

Filled with Golden Song: Part I

by Rémy van den Wijngaart

“Just tell them . . . I love them. And that I’ll be all right.”

Yorza turned to the parents of the boy and smiled enough to convey compassion but not too much to offend. “He wants you to know he loves you and that he’ll be fine.”

The father began to weep again, and the mother held him close. She looked at Yorza with a trembling bottom lip. “Thank you, Yorza. You don’t know how much this means to us.”

“I think I have an inkling,” Yorza responded.

The boy’s spirit began to slowly fade, continuing to regard the parents as peace settled over his ghostly features.

“Your son is on his way now. Pharama will judge him kindly, I’m sure. I will leave you now, but you can come find me in the future if you need to.”

The mother reached out and took Yorza’s hand, squeezing it, before tears formed in her eyes too. Unable to speak now, she gave one more grateful nod, and then Yorza left the two of them to grieve.

Yorza exited the house and joined the flow of the crowd in the street. She wiped the corners of her eyes—golden, pupilless globes that, alongside her white skin and hair, clearly marked her as a kayal, or fetchling. As a spirit-speaker, she had performed this service many times before, but something about this particular loss touched her more than usual. Mostly, though, she was left feeling the gratitude of the parents she had been able to grant a measure of closure.

She had never known her own parents; that is to say, she had never known her biological parents. They had died to save her. Yet, Yorza had more parents than most: Mama Niss, Mama Fragila, Papa Perpa—everyone in the neighborhood who had helped raise her. When Yorza herself perished, she would leave not two but many grieving parents.

That was a worry for later, though. Her work was done for today, and Yorza looked forward to spending time with her friends.

She ran a hand over her face, and her colorful skull make-up magically disappeared. The make-up was of her own design, inspired by her studies into death and its many aspects. From the moment she learned about them, Yorza had been fascinated by psychopomps: beings in service of Pharamasma, the goddess of birth and death, that ensured the proper processing of the souls of the deceased. Among them, there was a particular kind of psychopomp called a catrina. These psychopomps appeared as festively-dressed skeletons, often decorated with flowers and all kinds of colors. Yorza loved this aesthetic: death could be tragic and sad, but it could also be beautiful. Hence, her make-up took the shape of a skull with colorful, flower-like decorations around her eyes and slight cracks in the bone from which shone golden light. She was really proud of it.

On her way to the park where Yorza and her friends met almost daily, she picked up some hot food from one of the market stalls for both herself and T'Rk. Deetiev wouldn't need any.

Impatient and hungry, she popped a piece from a meat skewer in her mouth. While she chewed the delicious food, she took in the sights and sounds of the city. The sky over Beacon might be caught in a perpetual evening, but the city itself was hardly lacking color and light. Besides, the dark sky might be off-putting to those from other planes, but Yorza found it soothing. Large parts of the Netherworld were dangerous and frankly terrifying, but Beacon had always been her beloved home.

When Yorza reached the park, she could see T'Rk was already there, sitting on a bench at the edge of the small lake. As she approached, he turned and she suddenly heard a voice in her head: "Food?"

T'Rk was a d'ziarak, an insectile species native to the Netherworld. Like all d'ziaraks, T'Rk had one set of large arms with five-fingered, clawed hands; a second set of smaller arms and hands below the first pair; two legs; a termite-like abdomen; and a dull brown carapace that he had decorated with colorful runes. Unlike most d'ziarak, who grew 7 feet tall, T'Rk was about Yorza's size. As a child, he had suffered from an affliction that had stunted his growth. It had made him a bit of an outcast among his people. He had that social status in common with Yorza, and he was her best friend.

"Food," Yorza confirmed as she handed him a plate. He received the plate with his large hands and then used his small hands to put a piece of food in his mouth.

“Always delicious,” he said, out loud this time. Among themselves, d’ziaraks spoke a complex language of insectile chitters and buzzes that most other species couldn’t replicate. Yorza certainly couldn’t. Thankfully, T’Rk also spoke Shadowtongue. He could have continued to use telepathy, but that would’ve left Yorza being the only one actually talking aloud, which she always thought was weird.

