

## PROLOGUE

**N**ed Jerosso, First Order Apprentice to the Lord High Builder of Instruments, made the last adjustments to his invention and, gazing upward, proclaimed it ready. A great pyramid of bird cages rose before him. Three times taller than a grown man, this device looked even stranger and more powerful than Ned had dared to hope. How could it fail to create astonishing music? How could it fail to impress the Masters? How could it fail to please even the Harmonor? Ned took a few steps and stared at his handiwork. Beyond the surge of confidence he now felt about his upcoming performance, Ned felt proud simply to have built such a remarkable instrument. He called it the avian calliope. It was his finest musical invention ever, and it would assure a triumph so complete as to make Ned's ascent inevitable. He felt no doubt that the Lord High Master of Masters would appoint him Assistant to the Lord High Builder of Instruments. In the fullness of time, Ned would surely find himself proclaimed the Lord High Builder. From that lofty place he might well become the next Master of Masters, second only in power to the Harmonor. Such would be the consequences of his new creation.

A twinge of concern disrupted his reverie. If Ned were to harvest the bounty he had struggled so hard to sow and cultivate, these birds needed to accomplish what he expected of them. Would they? That uncertainty—for these were, after all, wild creatures—prompted his only doubt.

Ned set to work checking the avian calliope yet again.

The bottom level of cages—stout boxes made of wire and wooden slats—housed the largest of the birds. Ned could see some of these creatures peering out: a red-crested crag dove, whose cry is low and mournful; an ice owl, whose hoot carries far from its mountain aerie; a pair of dawn-and-sunset birds, whose mating calls resemble the

warble of a flute; and a young male swamp honker, whose warning cry is loud enough to knock the leaves off a tree. Other birds refused to reveal themselves, but Ned knew they lurked within their cages: a white-collared carrion-eater, two noon geese, a snowy hover bird, and even one of the rare stonefall wrens, whose warning call resembles the noise of rocks clacking and clattering as they tumble down a mountainside.

The next levels of the avian calliope, too, looked solid as a wall, each cage like a separate brick in the structure. Here Ned saw the variety of middle-sized birds he had selected: three cliff larks, a pair of night-flying fishers, a grave sentry, a couple of treetop roosters, a yellow-eyed shriek bird, a boulder hen, a frog-gulper, and even a wingless waddle bird. He could scarcely believe his luck in having assembled such a fine menagerie. Yet it wasn't what he saw that surprised him, remarkable as these birds looked, all those beaks poking through the wooden slats of the middle ranks of cages, and now and then golden crest feathers or bright red wings flashing through. No, it was how they would sing—how he hoped they would sing—that impressed Ned Jerosso.

Then the upper levels: the sight that exhilarated him most of all. Confined to the smallest, almost delicate cages forming the pyramid's summit were the rarest of all birds. Three starlight chasers. A cave denizen. Two honey suckers. A family of black-eyed hawks. A shadow bird. A smoky ember swallow. An array of birds whose melodies, once sung, would prompt even the Harmonor to weep with delight—  
“Ready at last, I see.”

Ned turned to see who spoke.

It was Sorrik, First-Order Emissary to the Lowlands. Few people could have so fully have reassured Ned at such a tense time. The old man's very presence felt calming: the warm smile eased Ned's worries, while Sorrik's appearance—the wise, weathered face, the white hair slanting from the sides of his head like clouds lingering near the summit of a bald mountaintop, and especially the snowy beard, which accumulated not so much on as under his chin—all these features soothed Ned's concerns.

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Nothing, however, could put him fully at ease. “I hope it *is* ready,” Ned muttered.

“It’s a towering achievement in more ways than one,” the old emissary said with a laugh.

“Spare me your wit.”

“I offer my compliment with delight and admiration. It’s most impressive.”

“Assuming it works.” When Ned gazed at the avian calliope, some of the birds stared back, unblinking, in anger and fear. Others, noisy but unseen, fidgeted within their cages. The whole contraption was so intricate!

“Of course it’s going to work,” Sorrik reassured him. “It’s a beautiful sight.”

“What worries me isn’t how it looks.”

“How it sounds, then? There, too, I see no cause for concern. You have chosen the birds that sing most sweetly, most powerfully.”

“True—”

“What could possibly go wrong?”

Ned felt a twinge of panic. “Anything!” he blurted. “Everything!”

Sorrik huffed in amusement. “Come now.”

“Sorrik, it’s true. Never mind that the birds sing sweetly and powerfully—that’s not all that matters. They must not just sing, but sing precisely when I command.”

“As surely they will.”

“Perhaps,” Ned responded.

