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The Dancer's Gift

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Late at night, Vraneas walked through the last trees of the forest and reached the borders of cultivated land. He had finally arrived at his destination, the jati of Igate: a small agrarian community nestled in the midst of the tamarinds.

The tilled fields stood silent and empty in the moonlight. At the edge of the first one, Vraneas paused for a moment, breathing in the smell of wet earth. He tried to forget why he had come. But, try as he might, he could still remember his orders. He was not in Igate for peace. He was there to arrest someone.

It was not the first time that he'd had such a mission; but never before had it concerned someone he knew.

Someone he had once known, he corrected. Akanti would mean nothing to him now. That thought rang hollow in his mind.

He walked by the peasants' huts, keeping his mind blank; into the widening streets with their houses of adobe and stone; and at least reached the heart of the jati.

There, in the temple under the branches of a huge banyan tree, the people of the community sat in silence. Every one of them kept a wide distance from their neighbours--so that their emotional auras would not entwine. Vraneas knew that, but he couldn't feel it. As a blood empath, he could not see or read anyone's aura.

Hibiscus garlands adorned the altar; on the stage that had been erected in front of the statue of the god, a priest of the Destroyer was reciting the sacred hymns.

Vraneas had hoped to make his way to the back of the stage unobtrusively. But a man sitting at the edge of the crowd turned his head, and saw him. And recognised him for what he was.

Vraneas knew it by the fear that filled the man's eyes. He knew from experience that the feeling would propagate within the crowd, spreading from emotional aura to emotional aura. And sure enough, one by one, every man and woman sitting there turned towards him with the same terror in their eyes.

There was no hope, now, for concealment of any sort.

The wave of fear finally reached the stage. The priest clambered down and made straight for Vraneas.

"My Lord," he said, bowing. "I am Pandu, priest of the Destroyer in Igate."

Vraneas acknowledged the gesture. The whole jati was staring at them; he let the priest take him away from the temple before he spoke. "I have come to arrest the dancer Akanti for sedition."

The priest's face filled with anger. "We ought to have known what a traitor she was."

Vraneas noted the reaction; he had seen it many times: servility, a desire to re-affirm the loyalty of the jati to the Pahate dynasty. "What you think doesn't matter," he said. "Tell me where she is, and I'll take her away."

"I'll give you all the help you need."

"I need no help," Vraneas said, softly. "Go back to your temple, priest."

"My Lord," Pandu said, bowing again.

They walked back in the direction of the temple; but before they could reach it, a girl emerged from the darkness, pale, shaking with anger. Pandu stopped, his face twisting as the full weight of her emotions filled his aura. Vraneas, who neither could feel auras nor had one of his own, watched the girl instead. She wore the white shift of dancers, but carried no weapons. She was no danger.

"You won't arrest her," she said.

"You think to prevent me?" Vraneas said, drawing himself to his full height, letting her see the attributes of his position.

"It's unfair," the girl said. "She's done nothing wrong."

"She protected a murderer," Vraneas said. "Would you deny the justice of the Pahate?"

Pandu had at last shaken off the effects of her aura; he said, "Shanni. Go away. You're a fool, and one step away from being a traitor."

"No," Shanni said. "You're all cowards. You bow down to him because you're afraid of what he'll do to you. I say it's unfair."

"You won't make a difference," Vraneas said. He was looking beyond her, at the community in the temple. They were all watching. They had all seen her defy him.

You must not appear weak, his mentor in the House of Learning had once said. Your weakness is that of the Pahate dynasty.

The girl faced him, shaking.

Vraneas said, "I offered you a chance to withdraw. You ignored it."

"I don't care."

"I think you do," Vraneas said.

He moved with the ease of long years of practise. His right hand wrapped around the hilt of his dagger, lifted it into the air. At the same time, his left hand reached out, seized the girl's wrist, and held it.

She screamed, once, a thin cry of pain as the dagger struck her. And then stood, shivering, staring at the thin wound on her hand, at the blood welling up.

Vraneas's left hand was also bleeding, a deliberate wound inflicted as he was withdrawing the blade. Now the dagger held both their bloods.

His gaze still on the girl's white face, he spoke the words of opening.

"Let our minds mingle as our bloods have."

He was within her now, with the strange exhilaration that always came out of blood-reading. He could see her childhood in Igate, the way Akanti had taken her under her wing, the fierce anger that hid only fear of loss: all those emotions that he could not feel, that he could not guess at unless he blood-read someone.

And blood-reading was destruction: every memory he touched shivered and started to come apart. If he stayed for much longer, there would be nothing left but a broken, drooling idiot. He had done it before.

