

# FAREWELL, EVERYTHING



VÉVA PERALA

Translated by  
H.B. CAVALIER



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*Translated and adapted by H.B. Cavalier*

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beginning to clear.

But Iza would have none of it. “Anyway—” she shattered the silence like glass “—so maybe the old technologies weren’t perfect. So what? All I’m saying is we’re not living up to our potential. We’re being lied to. Union, independent, resistance – *all* of us. And you don’t have to dig deep to learn the truth. It doesn’t take a genius to know where the old ways *really* came from.” Nadya and Holic heaved heavy sighs, but Iza was undeterred. “That’s right: spacemen.”

## NINE

The towering gates at Valena’s north exit were shut and locked, stopping up the road like a dam. In the snow at their base, digmen paced and smoked, scribbling in damp, wrinkled notepads. Bored and cold and poised to interrogate any looking to leave.

“We don’t have to cross here, do we?” Iza asked.

“No,” Osha assured her. But nothing looked as it had the day before. The paths that spider-legged off into the forest were lost in the white drifts. Still, he could feel the house out there, casting him a line. All he had to do was let it lure him in. “Take that road right there.”

“That’s a road?”

“Trust me.”

Iza looked despondent. “I was right. He *is* gonna kill us.”

“Shh! I need some quiet.” Osha was groping blind. “Take a left after that stump.” Thinking was no help at all. Fortunately, his brain wasn’t yet up to that task. “Another left there.” The house hummed, musical, ringing in his bones like the aftermath of a heavy gong. He could only listen. “Turn right there.”

“Where?”

“Back there. You just passed it.”

“Strange. I didn’t even see that.”

Osha’s irritable gut was dealt a blow as they jerked to a halt and began the squirrely process of backing up.

Nadya was shaking her head. “I don’t think I’ve ever been on these roads.”

“Neither have I,” Iza agreed. “They’ll never find our bodies.”

Between the trees, the jagged mountains could be seen, reliable as a compass arrow. Osha found their presence soothing, the way they just sat there. Still and dark. Like the inside of his eyelids.

“Osha.” Iza tugged his sleeve.

He’d closed his eyes. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s, um . . .” she tapped the side of her nose silently, brows knitted.

Osha felt his nostrils. Wet. Blood on his hand. He sighed. “Does anyone have a handkerchief?” The others shuffled through their things, coming up with nothing but apologies. So – with the Barsamina Company’s biggest stars looking on – Osha tilted his head back and pinched. If he didn’t feel so awful already, his pride might have been wounded – but most of his woundedness had been used up for the day.

Anyway, they were almost there. The house was just coming into view. They parked and climbed out of the car, not one word spoken. Complete, unbroken silence.

Osha gathered snow below the porch, cleaning his face and hands. Bit by bit, the ground grew gory, like the scene of some wounded animal crawling off to die. Clinging lightheaded to the railing of the stairs, he wondered how big that carcass would be.

Holic patted him on the back as he passed, sauntering up the steps like he owned the place. “We’ve all been there, kid.”

Nadya and Iza were much slower to approach. So slow, in fact, that they didn’t move an inch. The snow had glued them in place.

“It’s straight out of a ghost town,” they were whispering.

“It must be four-hundred years old.”

“At least.”

“Why haven’t I seen this from the water?”

“I haven’t seen it from anywhere.”

On and on they went, about sailing and ceremonies, beachcombing and treasure hunts that surely brought them to this very spot. But never in their lives had they seen this house. They blinked and blinked and stupidly blinked, giving it ample opportunity to disappear should it wish. Yet it remained.

Osha had no patience for their confusion. “Come on, it’s freezing!”

Iza raised her eyebrows. “I’m surprised to hear that from you. You should be used to much worse.”

He turned from them as they drew near, his nose continuing its red cascade over the railing. It had slowed some, but wasn’t giving much thought to stopping. The sudden weight of Nadya’s hand on his shoulder came as a shock. Pulsing. “Aren’t you coming with us?” Her voice, too, slipped under his skin, a gush of static. For a moment, Osha could only stare.

