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THE BONES OF OUR ANCESTORS, THE BLOOD OF OUR FLOWERS

They passed like shadows in the night, the two of them – the old man with a mattock slung over his shoulder and the boy with an empty sack dangling from one hand. The old man's eyes sometimes caught what little moonlight there spilled from the waning moon in the clear sky above as he glanced around him watching for other moving shadows; the hand resting on the handle of his mattock seemed casual but in fact everything about him was tense, wary, waiting for unseen danger. The boy swung from trudging along dutifully and stifling a yawn every so often to occasionally catching his companion's mood and looking around in the abrupt panic-stricken manner of a startled rabbit.

Nothing else moved in the night except the two of them, but the old man clung to the edge of the trees and what concealment they offered, and did not break out into the open field until he absolutely had to. Even then, he hesitated for the longest time, raking the trees and the meadow for danger before he stepped out into the open.

"Come," he whispered, speaking for the first time. "Hurry. We have little time."

The boy yawned. "Grandfather, why are we..."

"Hush. If you do not understand already, now is not the time. Stay alert."

"What are we looking for?"

The old man paused for a moment, glancing up at the sky. "Once, perhaps, angels," he said abruptly. "Tonight, who knows what demons walk. Follow. Be quiet, and be wary."

They stepped out into the grass, and a cool breeze they had not felt under the trees reached out to caress their cheeks, wrapped stray blades of the long grass around their ankles.

"How do you know where to look?" the boy said, dropping his voice even lower. "There's a whole field..."

We know. We have always known. This is your blood, your heritage, you should be able to walk on this field and find what we've come here to seek without pause, without thinking. I could have – I could have, if only these old bones did not get in the way... this belongs to both

of us, boy. This is our past... but this is your future...

The old man's thoughts were harsh... but he had said nothing. Not out loud. And the silence settled on both of them, gently, like the touch of a moth's wings. And out there on the field, in the dimness of the pallid moonlight and the glitter of distant stars, the grasses shimmered and stirred, as if the field were breathing. No, as if it were holding its breath...

The boy swung the empty sack he carried. "Grandfather," he said carefully, "it's *bulbs*..."

The old man's eyes glinted again as he turned briefly to glance at his grandson, and this time the glint was more than just moonlight on a reflective surface. This time it was moonlight on water. The old man's cheeks were streaked with tears, and more brimmed in the corner of his eye. "Some day," he whispered, turning away again. "Some day, you will understand. These are the bones and the blood of our ancestors..."

The boy suddenly flung out a pointing finger, squinting into the half-light. "What's *that*?"

The old man followed the line of the boy's hand, allowed his gaze to linger on what looked like freshly turned earth, bitter evidence of what other men who had walked abroad this night had already done here. His shoulders sagged, his mattock slipping down along his arm and into the ground at his feet, burying itself lightly into the earth. The old man leaned on it heavily, as though he suddenly could not stand unaided any more.

"They appear to be gone," he whispered brokenly. "But not before they finished their dirty work tonight. Go, you, my boy. Go, and tell me if what I fear is true. Go, go over there, and tell me what you see."

The boy hesitated, spooked by the way in which his grandfather had apparently aged twenty years or more in the space of a single instant, and then crept forward slowly, his hand tight around his sack.

It was hard to make it all out in the wan moonlight, but he could see enough. The earth looked as if it had been chewed by a hungry dragon, hewed and pitted with small holes, the grass mashed under booted feet and giving off an odour of wounded green, small piles of soil scattered around. Something that looked either makeshift-primitive or broken, obviously an implement used to dig all these holes in the ground, lay discarded a little way off; so did something else, something metallic, something that caught the moonlight and even half hidden by grass and soil gleamed with a pale evil glow. The boy stepped over gingerly to take a better look and saw a folding pocket knife, its blade snapped in half, lying next to something else, something he could not, in the first moment, make out.

And then he did, and frowned.

“They chopped it up,” he said, his voice louder than he intended, too loud in the quiet darkness. “They hacked it up – they diced it, and then they seem to have... ground it under their heel...”