“Work good?” he asked her between chews. T’Rk was a minimalist when it came to phrasing.

Yorza nodded as she chewed a crunchy vegetable and drenched a piece of meat in spicy sauce. “I think I did good today.”

T’Rk smiled, which would probably have looked frightening to anyone unfamiliar with d’ziaraks. “Another weight on the right side of the scales.”

Yorza was about to acknowledge T’Rk’s comment and ask about his day when a ghostly voice from behind said, “What’s this about Yorza gaining weight?”

A burst of blue energy flew through the gap between Yorza and T’Rk, landing in front of them, coalescing into a ghostly figure, arms spread dramatically as if awaiting applause. Deetiev did like making an entrance . . .

In life, Deetiev had been a human. Humans weren’t uncommon in Beacon, though not as prevalent as kayals. The city also housed many types of undead, including ghosts, but Deetiev was special. She had maintained an unusual level of identity and memory. Most ghosts were stripped of such things and reduced to a single overwhelming desire to resolve some unfinished business in their lives. Deetiev was, by all accounts, a normal human . . . only dead.

She still had that human form now, though it was tinted a translucent blue. It was a gorgeous form at that: Deetiev had long, straight dark hair, big eyes of which Yorza didn’t know their original color—they were blue now, like the rest of her—set in a face that looked like it had been sculpted by an artist. Epicanthic folds apparently gave away that she had originally hailed from a land called Tian Xia, though that meant little to Yorza, who had never been outside of Netherworld. In life, Deetiev had taken great care in maintaining her body, and the results of that had been locked in permanently when she died. She often complained about not having a corporeal body, but she also often extolled the benefits of not having to exercise anymore.

“All hail the Queen of Comedy,” Yorza muttered, not looking up at her dead friend.

Deetiev laughed musically at Yorza’s response. “Ooh, snarky!”

“Only way to reply to you,” T’Rk said with a shrug of all his arms.

“Want some food?” Yorza said as she held out a skewer. “Oh wait, you can’t eat, you’re super dead.”

Smirking still, Deetiev floated closer to Yorza and T’Rk. “Don’t take this the wrong way, Yorza, darling, but I wish you were too. We could have so much fun together.”

“I like eating food better than I do you,” Yorza replied with a grin as she made a show out of dipping her finger in the spicy sauce and licking it off.

“Fine, I surrender,” Deetiev said, dramatically putting the back of her hand to her forehead as she “lay down” on her side, in the air. “What about you, T’Rk? Wanna die and keep me company forever?”

“Can’t deny the ladies all this,” T’Rk said as one of his large hand pointed to his face.

The three friends burst into laughter. This snarky banter was part of their dynamic; they were all outcasts in their own way, but together, they were equals.

Deetiev perked up out of her lounging position. “Oh hey, I heard there’s a new musician doing a set at The Swanky Shadow soon. Wanna go see if he’s any good?”

“Sure,” Yorza said as she put another piece of meat in her mouth. Then, while chewing: “You still good with the guy?”

“Of course, Maiser loves me.”

The Swanky Shadow was, as the name implied, a fairly swanky lounge club not just anyone could get into, but Deetiev had an understanding with the owner. In exchange for occasionally acting as what Deetiev called “spooky backup” for him as he conducted shady business—Yorza didn’t know and didn’t want to know—Deetiev and her friends got to come and go as they pleased. Deetiev even took the stage herself from time to time as well.

“Food first,” T’Rk said as he took a big gulp of his drink.

“You can eat along the way, Molly Many-Hands. Let’s go!”

Yorza loved Beacon. The southern quarter where she grew up and now lived was fairly peaceful and independent—practically a little hamlet in and of itself. It was nice, but the city proper was a whole different beast. Beacon’s mid-town was always bustling with activity, no matter the time of day. Merchants slinging their wares, street artists trying to

impress goers-by, con men attempting their latest scams, shoppers, diplomats, tourists—endless combinations of people trying to make their way in the world.