“Sure,” he finally mustered. Wiping at his nose, he smiled. “There’s some old sheets upstairs.”

While the outside of the house hadn’t changed – dripping, mossy rock that it was – the inside was lighter. And not just from the snow. The air itself seemed to weigh less. All the spectral smells were stronger, more alive – and intermingled now with the faint aroma of music. Osha wasn’t certain, of course. He couldn’t recall having smelled music before, and the flavor of blood was surely tainting things. But it seemed rather distinct.

Nadya and Iza had frozen yet again, in the entryway, leaving Osha to push between them in his crimson rush to the staircase. In his wake, they whispered – and their voices carried. All throughout the house he could hear them. Clear up into the loft, right on his heels, their words followed.

“Are those moving?”

“What?”

“Those discs. Like the sun and the moon – right up there.”

“Well, that is a little strange.”

“Something doesn’t feel right, Iza.”

“Don’t get all superstitious on me now. This place couldn’t be more perfect.”

“What about that foghorn? Don’t you think it’s a little loud?”

“Unwind a little, will ya? What could go wrong?”

“Anything, with strangers involved like this.”

“Oh, psh. Osha seems alright. A bit loose at the seams, but he’s young – maybe it’s just a phase.”

“I do hope he’s alright. I’ve yet to see him at his best.”

“Assuming he *has* a best.”

“You’re too kind,” Osha shot down, leaning over the loft’s low wall.

“Well, would you look at that.” Iza beamed up at him. “A stage!”

He offered a broad, bloody grin – “It’s a natural amphitheater!” – and turned his back.

A lamp switched on as he entered his room, atop a tall wooden dresser – and beside that, a full change of clothes. On a rack near the door hung a long black coat. The bed had been smoothed, pillow fluffed, an extra blanket folded at the base. And on top of it, his hat! His favorite hat, feather and all, as crisp and clean as it had ever been. As Osha lifted it, a bundle of handkerchiefs tumbled out, crumpled clouds falling to the bed. Deep maroon (so as not to be bothered by bloodstains), each was embroidered in black with O.E.L.O. His initials. He lifted one to his nose. It smelled of lavender.

Sinking into the bed, he waited out the bloodbath, listening to the muffled movements of the others. They were in the kitchen, directly below. He could make out nearly everything they said:

“What do you have there?”

“Strawberries!”

“Where on earth did you get *strawberries* this time of year?”

“Right there, on the counter. There’s more in the basket.”

It wasn’t long before Osha felt better. Better than he had in years, in fact. When he stood again, his legs were strong. Energized. Hopeful. The pill was in full effect, his nose was dry, and good God, did he love strawberries.

But not as much as he loved pianos.

And there one sat, right in the loft, natural as a bee on a blossom. A beautiful black upright. The only instrument he’d been formally trained on, Osha hadn’t played one since leaving home. He’d made do, as he tended to, leaning on nomad ingenuity. The Sobinis pieced together all sorts of abominations – handmade melodicas, surgically altered

accordions. But a real piano? That ranked higher than indoor plumbing as a reason to settle down.

Slowly, he approached the bench. Very slowly, he lifted the fallboard. Very, very slowly, he placed his hands over the smooth ivory. And there he held them, reverently, drawing in a deep breath.

There it was: the smell of music.

“I’m going to play you now,” Osha whispered to the keys. “Just so you know. I wouldn’t want to startle you.”

Then in he dove.

The sound was staggering. Full and rich, the vibration almost too much for his skinny bones. But he played anyway, as he always did – just as the music wanted. Obediently, his voice joined in, tripping over each note, stumbling from one syllable to the next. Doing the song’s bidding.

He’d made good money with this up north, easily covering the cost of the medicines he didn’t need. All over Lanestabra, he played – at weddings, at funerals, at all the archaic religious functions his grandmother dragged him to. But even when he had to sit up straight, don a weird little hat and sing in a language that had been dead for millennia, he felt just as he did now. Open, relaxed. High as a kite. If he stopped to think at all, he’d wreck it completely, so he didn’t. After years of practice, he could play disassociation like any other instrument. Were it not for tips (both instructive and monetary), he wouldn’t have a clue if he was any good. He leaned on witness accounts like a sleepwalker, baffled come morning by misplaced books and mysterious bruises.

