





THE ONE-EAR SPIRIT SOCIETY

~VASANA'S SAGA~

1627, Sea Season.

Because of his ordeal in the Sleeping City Hills, Vishi Dunn had changed. He avoided the fertility rites of Sacred Time, and seemed to avoid proximity with Yanioth. When we camped, Vishi would not sleep, but sit upright through the night, mumbling motionlessly. I once caught a glimpse of a ghostly high llama with horns like an elk standing near him while he mumbled. He spoke to things not there, and constantly sensed spirits, both friendly and malign. When a White Bull Society member fell ill to a broo's curse, he cured him by laying hands on the Praxian.

I confronted Vishi and asked what had transpired in the Sleeping City Hills. He said, "I cannot speak of what happened, but I survived the ordeal."

I asked if he had been cursed by Tada's spirits and he replied, "I was cursed and blessed. I have one eye in the Spirit World now. There are places in the Spirit World I must travel to repay my debts—the Earth Serpents aided me against the Bad Man and I owe them dearly. I travel to them in the night, but do not worry, for my spirit-self keeps watch over me."

I asked Vishi if that was the horned high llama I had seen. He told me that it was, and that the specifics of his ordeal were secret, and he could not speak of them.

"I have probably told you more than I should, but I doubt the spirits will be angered much by me telling a friend such things. And if they are, I shall make them regret such insolence." He smiled broadly at this.

I had no idea what Vishi was talking about, but I listened and nodded attentively, and Vishi seemed pleased.

The spirit One-Ear's physical antecedent is a cattle-dog, a herding beast responsible for guiding cattle away from danger and facing predators.

According to Wikipedia, "All herding behavior is modified predatory behavior." The aim of domesticating herding beasts was to "*minimize* the dog's natural inclination to treat cattle and sheep as prey while simultaneously maintaining the dog's hunting skills."

I'm imagining this contradiction is at the heart of the One-Ear Spirit Society: the instinct to treat the community as prey (itself necessary for facing threats outside the community), and the necessity of minimizing that instinct to serve the community. They guide and guard the herd and (as servants of Storm-Bull's Spirits of Reprisal) bring down the Storm-Bulls who stray from the path.

The spirit society's initiation is called **The Tattering**. The Initiate cuts off an ear and gives it to their shaman mentor, who carries it into the Spirit World to One-Ear's Hut. In the hut is the Listening Grove, a thicket of previous Initiate's ears hanging from vines.

Upon attaining full Shaman status, members are taught the secret path to the Hut. They can whisper into the ears of the Grove to speak to society members living and dead. (One-Ear can

do this too, most notably to guide souls to safety after death). Other shamans say they have "one eye in the Spirit World." We have one ear there.

True, there are frightening things in the Spirit World. But we One-Ears are godly dogs, and we are frightening too!



Bastak's Dream

I awoke somehow outside my tent, beside the river that flowed here three thousand years ago. I could not move. It was all dark but I knew I lived because my Runes were glowing. Looking up I saw the roots of the world dangling down. There were men and trolls walking upside down on the roof of the sky, shouting to each other in thunder. As often happens in my dreams, the men spoke tongues I knew awake but could not remember in the Spirit World.

I heard a sound like fish leaping from water. A woman with the face of a loon emerged onto the bank. The western sky behind her glowed with the Dragonrise. She rode a High Llama with a hatchet in its teeth. The river was on her like a suit of jewels. She was singing strange songs, like many flutes. She slipped from her mount, took the hatchet from its mouth and raised it high above her head, slicing it down into my chest like a farmer splitting a stubborn log. I was sundered, yet remained awake, unable even to close my eyes though it was worse than any wound I'd ever suffered.

She knelt over me, singing still, and said in Spirit-Speech that my future now belonged to her. She rummaged through my chest with her beak, nudging aside my organs, unravelling my entrails. I cried out to Storm-Bull but he did not come. I called on my ancestor Ordag but he did not hear me. I looked to my left and there, on the bank, was a man planted upside down in the sand, eyes like clusters of lidless berries sprouting from his feet. Many eyes, and not one face; so many mouths, and all one scream.

Suddenly there was a terrible, raspy howl. A thunder of hooves upon the roof of the world, until I thought the sky must break. The loon-woman cried out and leaped into the sky, and her High Llama galloped back into the river, until only its horns were visible in the dragonlight, among the reeds. A great hound with one ear approached me in the darkness. As it crept close it told me "Bastak, do not fear. Your ear is safe in my hut," in slurring Spirit-Speech made with the tongue, lips and throat of a dog. Somehow, that was worse than the loon-woman.

Its slavering mouth searching inside the ruin of my body. Suddenly its jaws snapped shut and the bloody-muzzled dog lifted a crimson-dripping silver bracelet - no, it was the constellation Orlanth's Ring, stained red with dragonlight - from the crater of my chest, raising it up and ever up into the night, until all the stars were between its teeth.

My sponsor in the One-Ear Spirit Society explained my dream to me thus: The High Llama people must be planning some magical attack upon me after failing to kill me all those years ago. That is why the loon-woman rode one of their steeds. However, I need not fear for I had One-Ear's protection. I should seek my way westward (the way the river flowed) and find out about my Orlanathi cousins (this was the meaning of the constellation in my chest). There was a woman among them, a powerful



shaman, who was close to the trolls and who may well have been one of the dream-people walking back and forth on the roof of the world. She would help me find my way. I would face many trials, but it would come out right in the end. I bowed my head before my sponsor's wisdom, but I doubted. In the back of my mind I wondered whether the dream foretold a happy ending. I questioned why the loon-woman had the face of my power animal, the water-bird, and why her song had ached in me every night since, as I stayed awake looking up at Orlanth's Ring, trying to recreate her music on my flute.