“You are a brilliant inventor of instruments,” the old man assured him. “You are the most brilliant of all the apprentices currently among us.”

Ned felt his anxieties fade like spring snow.

“The Lord High Builder has told me so himself.”

So deep was Ned’s embarrassment on hearing all this praise that he couldn’t respond.

“Otherwise,” Sorrik continued, “why would the Masters allow you to perform here today in the first place?”

“Well—”

Edward Myers

“No other apprentice has been granted such a high honor in many years.”

“Perhaps they couldn’t find anyone else?”

“Oh, nonsense! The Lord High Builder chose you. Why? Because he values your abundant gifts.”

“Nonsense indeed,” Ned stated.

Sorrik glanced about, betraying a moment’s nervousness, and he whispered, “My suggestion: don’t insult those who trust you.”

“All I meant—”

“Many Masters have expressed eagerness to hear what you have created,” Sorrik went on, now in his normal voice, “and not just the Lord High Builder, I assure you.”

“Truly?”

“Truly. The Masters of the Low and Middle Choirs. The Masters of the Middle and High Consorts—”

Ned felt a twinge of excitement about what would soon take place. If everything went well—

“There’s even a rumor,” said Sorrik, “that the Harmonor himself may appear.”

“The Harmonor?” asked Ned, who fell silent in surprise and fear.

“The Harmonor.”

Within a short time guests began to arrive. Members of the lowest ranks came first: the Low Choir and the Low Consort, the Low Apprentices to the various trades, and the Novice Song Guards. They filed in, each wearing their characteristic robes—each robe woven to show the colors and patterns signifying the wearers’ ranks and roles as they took their seats on the stone benches that curved around the concert hall known as the Great Circle. Most of these guests were young, fifteen to twenty years old, and a few looked as if they had scarcely left childhood behind. The lads and the lasses alike wore long braids that dangled down their backs and swayed as they walked. Next came members of the Middle Choir and the Middle Consort, the Middle Apprentices, and others of their same rank. These members looked more varied in age—some youthful,

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some more mature—with the shapes of their bodies and the hue of their hair suggesting the differences in how long they had lived and worked within their orders. After them arrived the high ranks: Choir, Consort, and Apprenticeship, many of them older, grayer, and less agile than those preceding. Everyone proceeded quietly, calmly, and in perfect order. Soon the Masters arrived: Low, Middle, and High, almost all advanced in years and all accompanied by their attendants. They took their seats, too, until all the benches surrounding the Great Circle were completely filled.

Ned Jerosso observed all these people arriving and felt a mix of delight, excitement, and alarm. Everyone who mattered in Sifirithi had come to hear him!

Everyone except—

Where was the Harmonor?

Gazing about, Ned tried to spot him but couldn't. No Harmonor! Ned didn't know whether to laugh in relief or groan in despair. A great burden fell away from him, yet he felt deeply disappointed.

"Don't worry," said Sorrik as if reading Ned's mind. "He will hear of your great victory soon enough."

Ned couldn't even answer.

Soon all the guests were seated. Everyone waited, watching, as Ned got ready.

Ned looked around. Except for the Harmonor, not a single person of significance appeared to be missing. The tiers of seats rose all around him, leaving Ned alone with his huge instrument as if at the bottom of a valley. Beyond the Great Circle, the stone towers of Sifirithi rose toward the surrounding peaks until the man-made cliffs and the real ones—the ring of mountains—were indistinguishable. A light wind dipped down from the painfully blue sky, whistled against the cages, and ruffled the feathers of the birds.

He turned to the avian calliope and started to play.

From the very first note, the controls worked just as Ned had intended. Each lever pulled a cord, each cord tugged a mechanism in a cage, and each mechanism prompted a bird to sing. Sometimes this meant that a device of some sort prodded the bird until it squawked,

hooted, yelled, or cheeped. At other times a device raised a baffle between two cages, revealing a predator to its prey, and prompting either or both birds to call out. At still other times the cord dangled a morsel of food before a bird, which then yelped in delight or hunger. In this manner, Ned coaxed all the birds to sing, whether separately or together, and a great swell of music rose from the calliope.

*It works, he told himself. It works exactly as I've intended.*

Melodies rose, took flight, and intertwined like swallows flipping about in mid-air on a summer evening. Even Ned felt shocked by the beauty of what he had created. When he glanced right or left at his audience, he saw undeniable signs that these people felt impressed, even moved, by what they heard.

Ned played confidently and elegantly. He couldn't have felt more delighted with himself or with what he had accomplished. Having invented such a mighty and subtle instrument, he would surely encounter no limit to what Ned could attain within Sifirithi, no limit to his power.