And that’s what he sang about now: sleepwalking. He’d outgrown the habit, but it had stained him, and its ink leaked into every song he wrote. The one he sang now was particularly rancorous, recounting that long ago night – mere weeks after leaving the taiga – when he’d wandered, unconscious, away from his aunt’s house and into that contaminated marsh. His family fished him from the broken ice. The doctor stitched up his wounded thigh. But there was no recovering from the toxic water that had seeped in, a poison poised to dissolve him from the inside out in maddening cycles of torment that would leave him begging for merciful death.

Or so he was told.



Ultimately, the only torment Osha suffered was the stigma – that inevitable, animal response to the unknown. He was more than happy, at first, to deflect some bullying away from his sister, but it quickly wore him down. Until the day he left Lanestabra, Osha was little more than the disease he was said to carry: a prehistoric plague, hatched from frozen tundra during the Great Thaw. A parasitic swarm teeming in the tidal marshes of countless northern bays. He was to be fussed over or feared (depending on who you asked), and above all granted precious little freedom.

Before running away, music had been his sole sanctioned pleasure – and a convenient dumping ground for the algae blooms of angst that flourished in that stifling environment. In the first years after his diagnosis, he bore the tension like a shield; if he dropped his guard, the enemy within would surely wake, teeth bared. But with music he could unwind. He could let go. He could *vent*. From the nomads, he learned to hide his bitterness in drinking songs, to let his sorrows be swept away by violent waves of melody. His stories became whatever his audience wanted to hear, his past passing for a bad dream or a bad relationship, a bad government or a bad crop of potatoes. Pretty much anything bad, really. This tendency toward vague, mass catharsis made songs like the one Osha played now a hit. Especially at pubs.

He'd written this one for the piano, and he hadn't forgotten how to play it on one. He rode the whole song without missing a note.

When he finished, the room below exploded with applause.

Osha's hair had fallen, a black curtain over his eyes. He brushed it back as he smiled at his audience. With a bow, it tumbled down again.

Iza bounded up the stairs toward him, curls bouncing as she grasped his shoulders, words fluttering from her mouth like moths: "Why didn't you say you could do *that*? What *was* that?"

"Just something I wrote." Osha smoothed his hair again, firmly.

"Just something," Iza repeated, incredulous. "What do you call it?"

"Farewell, Everything."

"A touch dark, but still. You got any others?"

"A few."

Nadya appeared in the loft now, too, eyes wide. "You said you play

on street corners for peanuts!”

“Just guitar.” His hair fell back over his eyes. “And yes, downtown, right by—”

“Madness!” Iza shrieked. She cupped Osha’s face in her hands and squeezed. “A talented fella like you could be famous!”

“Well, put me on the radio then!”

“Holic, darling!” Iza called down. “Be a dear and bring in the equipment. Set it right here, in this very spot!” She beamed at Osha. “And then, bunny, you can put whatever you just did straight on the airwaves.”

## TEN

Jumbled mass of wood and wires though it was, setting up the radio station took little time, and even less work – almost as though the house itself did it. That was unlikely, though, for the house was awfully busy with other things: draping the windows in thin, light curtains, sweeping off the roof, beating back the covetous fingers of the North Woods. The kitchen filled up, shelves loaded with pots and pans, a teakettle, jars of rice and flour, dried fruit and nuts. Food sprung up in the cupboards, the refrigerator, even the oven. Hot meals, almost every evening. On top of all that, how could the house have any time for the station?

Thanks to the aural demands of Iza’s program, the floor of the loft grew crowded as well, all but carpeted with instruments: a violin, a trumpet, several drums. Chimes. A small harp. Glass jars of all sizes. A thin sheet of tin. Most were borrowed from Barsamina Theater, but under Osha’s roof they behaved just as the piano did: perpetually ready, quietly tuning themselves when no one was around.

People were almost always around, though. They came through in droves. Yet for all the traffic, it proved exceedingly difficult to introduce anyone new to the territory. By the end of the first week, Osha was