But that was not his purpose. The girl, after all, was not who he had come here for. He carefully disengaged himself from her mind.

She was still standing, but with difficulty. The fear in her eyes was deeper now, and he knew she would be forever scarred by his touch. "You--" she whispered.

"A warning," Vraneas said, raising his voice. "I am justice. I won't be stopped, or pleaded with, or corrupted."

Pandu's face was shocked; he made no protest as Vraneas bypassed the girl, and made for his original destination: a small, crudely erected hut of bamboo behind the temple, where the dancers would prepare themselves.

The hut was there. Its strong smell of incense reminded him of his youth in Dhyana, of the way he had once waited before it, hoping to catch a glimpse of Akanti after her dance. It was another time, he thought. It is past.

Some of the commotion must have reached the hut: the dancers were at the door, staring at him; as he entered, they scattered into the night like a flock of mynah birds.

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Inside, it was dark, and cool. Mosquitoes buzzed in the silence.

"Vraneas," a voice said, from the back.

As his eyes became used to the patterns of shadows, he saw Akanti. She was sitting cross-legged at the back of the room, her face smeared with white makeup, all expression smoothed out of it. He was blind to anything she might have felt.

"I did think they'd send someone," Akanti said. "I had no idea it would be you."

"They had no idea either," Vraneas said. He had hidden from his master in the House of Learning that he had known Akanti, however briefly, when she was a debuting dancer in Dhyana, and he a boy of fourteen. "Or they wouldn't have sent me."

"And so you come to me with blood on your hands," Akanti said.

She was observant: the wound on his hand was nothing more than a thin cut.

"Who was it, Vraneas? Who did you blood-read?"

"It doesn't concern you," Vraneas said. He still stood near the threshold, giving away nothing.

Akanti rose at last, the bracelets on her wrists and ankles tinkling with each step she took. Vraneas remembered the joyous, carefree girl of his youth, proud of her looks and her grace--someone whom he would never have associated with sedition--and wondered what had happened to her. She had changed: her bearing was quiet, her mouth set in a firm, resolute line. "It's you it doesn't concern, doesn't it?" she asked. "What happened to the boy I once knew? You don't feel anything any more."

"You know I can't," Vraneas said. To regain control over the conversation, he added, "As you know why I am here."

Akanti's mouth twisted. "How could I forget? If that's all you have to say, then let it be done with." She turned away from him, looking into the darkness at the back of the hut.

The question Vraneas had been holding in his mind since his departure from the House of Learning finally rose to his lips. "Why did you do it? You must have known what the price would be."

She was silent for a while, refusing to look at him. "He was a boy, Vraneas. Fifteen, and hounded by your kind for his so-called treason."

Vraneas said, simply, "He killed a Councillor in a jati. By that act, he stopped being a boy. You shouldn't have hidden him."

"No, I shouldn't have. We're not always rational, are we?" Her voice broke. "He looked--so much like my child would have looked."

"You have no children," Vraneas said, slowly. "You prefer your art."

"I have no children." Her words were low, angry. "I continue dancing long after I should have retired. Not by choice. For a barren woman there are few paths open in this life."

Vraneas said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," Akanti said. "I know you don't understand. You're cut off from the rest of us." She gave a

bitter laugh. "How ironic, in the end, that I should have only you to explain myself to."

"Yes," Vraneas said. She seemed to be expecting more from him.

"Was it hard, in the House of Learning?" she asked, at last. "As I remember, at the time you didn't want to go there."

No, he hadn't wanted--at fourteen, he'd been unsure of his future, unwilling to have his path chosen for him. But for someone like him, someone unable to read others' auras, there was little choice. The only way to gain power or respect, or to fit in at all, was to join the ranks of the blood empaths.

He said only, "It was my duty." He remembered the cold classrooms where law was taught, and the darkened lofts where the boys would learn the art of torture and blood-reading.

Akanti bent closer to him. "Yes," she said. "Duty. Was that, too, the only path for you?"

"You have no right to ask," Vraneas said. He unfolded the rice paper, held it before her. "This is the writ that sent me here."

For a moment it looked as though she would not move. Then she shook her head, and came to take it from him. She raised it to her eyes, read it with difficulty. In the dim light she seemed a statue. "I see," she said. She looked up at him. "And what will they do to me?"

Vraneas had been asked that question many times, and every single time he had answered coolly, emotionlessly. But for a moment he found himself at a loss. Habit took over. "For your crimes against the Pahate dynasty, you will be taken into the House of Learning, there to be blood-read until you finally break. If they are merciful, they will kill you at the end."

