks Vansernics have dark brown or black eyes, when in fact they just protect those sensitive gemstones of theirs so well that we can not see any of that color even when we look closely at them.”

Raan Ket blinked fiercely up at the Wanderer, trying to make him understand her.

He shook his head and grinned once more. “Ask.”

“Well, what happens when they blink?” she demanded. “Do they close their eyes and open them three times? One for each eyelid?”

“No,” he laughed. “If they are using their eyes without any of the nictating....ummm...without any of the *eyelids* at all, then they just blink by rapidly closing those eyelids. But if *those* eyelids are already closed to protect their eyesight, then the *next* set of

eyelids are the ones to blink. If *those* are closed, then they close their external eyelids—the ones that are like ours.”

“But how do they do all that and not get confused?” Raan Ket asked, holding her arms out in an elaborate shrug.

“It is similar to how you do not need to think when *you* blink your eyes. You just do it.”

She gave him a slightly skeptical look, but allowed his explanation to stand. “Okay, claw-fingers and pretty eyes that blink a lot. What else?”

“Well, they are covered in very fine hair all over their bodies. Even the face.”

“Like a monkey?”

He waved a hand from side to side. “Similar to a monkey, but not quite as thick. I would say a monkey is covered in fur, but a Vansernic is just covered in fine hair. It gives their features a softer look—probably to make up for the scary claws and the rock-crushing teeth.”

“They eat *rocks*?”

“They have to. Their bones are much denser than ours and require the minerals that certain types of stone are full of.”

“They eat rocks.”

“It is a supplement, not their meal of choice. An average adult would consume perhaps three stones per day, and each one would be no bigger than,” he looked around, “well, a fig.”

“They put rocks in their mouths.”

“They do. But they also eat regular food like you and I. In fact, regular food is their main diet. But they still need to consume the stones.”

“I’ve put rocks in my mouth before. They taste really gross, and you can’t chew them.”

“I would not recommend you trying that. It would be terrible on your enamel.”

“Uh-huh, but also it can hurt your *teeth*.”

The Wanderer opened his mouth, nodded in agreement, then closed it.

“These things sound pretty weird. Do they ever have friends who *aren’t*, um, Vansernic?”

He bobbed his head once at her getting the name right, then grinned. “Yes, Humans tend to like them because they smell good.”

Raan Ket wrinkled her small nose. “What? Like a flower?”

“No, that would be the Orman Perisie.”

“The what? Are they nonhuman too?”

The Wanderer held up a hand. "A tale for another afternoon, perhaps. The Vansernic naturally produce a musk that humans find pleasant."

"A musk? Like a fruit?"

He shook his head slowly. "I think it is one of those things you have to experience for yourself. There is nothing I know of that I could use as an example. Just...trust me when I say that it is a very appealing smell."

The young girl stared up at the Wanderer suspiciously. "Okay. I guess." She frowned as she saw his fishing pole suddenly give a tug.

"Finally," he muttered under his breath, and began letting the woven cord out and then pulling it back gently. "I thought I was going to have to dive into the river to get my dinner."

Raan Ket placed her palms on either side of her and then pushed herself up to her feet, carefully rearranging the skirt as she did so.

"Thank you, fisherman," she intoned, circling her hand once and forming an "o" with her fingers to emulate Tsaurem, as she had been taught. "My itch has been scratched."

"Your what has been...what?" he spared her a glance while pulling the cord in carefully as something on the other end struggled.

With a quick spin, the young girl headed back toward the village, leaving the Wanderer to his catch. It felt good to learn about something new, but she wondered how much of it was a bard-tale and how much was real. Three eyelids, claws, and they *smelled* good? She supposed Luanath had made stranger things appear in the world than that, but she couldn't think of what.

She had almost made it home when she felt the familiar sensation that the Wanderer's stories had a bad habit of instilling in her. Like the world was somehow much, much larger than she had thought. And maybe she should think about going out and seeing more of it when she got older. Like Avenger Ashenheart had.

"There you are, my little Ket," Father said as she skipped into the simple hut. "What have you been up to?"

"I was out by the river. Father, what's an...orman prayerseed?"