

A STRANGER
IN
OLONDRIA

Being the Complete Memoirs of the Mystic, Jevick of Tyom

by

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Chapter One

Childhood in Tyom

As I was a stranger in Olondria, I knew nothing of the splendor of its coasts, nor of Bain, the Harbor City, whose lights and colors spill into the ocean like a cataract of roses. I did not know the vastness of the spice markets of Bain, where the merchants are delirious with scents, I had never seen the morning mists adrift above the surface of the green Illoun, of which the poets sing; I had never seen a woman with gems in her hair, nor observed the copper glinting of the domes, nor stood upon the melancholy beaches of the south while the wind brought in the sadness from the sea. Deep within the Fayaleith, the Country of the Wines, the clarity of light can stop the heart: it is the light the local people call “the breath of angels” and is said to cure heartsickness and bad lungs. Beyond this is the Balinfeil, where, in the winter months, the people wear caps of white squirrel fur, and in the summer months the goddess Love is said to walk and the earth is carpeted with almond blossom. But of all this I knew nothing. I knew only of the island where my mother oiled her hair in the glow of a rush candle, and terrified me with stories of the Ghost with No Liver, whose sandals slap when he walks because he has his feet on backwards.

My name is Jevick. I come from the blue and hazy village of Tyom, on the western side of Tinimavet in the Tea Islands. From Tyom, high on the cliffs, one can sometimes see the green coast of Jiev, if the sky is very clear; but when it rains, and all the light is drowned in heavy clouds, it is the loneliest village in the world. It is a three-day journey to Pitot, the nearest village, riding on one of the donkeys of the islands, and to travel to the port of Dinivolim in the north requires at least a fortnight in the draining heat. In Tyom, in an open court, stands my father’s house, a lofty building made of yellow stone, with a great arched entryway adorned with hanging plants, a flat roof, and nine shuttered rooms. And nearby, outside the village, in a valley

drenched with rain, where the brown donkeys weep with exhaustion, where the flowers melt away and are lost in the heat, my father had his spacious pepper farm.

This farm was the source of my father's wealth and enabled him to keep the stately house, to maintain his position on the village council, and carry a staff decorated with red dye. The pepper bushes, voluptuous and green under the haze, spoke of riches with their moist and pungent breath; my father used to rub the dried corns between his fingers to give his fingertips the smell of gold. But if he was wealthy in some respects, he was poor in others: there were only two children in our house, and the years after my birth passed without hope of another, a misfortune generally blamed on the god of elephants. My mother said the elephant god was jealous and resented our father's splendid house and fertile lands; but I knew that it was whispered in the village that my father had sold his unborn children to the god. I had seen people passing the house nudge one another and say, "He paid seven babies for that palace"; and sometimes our laborers sang a vicious work song: "*Here the earth is full of little bones.*" Whatever the reason, my father's first wife had never conceived at all, while the second wife, my mother, bore only two children: my elder brother Jom, and myself. Because the first wife had no child, it was she whom we always addressed as Mother, or else with the term of respect, *eti-donvati*, "My Father's Wife"; it was she who accompanied us to festivals, prim and disdainful, her hair in two black coils above her ears. Our real mother lived in our room with us, and my father and his wife called her "Nursemaid," and we children called her simply by the name she had borne from girlhood: Kiavet, which means Needle. She was round-faced and lovely, and wore no shoes. Her hair hung loose down her back. At night she told us stories while she oiled her hair and tickled us with a gull's feather.

Our father's wife reserved for herself the duty of inspecting us before we were sent to our father each morning. She had merciless fingers and pried into our ears and mouths in her search for imperfections; she pulled the drawstrings of our trousers cruelly tight and slicked our hair down with her saliva. Her long face wore an expression of controlled rage, her body had an air of defeat, she was bitter out of habit, and her spittle in our hair smelled sour, like the bottom of the cistern. I only saw her look happy once: when it became clear that

Jom, my meek, smiling elder brother, would never be a man, but would spend his life among the orange trees, imitating the finches.

My earliest memories of the meetings with my father come from the troubled time of this discovery. Released from the proddings of the rancorous first wife, Jom and I would walk into the fragrant courtyard, hand in hand and wearing our identical light trousers, our identical short vests with blue embroidery. The courtyard was cool, crowded with plants in clay pots and shaded by trees. Water stood in a trough by the wall to draw the songbirds. My father sat in a cane chair with his legs stretched out before him, his bare heels turned up like a pair of moons.

We knelt. “Good morning father whom we love with all our hearts, your devoted children greet you,” I mumbled.

“And all our hearts, and all our hearts, and all our hearts,” said Jom, fumbling with the drawstring on his trousers.

My father was silent. We heard the swift flutter of a bird alighting somewhere in the shade trees. Then he said in his bland, heavy voice: “Elder son, your greeting is not correct.”

“And we love him,” Jom said uncertainly. He had knotted one end of the drawstring about his finger. There rose from him, as always, an odor of sleep, greasy hair, and ancient urine.