Akanti did not leap to her feet, or scream, or do any of the things Vraneas had seen others do. Her face remained expressionless. "I stand by what I've done," she said. There might have been fear in her eyes, as there had been in the girl's eyes, but the smoke from the incense burners made it hard to see.

"I understand responsibility," Vraneas said, at last. "But it's still wrong. There is a law and the boy broke it. And you broke it."

"And you think that's fair?" Her voice had risen almost to a scream.

"The law isn't always fair," he said. "But without it we should fall back into chaos, and be easy prey for foreigners."

"You would believe that." Her anger seemed to have spent itself. She moved away from him, to stand at the doorway of the hut, her face raised towards the white light of the moon.

"Akanti," he said.

She turned around, as fast as a tiger on the prowl. "I never knew you at all, did I? That tongue-tied boy who stood

by the stage, watching me dance with hunger in his eyes, was he only a mask you wore for a time?"

He said nothing. He had watched her dance, drinking in the grace of her movements, the way it transfigured her, but the time for dances and rejoicing was long past.

"I wonder what you saw in me," Akanti said.

To that, too, he had no answer.

He saw clearly the tears in her eyes. He had seen those, before, in other people, most recently in Shanni's face. They had not made something throb in his chest, as they did now. The dancer he remembered had never cried, or been afraid--she had moved on stage as if nothing would ever daunt her.

"I'm afraid," Akanti said. "But I won't run. No matter what happens."

"I admire your courage," he said. He refrained from commenting on the rightness of her beliefs.

"Oh, Vraneas," she said. "You never understood that either. We're afraid, and we still go on, but it's not courage that moves us. It's pride and stubbornness and all those silly things that make no sense."

It made no sense to him either, no matter how he looked at it.

After a while, calmer, she said, "I have no right to ask, but will you wait?"

"Wait?" he asked, puzzled.

"It's the Feast of the Moon," Akanti said, one hand rising in a jangle of bracelets. "I'm the eldest dancer, and I'll lead them as we honour the Destroyer, who undoes and renews all things." There was a bitterness in her voice.

"You don't sound happy about that," Vraneas said.

She barked a laugh. "I suppose it's an honour. When you're no longer beautiful, or plagued by men who long to share your bed, you take what you can." Her face, shadowed, was unreadable. "But it means something to the jati. To all of them. I wouldn't want to spoil that."

Duty, Vraneas thought. He suddenly wished he could understand what she truly meant by that request. "I have my orders."

She raised both hands to him, stopped as if remembering something. "I'd like to dance a last time, Vraneas. To remember what it feels like, before you take me away."

He'd had many requests like those. Despite his reputation, he was not a cruel man and had granted most of them. He saw no reason to deny her that. There would be cruelty enough, later.

"Dance," he said. "I'll be watching you."

"Yes," Akanti said. "You'll watch, as you did before you entered the House of Learning. Thank you, Vraneas."

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Vraneas found a place at the back of the gathered multitude, and stood, waiting. He ignored the whispers, and the heads that would turn to stare at him.

He watched the stage where, one by one, the dancers were climbing into view. Last of all was Akanti, in her princess costume with the jewels glinting in torchlight, and her white face shining like a reflection of the moon above. She stared through the crowd, straight at Vraneas, as if she knew where he was.

She couldn't. He was in darkness, covered by the shadow of branches. He was safe.

The music started to play: the slow beat of the drums was soon joined by the plaintive voice of the reed flutes, and the soft plucking of the veena.

On stage, the dancers began swaying to the rhythm, Akanti standing very straight, with only her hands moving at right angles from her wrists, graceful, elusive.

The music grew more persistent, as the side strings of the veena joined the melody that issued from the belly of the instrument. In the circle of light and whirling girls, Akanti knelt, and rose again, and her voice, unchanged by time, pierced the darkness.

"There was a girl destined to You, Lord,

A girl who would not accept the penitences and fasts to be cleansed, worthy of Your love"

Vraneas, hearing that voice, watching her move, was caught in her story, as he had been when he was a boy. He, whom nothing would move, felt the music echo the beat of his heart, and insinuate itself in his thoughts, and his eyes were filled by the glitter of jewels and the transfixing gaze of a white mask, a princess who had loved the Destroyer incarnate. The drums were the voice of his heart, the flutes the tears he could not shed, the vibrating voice of the veena the emotions he would never feel.

He had forgotten. He had forgotten how odd it was to be caught with the rest of the crowd in the spell woven by the dance, to feel himself, as if for the first time, one with every person around him.

That was what he had left behind on entering the House of Learning. That was what he would put an end to.

