

The Sixty-Fifth Treasured Song

I

Many thousands of summers away, many days sail from your home, there was a gifted young citizen of the great city of the East named Amil. Amil had been touched by the Gods at birth for inscrutable reasons of their own, and was left with two legacies from that destiny-laden encounter.

The first was a small, rose-colored mark on his face, that looked like a strange serpent with legs and a long, curling tail. The priests examined at his birth and cast auguries. The result was propitious – Amil would be singled out for great things, not cast out on the far hills naked and alone to die. Only one priest disagreed. He was called Scolacius, and was known for his ability in augury. He insisted that the mark was a sign that this child would bring disorder upon the City and urged that the baby be sacrificed to the God of Worms by being buried alive in the fields. But his particular set of priests were not in favor that year, and his advice was ignored in favor of the majority, who found it difficult to believe that a boy child from a family that had recently been so generous to the Temple could be so accursed.

Second, he was swift of mind. The people he was born among had Sixty-Four Treasured Songs of Knowledge that were said by the priesthood to contain all understanding necessary to live a life pleasing to the Gods. Amil had memorized them before his tenth summer, to the astonishment of the priests. It was said by all that he was bound to become a great prophet, perhaps of the Sun god, or of the gods of Tradition. In the end, he was selected to be an acolyte of the Priesthood of the Sixty-Four Treasured Songs of Knowledge. His parents were both proud and anxious, for the mark of the Gods often means two legacies – one blessed, and one tragic.

Despite these vague misgivings, all went well for Amil until his twelfth year. In search of more understanding, he had taken, in his innocence, to wandering outside the city walls and beyond the pleasant green fields worked by the bondservants. He wandered deep into the woods, and found strange places full of animals not mentioned in the sixty-four treasured songs, and stones carved with symbols that were strange and symmetric. He ran his fingers along them, and wondered.

Day after day, he slipped out of the city. Not his mother's warnings of monsters and raging barbarians, nor his father's application of the rod deterred him. It seemed that the more welts adorned Amil's back, the more persistent he became. His parents were filled with shame. If this dangerous habit became known, questions would be asked. "What could he be doing out there? Is he meeting with the barbarians to give them information about our defenses? Is he cavorting with witches or doing unspeakable things with creatures unknown?" The idea that he might be seeking after knowledge never crossed their minds, since all that needed to be known was contained within the Sixty-Four Treasured Songs. "Why seek after that which the Gods did not see fit to give us?" they would ask.

But for many days, Amil eluded both his parents and the faint curiosity of his neighbors. Something compelled him into the woods to seek the wondrous stones and the creatures he had no name for. He did not want to grieve his parents, or startle his neighbors, but he was driven by

a desire to know, and to bring back that understanding to his people. In olden times he had been told that hunters went into the far woods to bring down animals to feed the people of the city with their flesh. Even though now no forest creature could be used as food, since the Sixty-Four Treasured Songs forbade any meat that was not ceremonially slaughtered by the priests, he still thought of himself as bringing back something, someday, that would improve the life of his neighbors, some of whom were hungry in poor years, and some of whom were bondservants, who were permitted only to work in the fields, breed, and keep silence.

II.

One Autumn evening, as a chill flavored the breeze and the deep forest rained down leaves in all the colors of the priest's fine robes, Amil sat silently on a stone larger than an ox, covered with the mysterious carvings that fascinated him. His back stung from a beating his father had given him that morning as he slipped out through a window. The cold stone felt good on his pained, swollen skin.

For many months, Amil had a companion in his explorations, though he knew it not. There are many strange creatures in the dark corners of the world, and one of the most unique of them is Threcaus Dravonus Pius Dumensis, but he did not usually use his full name, nor his titles, which were considerably longer, when dealing with these interesting, hairless, ten-toed apes. They were generally unconvivial when they glimpsed his glimmering forest gold, mossy green, and rich earth black scales. One glimpse of his magnificent fangs, shown only by way of a polite greeting, sent them scampering like monkeys back to their oddly manufactured nests.