The old man lifted his face to the sky, raising one hand, his fingers curled into a savage fist. “Damn you,” he said softly. “Damn you all, you bastards, you bandits. You may think you came when nobody was looking but God sees. God knows. Your reward is coming, so help me. It is coming. Are they all gone, boy? All dead? All the bulbs?”

The boy suddenly found that he was crying, without quite knowing why, astonished that he could weep at the death of a few dug-up flower bulbs as though they had been children hewn down by a barbarian invasion. He had not really thought about any of this when his grandfather had hoisted him out of bed that night to come on this expedition. He was of a different generation, all his own experiences being fury and loathing which was more often than not based on the name he bore and not on what or who else he might have been. All he could think of, as he was being shaken awake, was that their bags had been packed for days awaiting their departure, and they were *leaving* this place, leaving behind the fear and hatred that had festered between the two warring peoples who claimed it, one by virtue of history and blood-ties and heartland and the other by right of superior numbers – leaving behind its heavy twin legacies of death and of triumph, finally leaving, finally free – but that was not why his Grandfather had woken him. They were not leaving yet. This place was not done with him yet, and the memories came flooding back.

He remembered his grandmother, gone these many years, with scarlet flowers in her hand. He remembered the way she held them, gently, worshipfully, as though they were precious. He remembered his grandfather coming in out of the summer sunshine and seeing the woman and the flowers and making a sign of blessing upon both. The flowers that grew on this field, and no other. The flowers dyed scarlet by the blood of warriors six hundred years dead. Somehow, he remembered that too – the fierce sounds and stomach-turning stench of ancient battle where blood flowed under swords and horses screamed as they died and vows were being kept or broken and a nation hurled itself on the point of history and... what... even six centuries later it was still hard to tell whether they had perished utterly or won themselves a place in the eternal memory of the world. Such is the thin line between heroism and lunacy, between legacy of pride and legacy of hubris. The boy was part of his past, as all men are.

And now, finally, standing here over the shattered bulbs, he suddenly realised what

they were and why his grandfather had come here this night.

Standing here, in the open field in the dark hours before his last dawn on the ancestral land for which his forebears had fought and bled and died... he remembered it all, somehow. Remembered the sight and the smell and the bright colour of the blood of a battle that had shaped a nation, blood which had seeped into the ground here and, legend had it, dyed the flower called the *bozur*, which his grandmother had worshipped, to the blood-red which they were to this day.

“All of them?” his grandfather said again. “Is there not one...?”

The boy bent down to bring his eyes closer to the ground, peered at the dug-up earth at his feet. What he could see of the destroyed bulbs made him feel oddly queasy; they looked... wounded, like a human being would have looked wounded. Like a child would have. As though limbs and bones had been hacked apart, as though eyes had been gouged out. Worse – as though these were just potential limbs and bones and eyes. As if he was watching the murder of something yet unborn.

“Would they grow from just a piece of it, grandfather?”

“They may, if it was big enough and not too badly damaged,” the old man said. “I don’t know. I don’t know. Oh, cursed... cursed is the land whose very flowers are damned for existing...”

You should know. This is your blood, your heritage. You should be able to walk on this field and find them without pause, without thinking – this is your heritage, boy.

These were words his grandfather had not uttered out loud to him – not here, not on this field, not this night. But somehow he heard them, clear and carrying like the pealing of the bells in the tower of the orthodox cathedral – another thing they would be leaving when the day broke, a thing that the boy had never even thought about before, not consciously, but which he now missed with a fierceness he had not believed possible – and he had not even left it yet. But the words echoed within him, inside a great empty hollow space. They would leaving so much that day – that very morning, in fact, and it would be a race for the boy and his grandfather to be back in their home before it was time to leave it forever. They would be leaving... everything behind. Their home. Whatever they could not carry from that home with them in their luggage, in their hands. The bells ringing out from the domed orthodox monasteries and churches built according to plans brought all the way from Byzantium, with now fading frescoes of ancient saints painted nearly a thousand years before. The bones of his grandmother and his father, in their tombs in the church yard. The dog which had grown up with the boy, and which was already handed

over to someone else to take care of, a new home, a new home apart.