Just then something odd happened. What took place started with an event so insignificant that Ned ignored it at first: a bird landed on the calliope. An ordinary bird. A sparrow, perhaps—a small, drab female—who had flown in from elsewhere. Perhaps the music had attracted her. Alighting on the topmost cage, she roosted there, twitching, hopping about, trying to understand the commotion below. All the birds in the pyramid of cages ignored her; most were probably unaware of her presence. They continued to sing on cue. Great waves of melody rolled forth like surf. Ned glanced at the little newcomer now and then but otherwise paid no attention, so indifferent did he feel about her arrival. Let the sparrow roost up there if she wished! Let her listen! Well aware that the gathered citizens, the various choirs, and even the Masters themselves continued paying close attention to the concert, Ned played the avian calliope without the least worry that such a tiny change would affect the outcome.

Then the sparrow began to sing. Is “sing” the right word? Ned, listening to the first notes that came forth from her, asked himself that question at once. He felt as if he had done far more than simply listen

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to a plain little bird sing a song. He felt as if while half-starved, he had savored the first morsel of a feast. As if while dying of thirst, he had swallowed a mouthful of cold water. As if while lonely and bereft, he had felt the warmth of a friend's embrace. Against his will, Ned ceased to manipulate the avian calliope's controls. He stood, confused and motionless, before the instrument. He listened.

He wasn't alone in doing so. By now the caged birds had fallen silent. Somehow these creatures heard the tiny sparrow's liquid notes despite the racket of all their hoots, bellows, screeches, warbles, cries, moans, whoops, and wails; and, having heard the small bird's song, all the others now waited for a long, uncertain moment.

The human audience, too, listened. The gathered citizens. The Low Choir. The Middle Choir. The High and Middle Consorts. The Masters of all those groups. The Apprentices. The Lord High Builder of Instruments. All of them watched, waited, listened.

Then Ned heard the Lord High Builder's stern voice: "What is the meaning of this?"

At once great commotion erupted. An ice owl screeched, and its chilly cry, alarming to smaller birds, panicked the cliff larks. Fluttering desperately within their cages, the larks agitated the snowy hover bird right below them. The hover bird wailed only once but so loudly that the noise startled the noon geese. The geese in turn jostled hard inside their cage until its framework of slats and wire collapsed, freeing the geese and damaging that corner of the pyramid. Finding themselves abruptly freed, the geese took off at once and flew away. At the same instant, the treetop roosters in the cage above came crashing down, the cage shattered like a pumpkin, and the roosters escaped into the air. This noise in turn terrified the stonefall wrens, the waddle-birds, the grave sentry, the starlight chasers, and the cave denizen. Within little more than a moment that allowed Ned to blink in astonishment, the avian calliope started to collapse. The thrashing of so many birds weakened the bonds between the cages. Some of the doors fell open. Several cages split apart. Birds both large and small—predators and prey alike—took to the air. The crag dove attacked a boulder hen. The black-eyed hawk pursued a honey sucker. The night-flying fishers

swooped, rose, and swooped again. The air churned with birds.

Ned, terrified, clasped his hands over his head to protect himself and stared in astonishment as the avian calliope fell to pieces, releasing the captive creatures, crumbling, and letting pieces of wood, metal, and fragments of cages topple toward the audience.

“Get away!” a man yelled.

“Run for your lives!” a woman shouted.

Even before these warnings rang out, people had begun to flee. Some backed off. Others turned and sprinted away. So crowded was the Great Circle, however, that few could escape without slamming into others. People sought safety as well as possible, but many, desperate to escape, tripped and fell. Others toppled over them. Still others stumbled on fallen bodies.

Cries of injury and fear soon overwhelmed even the racket of all the panic-stricken birds wheeling overhead.

Ned, scarcely able to stay upright, surveyed the chaos surrounding him. People dashed every which way. The Lord High Builder tripped on a broken cage and fell. Two members of the Low Choir huddled together on the ground. A Middle Choir Master wept and hollered, his face streaked with blood. Three children from the Low Choir cried out for their mothers.

It seemed impossible that so much could have gone so wrong.

The avian calliope lay before him, cages scattered everywhere. All the birds had fled.

Except one.

At first Ned nearly missed her, she was so small. When something caught his eye, however—a twitch somewhere on a cage—he realized that the little sparrow hadn’t left. She roosted just a few arm lengths away. Looking this way and that, the bird didn’t seem scared, only puzzled by all the commotion. Then she turned slightly and stared right at Ned.

He felt so bewildered to see of all his work reduced to rubble that he couldn’t even speak.

The bird stared at Ned for a moment, then sprang into the air and flew away.