For a century he had toyed with the thought that these bipeds were ignorant creatures who built mounds like wood ants. He had been encouraged to eat them, especially the young, tender females, by others of his kind, but he found them disappointing as prey, and gustatorially marginal. Moreover, the young females he had been encouraged to try had some sort of grease smeared on their faces that turned his fangs unpleasantly pink.

Nevertheless, he had been watching this curious young ape with a thought of roasting him with wild garlic and tunberry sauce. But the more he watched, the more interesting the ape's behavior became. The ape actually seemed to be trying to read the inscriptions on the old temple ruins! What an odd creature! What a curious monkey! Threcaus decided to introduce himself, and if that proved unfruitful, well, he had a good supply of tunberry sauce.

He raised his golden head from his hiding place and looked directly at the young monkey. He cleared his throat politely, and the ape turned around.

Amil felt all the blood in his body run away from his limbs. A scream built in his throat. He could hear his mother's voice inside his head screaming, and his father crying out "Run!" But he did not move. He had never seen anything like this creature, with its gleaming scales and glistening ivory fangs. Terror was mixed with fascination. Fear wrestled with curiosity and as it had so often before in Amil, curiosity won.

"Good evening. I am Threcaus. I have more names than that and many titles of nobility, but I do not wish to be tedious. Tell me, ape, do you possess the power of speech?"

“I...I do. My name is Amil, and my father’s name is Urizen. I am an Acolyte of the Temple of the Sixty-Four Treasured Songs of Knowledge.” This was the formal way of introducing oneself among Amil’s people.

“Amil Bar Urizen, you are a very polite young ape. I confess that I came here with a mind to eat you, but perhaps you have a value beyond the nutritional. Do you?” Threcatius looked at him quizzically.

“I know all of the Sixty-Four Treasured Songs.” He said quickly, not knowing if such a creature had any respect for their sacredness.

“Do you? I should like to hear them.” He said. “The idea of monkeys possessing knowledge worth singing about intrigues me.”

“You are curious about them?” Amil said, the terror beginning to subside.

“Yes, of course. I’ve never heard them.” Threcatius scratched his gleaming chin with a green, hooked claw as large as Amil’s forearm.

“In the Great City, our priests teach us that to want to hear what the Gods have never told is to lust after knowing, and gluttony after strange understandings. It is sinful.” said Amil, trying to sound convinced.

Threcatius stared at him meaningfully. “Perhaps gluttony is not a subject you wish to bring to this conversation. Let us have these songs. Perhaps they will substitute for an evening meal of monkey.”

“They are very long.” Amil said dubiously.

“My kind is renowned for patience.” Threcatius lowered his body, larger than three oxen laid end-to-end, down on the soft, mossy earth.

So, Amil sang all Sixty-Four Treasured Songs. By the time he had finished, his mouth was dry, and his throat was swollen and painful. Dawn was breaking over the horizon. He realized, with a start, that he had sung all through the afternoon and the night. But he knew that he had never sung the Songs with more feeling. He felt that he had sung to the Gods for the last time, perhaps, and a strange peace filled him.

He looked at the creature, who lay at his feet, and had not moved in several hours. He tried desperately to suppress a cough from his raw throat, and began moving slowly toward the opening in the trees that would allow him to escape. “If I somehow live to see home again,” he thought, his heart hammering against his ribs, “can I tell anyone of this adventure? Surely the priests will wish to know that the Songs can charm a creature to sleep and save an Acolyte’s life through their divine influence!”

After he moved his foot the width of a grain stem, Threcaius said, “Not bad, really. A bit tedious. The rhythm needs work in places, and “Our sacred plowshare, most divine,” really doesn’t rhyme with “Since our father’s blessed time,” but not a bad effort. Let me see if I got it right.”

And Threcaius recited all Sixty-Four Treasured songs without pause or error, all through the day and well into the night. Although Amil was weak with exhaustion, fear, hunger, and thirst, he noticed that the creature had changed a few of the sacred words, but he did not speak until the creature had finished.

“You changed some words.” He said.

“Yes,” Threcaius said, with a hint of pride, “Did you like it?”

“That’s...you can’t...blasph...” and Amil toppled from the carven rock.