The friend group had a route they liked to walk that took them past their favorite spots in town. Yorza liked the various weird book stores and occult shops, while T’Rk was partial to Hive Izt Sixt’Zym, a large d’ziarak hive that towered over the western part of Beacon. The hive’s inhabitants were more tolerant of T’Rk’s condition than those outside of the city. Its signature light-woven runes made it a particularly colorful stand-out, visible from most anywhere in town. The only thing that outshone it was Glare, the large planar portal in the center of town, leading to the Universe.

Deetiev’s favorite spots all had to do with music or her past life. Instrument stores, artist social gatherings, clubs she had performed at, and most importantly: the wall.

The wall was situated in between a general store and book shop. Town criers and the like used this particular wall to post news and announcements, including musical and theatrical events. As soon as they neared it, Deetiev floated off. Yorza and T’Rk followed dutifully, lagging behind a little to give her some space. Deetiev came to see a particular poster.

Except, something was wrong. Deetiev was silent.

Yorza approached to peer over (or through) Deetiev’s shoulder at the poster. It had been largely covered up by two other, newer posters. All that was left of Deetiev’s poster was part of the band name.

TIEV AND H

“They . . . They plastered over it,” Deetiev whispered.

Yorza instinctively tried to put a hand on her friend’s shoulder. It passed right through.

“They fucking plastered over it! How very dare they!” Deetiev yelled. Her ghostly form made it a slightly frightening sight.

T’Rk came to stand on the other side. “Not on purpose, probably. Poster had been up for a long time, looked old.”

“They forgot about me . . .” Deetiev said, voice strained as if she was having to swallow something stuck in her throat. “How did this happen? Have I been gone that long?”

“You do always say the music world moves on quickly,” Yorza offered carefully.

Deetiev rounded on her. “When it comes to one-hit losers, yes! No-one moves on from me! No-one!”

Yorza tactfully held back a comment about how their romantic entanglement ended.

Turning back to the poster, Deetiev tried to put her hand on it, but just like Yorza’s hand phased through Deetiev, her hand phased through the wall.

“I was on the verge of my breakthrough,” she said softly, still in disbelief. “I was going to be a music legend. The name DEETIEV was going to be up in rune lights all across the city . . .”

“What happened to ‘and Her Oracles?’” Yorza asked.

“Those tramps replaced me with a new singer not three weeks after I died!”

“Isn’t that good? Don’t you want them to keep going? Carry on your legacy?” Yorza was really playing to Deetiev’s ego with this phrasing; anything else would only backfire.

Deetiev scoffed dramatically. “Without the star, what’s the point? Who would want to listen to a band of background singers? Preposterous!”

Yorza and T’Rk stayed silent, unsure of what to say.

“I’ll be a star yet,” Deetiev whispered darkly. “You’ll see. They’ll all see.”

“Yeah . . .” Yorza said softly.

Through her studies, Yorza had come to learn a lot about all kinds of undead, including ghosts. Most ended up driven insane by their obsessions and inability to interact with the corporeal world, eventually becoming a danger to all around. In Deetiev’s case, obsessing over her missed shot at fame could fester into that kind of dangerous trauma. Yorza had even come to terms with the possibility of someday having to forcefully release Deetiev from her sorrow herself. Then again, Deetiev’s personality was so singularly strong, if anyone could overcome that fate, it’d be her. For now, taking small bits of life force from Beacon’s denizens to sustain herself was harmless enough. Yorza knew what that was like . . .

As Yorza contemplated these things, the unofficial fourth member of their gang emerged. Like all kayals, Yorza possessed a living shadow. V, as Yorza called her, was part of Yorza, but also an entity unto herself. She could not speak, but she communicated through gestures and body language, and exhibited a distinct personality. V was the first friend Yorza had ever made. Though, she could be a pest as well, parodying Yorza’s movements or exaggerating parts of her body to mess with her. She did that to other people too, though, so Yorza didn’t take it too seriously.

V slid across the ground to Deetiev's shadow, diffuse as it was due to her ghostly translucence, and hugged it. It was a genuinely tender gesture that made Yorza feel a bit proud. Then again, V had always fawned over Deetiev, especially when she and Yorza been an item.