Their home. Their dead. Their past.

But not all. Dear God, not all. There had to be one left whole. One. His grandfather had said that he should be able to tell...

Blindly, with nothing but instinct and memory and pain, the boy fell onto the violated ground and crawled forward on his hands and knees, heedless of the mess the raw earth was making of his clothes, his fingernails crusted with dirt – feeling, questing, reaching out for that part of himself that was buried in this hallowed ground. One. *One*. One had to have survived this senseless destruction – flower bulbs, hacked and destroyed because they were perceived as having a nationality, a bloodline, a legendary provenance which could not be allowed to exist in the new world of the morning – because the new masters of this place could not allow them to exist. Could not allow it because every scarlet bloom that raised its heavy head denied their own right to this place – because they had no connection with a flower that grew only here, and another people did, the people from whom the land had been taken and stolen and wrested and torn, the people whose blood had continued to feed the red flowers for many years while they were systematically hounded and bullied and murdered off their land.

One. *One*. His grandmother's hands had flowed with them once. One had to remain.

He stumbled over a mound of dirt, and his wrist folded, pitching him forward into as yet untrampled grass. He lay there as though dead for a moment, his fingers twisting painfully around two handfuls of grass, his face on the ground, his mouth open and his lips touching the soil as though he was kissing it. And then a strange feeling coursed through him, as though something electric had reached out and burned him. He pushed himself off the ground with one hand, allowing the other to uncurl, to lie flat beside the clump of grass which it had grasped so violently a moment ago. For a moment he sat there, quite still, and then he began to burrow into the soil carefully, using only his hands. He pushed it aside, right and left, gently, his touch as light as if he was caressing his mother's hand.

And then held his breath as something began to emerge from the dirt. An irregular bulb. Unharmed. Whole.

Holy.

He dug around some more, carefully, freeing it from the hold of the earth, and then he stumbled to his feet, his hands dark with dirt, smears of it on his cheek and the corner of his mouth and clinging to his hair, holding something between his palms as a man might hold water in the desert.

"I found one," he whispered. His voice was very soft, almost no more than a breath, but his grandfather's head turned in his direction. The old man said nothing, but his shoulders tensed and he straightened up, resting only one hand lightly on the mattock.

"I found one," the boy repeated, holding out the bulb.

"Then it is blessing enough," the old man finally said, as though the words were wrung from him. "Bring it. We will make sure the memory lives on."

It was still full night, but away to the east there was the barest hint of a lightening in the sky, the promise of the morning to come. The old man turned to the east and lifted his fist again, a gesture more of a curse than of lamentation now.

"Damn you," he said softly, speaking to the glow in the sky. "Damn all of you who think that killing a flower will kill the memories of a nation. We will survive. We will endure. We leave our bones and our graveyards and our dead behind us, because we must. But we carry the memories within us." He glanced back to where the boy was making his way back with his prize still cradled between his hands like the most precious of jewels. "We will remember," the old man said. "We will remember. As long as that flower blooms. And there will always be one. There will *always* be one."

He allowed his arm to slip briefly around the boy's shoulders as he came near enough, and let his hand convey his pride and his approval, tightening momentarily and then letting go.

"Come," he said. "They will be abroad tonight. And tomorrow, we go. Tomorrow... we go." He swallowed, looking around him at the empty field in the moonlight and shadow, and the boy could see that for the old man it was not empty at all, it was filled with ghosts, with memories, with a long and bitter past. "The best of it... we will take with us," he said softly. "One of them lives."

"I will protect it, grandfather," the boy said, and knew he meant far more than mere words conveyed.

His grandfather understood it, too. Their eyes met, briefly, and then slid apart again.

"Come," the grandfather said, hoisting his mattock back on his shoulder, and deliberately turning back on the violated ground in the field. "Home. Be quiet. Be wary."

They slipped back into the shadows of the trees, and vanished into them.

The breeze stirred the grasses in the Field of Blackbirds, raising a susurrus, a whisper of vanished voices. Ghosts of slain humans and scythed flowers met and mingled in the empty air.