“Oh, that’s right.” Threcaius said, sighing impatiently. “You apes have to eat, drink, and sleep almost all the time! What a burden with such a short life to live. I will take you to my home, and see that you don’t die of love of poetry.”

III.

So Threcaius took Amil to the cavern he resided in. It was very comfortable, if you happen to be an enormous, ancient reptile. He woke Amil with a draught of strong mead, which made him choke a bit, having never had mead before. When he felt the warm tingling of the mead, he feared he had sinned again, intoxicating drinks were forbidden, but he was, he reasoned, a guest, in which case it would be impolite to refuse hospitality, or a prisoner, in which case it would be supremely unwise to seem ungrateful.

Threcaius left him alone to sleep while he went out to find something the ape could eat. When he arrived back with dinner, a misunderstanding occurred – “What do you mean you don’t eat your own kind?” Threcaius said incredulously. “Look how healthy and well fed she is! Well, what do you do when you monkeys die? I most sincerely hope that someone has the courtesy to eat me when that happens! How impious to waste the Gods’ good meat!” The girl was discreetly returned, unharmed, but terrified past speech for many months.

Thereafter, Amil resided with Threcaius. He lost count of the months as Threcaius taught him the ancient songs of his kind, and how to read the inscriptions on the ruins in the forest. They discussed poetry, and even indulged in what Amil would have taken to be an unpardonable sin...they created new songs. Amil feared the wrath of the Gods at first, and only whispered his verses, but in time, he came to roar, plead, weep, and sing just as Threcaius did. He came to believe that perhaps men were meant to make songs, and give them as offerings to the Gods, and give the knowledge in them to his fellow men. He knew that such beliefs made him a heretic, but out here, deep in the forest, nothing seemed unnatural that came from an honest heart.

Threcaius had other knowledge to bestow – how running water could be used to do work, and how heating certain stones and powders could make a much stronger metal than the iron used by

his people. Although the flying lessons did not go nearly as well, Threcatius was pleased with his pupil, and valued his companionship, which is an unusual attitude among his kind.

IV.

One day, Threcatius returned from his stealthy observances of the Great City. Amil was setting an alembic to boil. "Ave, Threcatius," he said smoothly in Threcatius' native tongue. When Threcatius did not immediately respond, he turned to face him. The great, golden eyes of his friend were downcast. "What ails you, my teacher?" he said, a dread of the answer swelling in his chest.

"I have heavy news for you, my friend. I saw your funeral today." The news vibrated in Amil's heart like the groaning note of a cold, leaden bell. "I think it was your mother and father that led the procession. They were very upset, rending their clothes and shrieking. The priests carried a bier for you, although it was empty."

"How could they...why do they assume?"

"My friend," Threcatius said softly, "Do you not know that you have been here for more than nineteen moons?" Amil's eyes widened with recognition. "They have searched for you, but no man comes to these cliffs who does not know the way."

"My parents!" Amil cried, "They will be punished for losing me! I belong to the Temple, and they were only allowed to care for me! They will whip them through the streets, rend them on the rack, and then hang them up to die as heretics, Threcatius!"

Threcatius sighed. "And you won't even get to eat them."

"I must go back! I must show them that I live!"

Threcatius looked at him with great sadness in his eyes. He was silent a long time before speaking. "I value your company, Amil, but believe me when I say that I tell you this only out of my love for you. You should not go. You do not belong among them anymore. Perhaps you never did. To them, you are dead. It would be wise to remain so."

"I cannot leave my parents to die in shame!"

"It is not you who will kill them, Amil. Those idiot monkeys with their vengeful, stupid ape gods – don't try to look offended, we both know it – will kill them. When we met, your back bore a fresh beating, and marks of many beatings before. They did not understand you, nor did they wish to make the effort. Are you not more of my kind now, than of theirs? They are incurious, vengeful, farm animals. You are a poet, and, at least in heart, one of my kind now. If you go among them, they will smell my kind on you, and hear our accents in your speech. They will not welcome you."