Abruptly, the dance ended. Vraneas, his eyes unable to leave the slim shape of Akanti, walked towards the scene, barely aware of the whispers in his wake. It wasn't that she needed to be prevented from running, only that he couldn't think or focus on anything but the memory of that music.

He met her at the bottom of the stage. "It was beautiful," he said, unable to put into words what he had experienced. "But it's time."

Her eyes met his, bitter, filled with something he could not name. "Yes," she said. "It's time."

"You can take off the makeup and the costume," he said.

She shook her head. "No," she said. "This is what I am. All that I am. Let's go, Vraneas, before I lose my courage. Let's sleep elsewhere."

Vraneas had no answer. He followed her as she made her way out of the jati, proud, magnificent. Her bearing was steel.

She stopped, a little way from the outside of town. The moon cast her light on the gold, the jewels she wore. "You liked it."

"Yes," he said.

"I saw your face," she said, with a grave smile. "And for a moment I knew all was not lost, that my boy from twenty years ago wasn't dead."

Vraneas had no answer.

"It's my gift to you," she said. "A bitter one, Vraneas, a bitter one to keep. But I hope you'll never forget it."

"No," he said, knowing that never again would he fool himself into thinking he could not be moved. Blood empath, deep down, were the same as other people: human to their cores.

What he did next, he did on sheer impulse--an alien feeling. He took out the dagger from his belt, and held it to her. "There is a way out, if you wish to take it. A far less painful one than the fate they have planned for you." He kept his voice expressionless, so she would not guess how much those words went against all he had ever been taught.

She looked at him. "And what would you tell them?"

"Some lie," he said.

She was silent, for a while. "But they will blame you?"

"They will think me clumsy. Your corpse would be proof enough for them that you have not run away."

"But I would have run away, wouldn't I? Hoping to spare myself pain and degradation."

"No," Vraneas said.

She closed his hands around the haft of the dagger. "Yes. I have little left, Vraneas, but I have my pride. I will not kill myself. Let them kill me. Let them have my blood on their hands. I won't sully mine, or yours."

He did not know what he could say. "I'm sorry," he said.

"And you mean it." She smiled, with true joy this time. "You won't forget me?"

"No," Vraneas said. "Never. Nor your gift."

"Good," she said.

In silence, they made their way to a quiet place amidst the tamarind trees, where they would sleep for the night. The road to the House of Learning, where she would be broken, lay before them, quiet and deserted. She fell asleep quickly, her head pillowed on the grass.

Vraneas sat, watching the moon in the sky, her golden headdress on his knees. He twirled the dagger in his hands, thinking of her gift.



A gift that would be lost: for when the other blood empaths read her, as he had read Shanni, they would know everything that had gone on between them. They would know he had lied--that he had offered her a way out. And then it wouldn't only be her that they would kill--he, too, would be arrested, tried and executed.

It would come to nothing, in the end, her gift--it would be as utterly lost as her.

The dagger was cold between his fingers. He saw himself again, holding it out to her.

*There is a way out, if you wish to take it. A far less painful one than the fate they have planned for you.*

*I have little left, Vraneas, but I have my pride. I will not kill myself.*

No. She wouldn't.

But there was still this way out--the only way to preserve her gift, to build something out of this night's events.

He only had to--

His hand tightened around the dagger's hilt. He had done it before: he had killed people after he had blood-read them--a kindness, after he had destroyed their minds.

Why then, did he hesitate? He was a blood empath; he should have felt nothing.

He closed his eyes for a moment; and then, before he could think again or change his mind, he lifted Akanti's head, and brought the dagger down with the ease of practise.

Blood fountained up from her opened throat, staining his hands--begging to be mingled with his, to be read so that he would know her thoughts at this last moment.

Her eyes opened in shock, stared up at him.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I had to."

Her lips moved, straining to speak--but no sound could come out. It might have been his name she was trying to speak--a reproach, or thanks.

He would never know.

*I'm sorry.*

At length her gaze grew slack, and the body under him stopped moving. There was only the blood, blood everywhere on his arms and hands--and the memory of her gaze transfixing him.

He did not move. He remained kneeling by her body, in the silence of the night, struggling to mouth the words of a prayer for her soul--and finding nothing in the growing hollow of his heart.

He heard only her voice. *And what would you tell them?*

*Some lie.*

Tomorrow he would walk back to the House of Learning, her corpse in his arms. And he would find some excuse. He would...

His eyes stung. But blood empaths never cried--surely those could not be tears.

*This is my gift to you. A bitter one, Vraneas, and a bitter one to keep.*

Yes, he thought, staring at the blurry orb of the moon, knowing that her shadow would haunt him on every path he took, on every arrest he made. A bitter gift.

But he would cling to it, no matter what happened.