My father sighed. His chair groaned under him as he leaned forward. He blessed us by touching the tops of our heads, which meant that we could stand and look at him. “Younger son,” he said quietly, “what day is today? And which prayers will be repeated after sundown?”

“It is Tavit, and the prayers are the prayers of maize-meal, passion fruit, and the new moon.”

My father admonished me not to speak so quickly, or people would think I was dishonest; but I saw that he was pleased and felt a swelling of relief in my heart, for my brother and myself. He went on to question me on a variety of subjects: the winds, the attributes of the gods, simple arithmetic, the peoples of the islands, and the delicate art of pepper-growing. I stood tall, threw my shoulders back, and strove to answer promptly, tempering my nervous desire to blurt my words, imitating the slow enunciation of my father, his stern air of a great landowner. He did not ask my brother any questions. Jom stood unnoticed, scuffing his sandals on the flagstones—only sometimes, if

there happened to be doves in the courtyard, he would say very softly: “Oo-ooh.” At length my father blessed us again, and we escaped, hand in hand, into the back rooms of the house; and I carried in my mind the image of my father’s narrow eyes: shrewd, cynical, and filled with sadness.

At first, when he saw that Jom could not answer his questions and could not even greet him properly, my father responded with the studied and ponderous rage of a bull elephant. He threatened my brother, and, when threats failed to cure his stubborn incompetence, had him flogged behind the house on a patch of sandy ground by two dull-eyed workers from the pepper fields. During the flogging I stayed in our darkened bedroom, sitting on my mother’s lap while she pressed her hands over my ears to shut out my brother’s loud, uncomprehending screams. I pictured him rolling on the ground, throwing up his arms to protect his dusty head while the blows of the stout sticks descended on him and my father watched blankly from his chair. . . . Afterward Jom was given back to us, bruised and bloodied, with wide staring eyes, and my mother went to and fro with poultices for him, tears running freely down her cheeks. “It is a mistake,” she sobbed. “It is clear that he is a child of the wild pig.” Her face in the candlelight was warped and gleaming with tears, her movements distracted. That night she did not tell me stories but sat on the edge of my bed and gripped my shoulder, explaining in hushed and passionate tones that the wild pig god was Jom’s father; that the souls of the children of that god were more beautiful, more tender, than ordinary souls, and that our duty on earth was to care for them with the humility we showed the sacred beasts. “But your father will kill him,” she said, looking into the darkness with desolate eyes. “There is flint in his bowels. He has no religion. He is a Tyomish barbarian.”

My mother was from Pitot, where the women wore anklets of shell and plucked their eyebrows, and her strong religious views were seen in Tyom as ignorant Pitoti superstition. My father’s wife laughed at her because she burned dried fenugreek in little clay bowls, a thing which, my father’s wife said with contempt, we had not done in Tyom for a hundred years. And she laughed at me, too, when I told her one morning at breakfast, in a fit of temper, that Jom was the son of the wild pig god and possessed an untarnished soul: “He may have the soul of a pig,” she said, “but that doesn’t mean he’s not an idiot.” This

piece of blasphemy, and the lines around her mouth, proved that she was in a good humor. She remained in this mood, her movements energetic and her nostrils clenched slightly with mirth, as long as my father sought for a means to cure Jom of his extraordinary soul. When the doctors came up from the south, with their terrible eyes and long hats of monkey skin, she served them hot date juice in bright glazed cups herself, smiling down at the ground. But the dreadful ministrations of the doctors, which left my brother blistered, drugged, and weeping in his sleep, did not affect his luminescent soul and only put a shade of terror in his gentle pig's eyes. A medicinal stench filled the house, and my bed was moved out into another room; from dusk until dawn I could hear the low moaning of my brother, punctuated with shrieks. In the evenings my mother knelt praying in the little room where the family *janut*, in whose power only she truly believed, stood in a row on an old-fashioned altar.

The *jut* is an external soul. I had never liked the look of mine: it had a vast forehead, claw feet, and a twist of dried hemp around its neck. The other *janut* were similar. Jom's, I recall, wore a little coat of red leather. The room where they lived, little more than a closet, smelled of burnt herbs and mold. Like most children I had at one period been frightened of the *janut*, for it was said that if your *jut* spoke to you your death was not far off, but the casual attitudes of Tyom had seeped into me and diluted my fear, and I no longer ran past the altar room with held breath and pounding heart. Still, a strange chill came over me when I glanced in and saw my mother's bare feet in the gloom, her body in shadow, kneeling, praying. I knew that she prayed for Jom and perhaps stroked the little figure in the red jacket, soothing her son from the outside.

At last those unhappy days ended in victory for my brother's soul. The doctors went away and took their ghastly odor with them; my father's wife reverted to her usual bitterness, and my bed was moved back into my room. The only difference now was that Jom no longer sat in the schoolroom and listened to our tutor, but wandered in the courtyard underneath the orange trees, exchanging pleasantries with the birds.

After this my father took a profound and anxious interest in me, his only son in this world; for there was no longer any doubt that I would be his sole heir and continue his trade with Olondria.