"But they will welcome my gifts! You have taught me so much, Threcatius! Of building, and medicines, and machines, and writing! What I have learned will improve the lives of every one

of my people. And I will tell them of my mentor, and they will build statues to you as their benefactor. And I will come to this lair and invite you to great feasts in your honor, as befits student to do for his teacher.”

Threcatius shook his great head slowly. “If you must leave, then you must. No one is your master, each must find his own way, and keep his own lair. I hope I have taught you that. But there will be no further company between us. I must leave before the “people,” as you have taught me to call them, find my lair through you. They would kill me and leave me to rot, uneaten, my soul trapped in my corpse, or dispersed by wretched worms and flies. This my gods teach me, and I have seen their wisdom. I was not always alone.”

“I would never betray...” his eyes filled with hot tears of anger. But then he realized that the priests would give him no choice. They would threaten his family, and if he would leave Threcatius for them now, then he would betray him for them later. Threcatius was strong, and wise, but they would come in hundreds, led by their priests invoking the wrath of the gods on any who dared shirk the fight. They would hunt his friend forever.

He turned away in shame. But he could not bear to think of his parents dying such ignoble deaths, cursing his birth. Taking nothing with him, he ran, crying silently, out of the lair and toward the Great City.

Threcatius called after him, trying to keep the lump in his great, golden throat from cracking his voice. “Goodbye, and good fortune, Amil! And be careful among those ap..people. They are unforgiving of their benefactors!”

V.

Amil arrived the day before his parents’ scheduled purification on the rack. The entire city turned out to see the young man walk through the streets. Hymns of praise were sung to the Gods for his safe return. A feast was given.

The Chief Priest presided over the banquet, and Amil’s parents sat on either side of him, both relieved and happy. As the roast was passed around, one of his fellow acolytes called out in a jolly voice “Brother Amil! Where have you been all this time? Tell us of your adventures!”

The Priest responsible for the behavior of the acolytes immediately turned on the boy, “Silence! What the Gods wish us to know they will tell us! Do not tempt a boy so newly returned from the land of demons!”

The Chief Priest held up a hand, and smiled benevolently. “Father, there is no need to rebuke the boy so strongly. He is a little ecstatic over the rescue of his friend. He will tell all of his “adventures” to the appropriate authorities, in time.” He looked at Amil and his genial eyes narrowed marginally. The lips framing his beatific smile seemed to narrow and bared a bit more of his aging, yellow teeth.

VI.

Threcaius looked down upon the cliffs he had inhabited for so long. He flew above them effortlessly, his will all that was needed to loosen the bonds of Earth. But his heart was heavy in his great, scaled chest. Amil was back in the land of his birth, and therefore, Threcaius knew he must move his lair far away from the great city, where not even his friend would look for it.

He allowed himself to rise slowly, on a column of warm air until he approached the clouds. Once above them, he would be beyond the eyes of monkeys, and perhaps under the eyes of Heaven.

He beat his great wings slowly, and rose through the dazzling white clouds. Suddenly, he emerged above them, the sky brilliant and cold, the clouds forming a landscape of peaks and valleys. It was a sight no monkey had ever seen, and it never failed to exalt his spirit.

But the ache in his heart would not disappear. As he sailed effortlessly to the West, he reflected on the fact that all love ends in a parting. He sang a new song to himself, and sent it ringing among the cloud mountains and valleys.

Listen, Shepherd of the Clouds.

Let my wisdom, bartered with tears rain down.

Let it rain down to where the farmer bends his back.

May it rain down upon the brows of kings.

May it rain down upon the wise, and cool their fevered heads.

May it rain down on the friend who has forgotten me.

It is ordained that all things must dissolve.

Mountains and princes crumble to the same dust.

The more complex and delicate the flower, the faster it decays.

What is more complex, and delicate than Love?

All love must end in tears.

Either a parting sunders, or the grave banishes the sight longed for.

And the closer we fly to the highest love, the light of God,

The further we fall when our wings fail.

Yet I will love. I will fly. I will defy the tears,

Or rather pay them willingly, as tribute

To the greatest of all Holy Gifts.

No less great for its mortality,

For all things Holy pass away.

Since this was an important song, each note lasted an hour. By the time he had rendered it, he was far from his former lair, and from the great city.