

VRAM

WHISPERS IN THE MIST



Remembering the forgotten

PART 1

A SHORT NOVEL BY
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by

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Part 1: The Call

Chapter I: The Funeral Dirge

**They asked the mist to guard their gate,
And tied their names in thread and bone.
But death walks backward through the years,
And crows remember what was sown.**

They buried Tovin Varn before the sun breached the chapel's spire.

The morning came blind, shrouded in the kind of fog that chokes sound and steals warmth. It slithered through the yew trees like a penitent's whisper, pooled in the hollows where the old graves slept, and clung to the mourners' coats like a second skin. The graveyard was a tableau of decay: iron fence rails gnawed by rust, headstones slumped like drunkards, the hawthorn's branches clawing at the sky. No birds sang. No wind stirred. Only the crows watched, still as sentinels.

No bell tolled. No hymn rose.

The silence was not for reverence. It was fear.

Mira stood apart from the gathering, her shawl drawn tight against the damp. The village had always placed her thus-at the edges, where the light frayed. She'd stood so at her father's burial, and her mother's before that, though the woman's face had blurred in her mind like ink in rain. But she remembered the cord.

The black cord at her wrist had been tied by her grandmother on a night when the crows had gathered thick as storm clouds. The old woman's fingers-knotted with age, smelling of bitter herbs-had looped it thrice, her voice a spider's thread:

"Names are anchors. Songs are snares. Never look back, child."

She'd tried to burn it off once. The scar beneath her wrist still ached when the moon swelled.

Tovin's body lay in the earth's maw, linen-wrapped, bound at wrist and ankle with cords like hers. He was no longer the boy who'd dared her to race across the mill's rotting beams, nor the youth who'd kissed her in the grain loft, his lips chapped and hurried. Just another meal for the worms.

Three nights past, she'd watched from her window as he walked barefoot into the orchard, his shirt hanging loose as a scarecrow's rags. The moon had painted him silver as he paused at the tree line, head cocked like a hound catching a distant note. She'd pressed her palm to the glass, fogging it with her breath-waiting for him to turn, to wave, to do anything but stand there, rigid, as the shadows between the apple trees deepened.

When he'd finally stepped into the dark, the crows had erupted from the branches in a black wave. She'd counted them after: sixty-one. One fewer than now.

They'd found him at dawn, face-up in the creek, his eyes open and clouded like frosted glass. No wounds. No struggle. Just his hands folded over his chest, as if he'd arranged himself for burial.

Father Lerek rasped the abbreviated rites over the grave, skipping the verses about resurrection. The chapel bell hadn't rung since the last Varn died-Tovin's uncle, who'd hanged himself from its yoke-yet it tilted. Toward the cemetery. Toward the fresh-turned earth.

Mira counted the crows.

Sixty-two. Perched on the fence, the chapel roof, the hawthorn's gnarled limbs. Not a feather twitched.

"Each crow is a name," her grandmother had said, stirring a pot of something that smelled of turned earth. "When the last one falls, the sky will split like rotten cloth."

She'd never asked which name was hers.

The villagers melted away, eyes downcast, their footsteps muffled by the fog. Only Tomas lingered, scuffing his boots like a restless child.

"Said he heard it," Tomas muttered, picking at a splinter in the fence. "Night afore he... went. Said summat were singing in the trees. Not proper singing, mind-like a child humming through a broken flute."

Mira said nothing. The cord throbbed against her pulse.

She knelt and pressed her palm to the grave.

The earth was colder than it had any right to be. Her breath seized-not from the chill, but from the cord's sudden cinch, sharp as a sickle's bite.

Then the world tore open.

A clearing yawned before her, vast and moon-blighted. At its heart stood a stone ring, its surface carved with symbols that oozed like fresh cuts. The air reeked of charred flesh and wet iron. Crows wheeled overhead-*hundreds* now-their wings a black maelstrom.

Within the circle, a man in robes blacker than pitch lifted his arms to a bell hanging in the air, its surface choked by vines and chains. His voice was not sound but *pressure*, squeezing her ribs like a vice.

Kneeling around him: figures with cords on their wrists-some red as open wounds, some black as a starless night.

At the ring's edge stood a woman with Mira's face, aged by grief, her lips moving soundlessly. She cradled a swaddled infant, its wrist bound in black thread. One knot dangled, undone.

The bell rang.

The sound bent-not outward, but in, as if the world itself were gasping.

Every crow snapped its gaze toward her.

The woman mouthed a name. Mira couldn't hear it, but it *burned* in her throat like swallowed embers.

She wrenched back-

-and choked on graveyard air. Hand still on the mound. The cord limp now, slick with her own blood.

The crows watched.

Sixty-two.

“You saw it.”

Father Lerek loomed over her, his breath sour with communion wine. A drop of sweat slid from his temple into his collar.