To Yorza's surprise, Deetiev actually returned the hug, insofar as that was possible for her to do. A ghost hugging the air; it looked both awkward and sweet. She must've really been feeling bad.

"You're still a star in my mind, Dee," Yorza said.

T'Rk chittered his agreement. "Screw these new one-hit wonders."

Deetiev turned and grinned slightly. "Thanks, guys . . ."

Then she raised her head, chin slightly cocked, and was back to her normal self. Yorza could see she was still hurting underneath, but this was how Deetiev processed her feelings.

"Come, let's move," Deetiev said. "These losers don't deserve my attention. Let's see if this new guy is any different."

Some hours later, the group left the Swanky Shadow in high spirits—even Deetiev. The musician had been surprisingly good, and the friends were still raving about the danceable yet innovative tunes on their way out. Yorza and T'Rk were dance-walking around each other, sometimes tapping out a rhythm on street lanterns they passed, and Deetiev was rambling to no-one in particular about how the lyrics could use some work but his vocal technique was pretty solid.

"Saw him looking at you a couple of times, Yorza," T'Rk said.

"He was pretty cute, I guess," Yorza replied, finishing her dance-walking with a twirl. In fact, that was selling the guy short. Yorza suddenly felt anxious. Was this it? Was this her chance? "Do you think I should give it a shot?"

That shook Deetiev from her analytical reverie. She floated in front of Yorza, matching her speed so that she remained at the same distance as Yorza walked. "Hey, it's rude to talk about that stuff in front of your ex."

Yorza rolled her eyes. "Oh, please, Deetiev, you were always pointing out attractive people even when we were together."

“I was just pointing out potential people for me to possess, so we could be *together-together*, but you thought that was weird.”

“It *was* weird!” Yorza said as she threw her hands up. “Hells, you even wanted to possess *me*!”

Deetiev scoffed and crossed her arms. “What other choice did I have? As established, you didn’t want to have sex with anyone else I offered to possess!”

“Because that would’ve been so weird! I didn’t want to have just some random guy or girl—I wanted you.”

“Then you should have let me possess you! What’s better than having me inside you in the most literal sense of the word?”

“Ew, gross, Deetiev. Don’t put it that way, you perv.”

Deetiev smirked broadly, floating closer to Yorza’s face. “Face it, Yor. I would have rocked your world, on multiple levels.” Then she distanced herself again and turned her head away dismissively. “You’re such a prude. This is why we broke up.”

Yorza scoffed wryly. “It’s *definitely* not why we broke up. And I’m not a prude—you of all people should know that.”

On the pavement, V floated along in a doubled-over pose, holding her sides and shaking with laughter. There was no sound, but the motions nevertheless made it crystal clear.

Yorza glared at her shadow. “Shut up, V, you’re just as much of a pervert as Deetiev.”

In response, V stuck out her tongue at Yorza.

T’Rk chittered in a way analogous to a sigh. “You’re all perverts, all three of you.”

“You could’ve had me,” Deetiev continued, ignoring T’Rk. “Now it’s too late. That ship has sailed. Chance forever lost.”

“Oh, get over yourself!” Yorza fired back. In the back of her mind, she knew that Deetiev’s poking and prodding was probably her way of coping with the disappointment from earlier. But Yorza didn’t like talking about lost chances and sailed ships. Deetiev knew that. “If I offered to sleep with someone you possessed right now, you’d do it in a heartbeat. Except your heart doesn’t beat, does it?”

Yorza regretted that retort as soon as it left her lips.

“Fine, be that way!” Deetiev said as she floated away from Yorza and to the other side of T’Rk, who was now literally caught between the two warring women.

The silence that ensued was awkward. V retreated into simply being Yorza's actual shadow, and T'Rk had subconsciously started walking a bit faster.

Yorza swallowed. Her mouth felt dry. It was like there was something stuck in her throat. Perhaps she should apologize . . . and give Deetiev further reason to gloat? No way. Then again . . . what if this was somehow the last straw for Deetiev, after the poster? Yorza couldn't bear losing a friend; she had so few. And Deetiev still meant so much to her. What should she say, though? What if she just made things worse? Her chest felt tight.