“You saw it,” he repeated, fingers twitching toward his own wrist-where a hint of red thread peeked from his sleeve.

Mira wiped her muddy hand on her skirt, staining the wool the color of dried blood. “Why did he go to the trees?”

Lerek’s throat bobbed. “The old debts are called in by threes. His uncle. His father. Now him.”

“You *knew*.” Her voice was a blade.

He crossed himself with a trembling hand. “I prayed it would pass him by.”

She stood, her knees popping like kindling. “Prayer didn’t save my mother.”

At the chapel arch, Tomas barred her path, his eyes darting to her wrist. “Did you see summat? In the ground, like?”

She studied him-the way his left pinkie curled inward, a trait all the Varns shared. “Do you believe the old tales?”

“Ain’t about believing,” he muttered. “It’s about living through ’em.”

She pushed past him.

The bell didn’t ring.

But it leaned.

Further.

And the wind didn’t dare stir.

And the crows didn’t blink.

And Mira didn’t look up.

Because the thing in the sky wasn’t watching.

It was *waiting*.

Chapter II: The Wake

**One crow cries and two will call,
Three will stand at judgment's fall.
When cords are tied and bells hang mute,
The roots will drink what men pollute.**

They gathered in the hall because it was tradition, not comfort.

The wake followed no prayer. No feast. Only boiled barley, weak ale, and silence gnawed thin by candle smoke and the occasional crack of settling timber. The longhouse smelled of mildew, pine pitch, and too many bodies pressed in too tight-a mortared tomb for the living.

Mira stood again at the edge, near the hearth, where shadows licked the stone like cats cleaning their claws. No one spoke to her. That was expected. Her presence was tolerated only because her blood ran from both lines-healer and heretic. But she knew the wake was never for the dead. It was to see who twitched when the crows circled.

Tovin's mother hadn't come. She'd been taken to the elder's house two nights before, when the fog set in too thick and she began singing hymns no one recognized. Now she sat curled in a window alcove, humming to the dark and threading invisible cords between her fingers.

Father Lerek kept to the wall, sipping his drink like it scalded him. He hadn't changed robes. Mira could still see the smear of grave soil at his hem.

From across the room you could hear the screaming whispers of the villagers.

"They say he drowned but left no wet," someone whispered.

"Found a feather in his mouth," another muttered.

"Don't speak it. Don't name it," hissed an elder woman, knuckles white on her mug. "It hears."

At the far end of the room, Tomas leaned against a support beam, arms folded. His gaze tracked Mira like a watchman's lantern. She ignored it.

The hearthfire popped, a log splitting like bone. A gust of smoke spilled out instead of up. The flame leaned sideways, as if bowing to some unseen presence.

Then the door creaked.

And a man stepped in who hadn't been seen in years.

His boots were slick with creek silt. His cloak smelled of damp leaves. His hair was Tovin's, but longer. His eyes were Tovin's, but wrong-too calm. Mira felt the cord pulse before she recognized him.

“Davin,” someone whispered.

“The other Varn.”

Davin Varn. Tovin's twin, long presumed lost, if not dead.

No one moved. Not even Father Lerek.

He looked straight at Mira and said, “You saw it, didn't you?”

“What did you see?” she asked, voice low.

Davin unfastened his cloak. Beneath it, his wrist bore no cord. But it bore something else: a brand. Twisted, fresh. Still red at the edges.

“I broke mine,” he said. “And it marked me for that.”

The hall breathed again—an inhalation of old fear.

Father Lerek stepped forward, tone brittle. “You should not have come back.”

“Neither should the bell,” Davin said, and every head turned.

Outside, in the deep fog, a sound began.

Not a ring. Not a chime. But a hum. Low, metallic, distant. Like a bell underwater.

Mira gripped her wrist. The cord warmed against her skin.

“It’s started again,” Davin whispered, stepping closer. “The cords are waking. The names are loosening.”

She remembered a night ten years past. Tovin had held her hand by the barn while Davin argued with their father. The shouting was jagged-fear wrapped in anger. Something about blood, about a mark passed down. About a choice.

Then Davin was gone. Into the woods.

They found his father hanging the next morning.

Now Davin had returned-unharmed, yet marked. Ungrounded, yet aware.

“I know where it leads,” he said. “The ring. The chants. The unborn name. And I know who’s next.”

Mira felt it before he said it. The blood knew.

“It’s you.”

The hearth fire died with a crack. All candles blinked out. The room dropped into black.

In that darkness, the bell rang.

This time, not imagined. Not distant.

Above them.

The roof groaned. Rafters creaked. Wind howled inward, pulling warmth from every chest. The crows outside screamed as one, then went silent.

And in that stillness, Mira saw not with her eyes, but with the cord-now coiled around her wrist like a living thing.

The ground remembers.

The blood remembers.

The cord remembers.

She blinked-and the candles re-lit.

Davin was gone.

Only a black feather remained on the hearthstone, still wet with creek water.

Chapter III: The Envelopment of Mist

**Mist will rise when truth runs cold,
And secrets sleep in roots grown old.
Call not the name beneath the bell,
Lest it rise from its broken shell.**

The mist did not arrive like a storm. It did not blow.
It did not warn.

It grew.

It sprouted from the stones behind the chapel,
flowered along the base of the old well, and bled out
in rivulets down the cobbled path toward the square.
It was thicker than fog, finer than smoke. It did not
cling to the skin; it soaked.

By dawn, it had blanketed every rooftop, seeped into
the bones of the village, and erased the edges of
every fence, every threshold, every line that once
made Vram a place of borders.

No one spoke of it.

Not aloud.

But Mira heard them anyway.

Whispers from behind closed shutters. Scratched prayers into window frames. The faintest echo of songs hummed by the old and mad. The same song she had once been rocked to sleep with-the one her grandmother sang with shaking hands and a mouth full of bitterness.

She did not hum it now.

She watched instead. From her window. From the edge of the square. From wherever the cord on her wrist led her.

It tugged lightly. Once every hour. As if counting something.

That morning, three crows fell from the sky.

They didn't flap. They didn't scream. They simply dropped-limp, intact, eyes wide and glassy. One landed near the chapel. Another near the blacksmith's. The third struck Mira's doorstep, bounced once, and lay still.

When she picked it up, the cord pulsed.

Not in fear.

In recognition.

By midday, the fog turned blue.

Not a trick of light. A truth of substance. It shimmered where it pooled-deep sapphire hues that curled at the edges like ink in water. Children tried to play in it. One vanished. The rest were brought inside, and no one said the word taken, but everyone thought it.

Mira stepped out after sunset, the cord now hot against her skin. Not burning, but insistent.

Father Lerek stood in the chapel doorway, arms folded beneath his robe. His eyes were red. Not from weeping. From staring too long into the mist.

“She’s moving again,” he said, not looking at her.

“Who?”

“You know.” His voice had the weight of old confessions. “She never left. But now she’s not hiding anymore.”

“Then the bell will ring.”

“It always does.”

It tolled at midnight.

One deep, dragging knell that bent the air and folded the mist inward on itself. No hands touched it. No ropes pulled. The bell swung under its own will. And when it sounded, the sound didn’t fade.

It spread.

Mira dropped to one knee.

Her ears rang, not from pain-but because something inside her recognized the tone.

The cord on her wrist lashed tight. Her breath halted. And in her mind, a name surfaced:

Elithra.

Not hers.

But not unknown.

And then came the scream.

Not from Mira.

From across the village. A voice breaking mid-word.
A sound of splitting, of cords unwinding, of history
collapsing inward.

They found the body near the well.

Arik Marrow. Fifty-two. Never married. Descendant
of one of the oldest lines.

His mouth was filled with crows' feathers.

His wrist-black with burst vessels where a cord had
once been.

Tomas stood with Mira beneath the hanging bell.

“Sixty-two,” he said, staring at the roofline.

She didn’t need to look.

“How many now?”

He swallowed. “Fifty-nine.”

She didn’t ask how he knew. The cord told her the same.

At dawn, the mist began to move.

Not with the wind. Not with temperature.

With intention.

It gathered at the edges of the square. Formed slow, dragging limbs across the stone. Pulled shapes that mimicked people but failed to hold them. And at the center of the square, where the crows had begun to circle overhead in silence, it stood up.

Not a person. Not a beast.

A shape of robes. Of hollow bone. Of hands made from woven ash.

No face.

Only a sigil burned where the brow should have been. A spiraling mark of loops and thorns. Mira had seen it once before.

On Davin.

Branded into his skin.

“It sees me,” she whispered.

Father Lerek did not deny it. He stood beside her, clutching a book that had no title and no end.

“It sees through us,” he said. “It remembers our forgetting.”

The entity did not speak.

It pointed.

At Mira.

And the bell tolled again.

She did not fall this time.

She stood, eyes locked on the figure that should not be. Her cord screamed inside her veins, her vision blurred, her teeth clenched until her gums bled. But she did not move.

She did not break.

She remembered what her grandmother said: “The cord binds more than names. It binds defiance.”

And so she stared.

Until the mist collapsed.

Until the figure fell backward into itself like smoke recoiling from flame.

Until the silence returned-and in its place, a name hung on the air.

Ylven.

Another bloodline.

Another name.

Another crow gone.

When the morning came, the mist remained.

But it no longer hid.

It waited.

Chapter IV: A Brief Moment of Chaos

The cord once broken cannot mend, But still it pulls
you to the end. A name undone, a bond reversed,
Will bleed the earth of what was cursed.