After a few moments of walking in silence, T'Rk started to rhythmically tap his four hands on different parts of his carapace. He whistled through his spiky teeth in a way that melded with his percussive tapping surprisingly well. It sounded like multiple instruments coming together in a song.

Deetiev scoffed; she knew what T'Rk was doing, and so did Yorza. This composition was part of a song they had written together. The two women stoically kept walking (or floating, in Deetiev's case), but as T'Rk neared the first verse, they looked at each other expectantly. Yorza smiled a sad smile. Why couldn't she just say sorry?

To her surprise, Deetiev was the first to give in, beginning the first verse of what was effectively a duet between her and Yorza.

*Cracks no longer empty
Filled with golden song
You were and are still broken
Yet golden and so strong*

Deetiev had adjusted her singing style over the last few years to better fit her new ghostly voice, and the result was hauntingly beautiful. A lot could be said about Deetiev and her outsized personality, but she was undeniably a musical genius. Her compositions were incredibly dynamic, filled with deliciously unexpected twists and turns, bound together by utterly thrilling vocal melodies.

There was no world in which Yorza would have been able to resist. The song was too good. She took a deep breath and joined in for the second verse.

Remembered, alive

Forgotten, perished

The line, so thin

So easy to cross

Yorza's voice, too, had always had a unique quality to it. She had been singing ever since she was little, when she first heard music inside her. That dirge—sometimes sad, sometimes beautiful—had started and never stopped. After Deetiev started teaching her, though, her craft took a huge leap forward. Yorza's voice now was truly versatile, able to be soft and tender or big and powerful. This new song called for the latter.

For the refrain, Yorza and Deetiev sang together, their voices blending like magic. It gave Yorza goosebumps. She and Deetiev had written the lyrics together, tapping into their fears, frustrations, hopes, and dreams. For Yorza, it was about how she would leave this world, and how she would be judged in the next. Singing it together now reminded her of why she had loved Deetiev romantically, and why she still loved her as a friend now.

By the time the song finished, both women were beaming warmly at each other. An applause came from people on the street who had stopped or even followed them to hear the song, and the friends took a humble bow. Well, T'Rk and Yorza took a humble bow. Deetiev floated high into the air and bowed deeply, waving and blowing kisses at her adoring fans.

When she was done feasting on the attention (perhaps literally), Deetiev came down, smiling at Yorza. "We may disagree on why we broke up, but we know why we got together, Beloved."

Tears of relief started welling in Yorza's eyes. "If we're broken up, why do you still call me Beloved?" she asked softly.

Deetiev's ghostly form playfully swirled around Yorza until they were face to face. "Because it suits you."

Yorza smiled. Deetiev always needed to feel like she was living in a novel; if she had the chance to add dramatic flair to a situation, she would. Calling Yorza "Beloved" was absolutely such a dramatic touch, but Deetiev didn't pull it out of nowhere either.

Yorza would be lying if she said it didn't feel good.

They continued on their way, and it wasn't long before they were back to friendly banter, all awkwardness forgotten. The friends spent a few more moments walking around, circling back to the park where they wished each other a good night and went their separate ways.

Yorza walked home alone with a smile on her face. For as tough as life could be, she always had her friends.

"Yorza Ensom?"

She turned around to see two people, a man and a woman wearing traveler's cloaks, approach her from an empty alley.

Yorza readied to defend herself, gathering void energy to fuel her necromantic spells. The dirge within her rose, providing an avenue to power magic.

Noticing her reaction, the man put up both his hands, lowered the hood of his cloak, and kept his hands in the air. "We come in peace." He elbowed the woman, who reluctantly also lowered her hood. "My partner and I were hoping you could help us. Not just us, but a lot of innocent people, actually. In return, we could potentially help you with your . . . affliction."

Knowledge of her affliction wasn't exactly a secret around these parts. It, and Yorza's way of mitigating it, were what made her an outcast to some. To have two cloaked strangers dangle a potential solution in front of her face was suspicious to say the least.

"Help with what?" she asked tentatively.

The man nodded as he slowly lowered his hands. "What do you know about the Onyx Alliance?"

To be continued