The night began in silence, but silence was never
safe in Vram.

Mira awoke with blood in her mouth. Not from her
tongue, not from her teeth. It was old blood. Dry at
the edges, metallic, clinging to her gums like a
memory that had forgotten how to die. Her cord had
tightened in the dark, leaving a welt on her wrist as if
it had tried to strangle her pulse.

She stood barefoot on the wood-plank floor, feeling
for the hum beneath the house. The boards did not
creak. They breathed. As if the earth below was
inhaling slowly, holding it, waiting to exhale
something it no longer trusted.

She did not light a candle

.

The mist had slipped in through the shutters again. It moved differently now. Not like weather. Not like water. It pulsed in time with the cord. She stepped through it without blinking.

The village had changed while they slept. Structures were unchanged, but shapes were wrong. Angles leaned. The sky was the wrong shade of black. The wind stuttered when it passed the chapel. The bell did not ring, but it had moved again. It was leaning so far forward now that it seemed to bow toward the earth, as if waiting for something beneath the soil to rise.

Mira counted the crows.

Fifty-nine.

They had not returned.

They only left.

She did not call out. Words felt dangerous now. Like a crack in the floor that might spread if pressed. She walked the path toward the well, her steps light, her cord prickling against her skin like frost.

At the well, she paused.

There were three handprints on the stone.

They were small. Children's hands. Each print smeared with something darker than dirt, but dry.

The mist recoiled when she reached forward to touch them. It hissed softly, like air escaping from a long-sealed wound.

Then the screaming began.

Not from the chapel. Not from the houses.

From inside her own skull.

It was not a scream of pain. It was a scream of recognition. As if something inside her had finally seen the shape of what it feared and could no longer pretend otherwise. She dropped to her knees. The cord lashed once. Hard. Her vision went white.

And the name came.

Not in words. In shape. In breath. In the moment before thunder. She felt it etch itself into her chest, into the spaces behind her ribs. It was a name older than language. A name with no vowels.

Then it was gone.

She opened her mouth to speak it. It dissolved on her tongue. She couldn't even remember the sound it had never made. It slipped from her like breath in winter.

Behind her, something moved.

She turned slowly.

Tomas stood at the edge of the well, eyes hollow, hair damp with mist. He did not speak. He held out his arm.

His wrist was bare.

No cord.

He saw the shock in her face and nodded once.

"My family never wore them. My mother cut hers. My father never had one. We were told to never say our name aloud outside the house."

Mira stared at him, not speaking.

Tomas lowered his arm.

"You're bleeding," he said.

She looked down. Her cord had split open the skin. Blood had soaked her sleeve and run down to her palm. It was pooling at her fingertips. It did not fall. It clung there.

The mist began to churn behind him.

Shapes flickered in its depths. Not human. Not whole.

Tomas turned to face it. He did not draw a weapon. He did not run.

He waited.

Then the air fractured.

It did not explode. It broke like glass being bent. The sound was wrong. Shards of silence cut through the fog, leaving gaps where sound should have been. Mira reached out, not knowing why, and touched Tomas's shoulder.

The instant she did, her cord ignited.

Light flooded her vision. But it was not fire. It was memory. A rush of visions, layered one atop the other.

She saw the original summoning. The black priest's mouth sewn shut with silver thread. The healer's daughter running barefoot into the woods. The bell hanging from a tree that no longer grows. A child carved with the sigil. A crow with no eyes speaking names in a dead tongue.

She saw herself.

Older. Worn. Alone.

Standing in a field of ash.

Holding the last bell.

Then it faded.

The mist swallowed itself.

And everything went still.

Tomas had collapsed.

Mira knelt beside him, pressing two fingers to his throat.

Still alive. Barely.

The cord hissed.

Not in anger.

In warning.

She turned her head.

The crows were flying now.

Not away.

In circles.

Above a single point.

The bell.

It had moved.

It was no longer hanging.

It had fallen.

Resting on its side in the chapel courtyard.

The silence that followed was not quiet.

It was absolute.

Mira rose.

She did not remember walking.

She was standing in front of the bell, barefoot, bleeding, staring into the mouth of something that had not opened in centuries.

Inside the bell, etched deep into the metal, was a name.

The name she could not remember.
And beside it, scratched newly into the rust:
“She heard it.”
Mira stepped back.
The mist surged.
The bell tolled.
And the world broke.
Not in fire. Not in screams.
In stillness.
Everything stopped.
Every crow turned its head at once.
The cord snapped taut.
Mira screamed without sound.
Then it was over.
She was alone.
Tomas was gone.
The mist had receded.
The bell was gone.
But the cord still pulsed.
And in the distance, something was calling.
Not with words.

With her voice.

Repeating the name she could not remember.

Again.

And again.

And again.