



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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ON FREEDOM OF AGENCY AND THE FINDING OF LOST HEARTS

by Ken Scholes

Ratzer, the man who trained me, told me I had to be a thief because I was too ugly to be a whore. I told him that he should learn respect, and later, when I'd learned enough about thievery and knife work from him, I taught him some respect by taking his right eye in an even match. He was dead now, from some other woman's lessons I'll warrant.

I always thought about Ratzer when I was on the job. What would he do? How would he lay it out? Would he go alone or work a team. But in this case, he'd have never taken the job. "Never for the unders. Never owe a demon."

Still, Gilga-Yar had been a fair patron. He'd softened by the time he'd taken on my contract; gone were the fealty maimings and game-playing. He taught me the bits of the Art that applied to my chosen profession, and I, in turn, rendered the services only my chosen profession could. Namely, I stole for him every now and again, each job putting me closer to my contract expiring and a life of free agency.

The messenger demon in my pocket farted and giggled, the noise of it loud in the otherwise silent forest. I swatted at it. “Quiet.”

I felt its tiny teeth snapping at my fingers. “Master requires messenger returned in fine tip-top shape.”

“Mistress requires silence,” I said, swatting at the pocket hard enough to get a yelp. “And mistress wonders what master wants from this hovel?”

The cabin lay in a forested gully below us, smoke leaking from its solitary chimney. It was the only smoke on the horizon after days of crossing the Eldenwood on foot, and it was hard to imagine anything of value in this quaint log structure far removed from civilization.

“Master wants what master wants,” the demon said. “Master says this may be your last job. It may. It may. It may.”

He’d said that before. I wasn’t going to believe it this time either.

When I spoke it was more for my benefit than my obnoxious companion. “What could he possibly want from here?”

The demon in my pocket said nothing. I lay still and watched the cabin below, hidden from view by the woodling cloak I’d spent a years’ take purchasing for this trip. Under the

best conditions the Eldenwood was dangerous, and we were on the edge of howler season.

After another hour, the door opened and a shirtless old man dressed in buckskin trousers stepped onto the porch to gather an armful of firewood. Evening was coming, and the autumn air was crisp. Even at this distance, I saw what I had come for. It was bright on his neck, and though I had no idea what exactly it was, it reeked and shimmered with power that was palpable from where I watched. And not any power I recognized. This was something older even than the Art.

“He wants the amulet,” I said.

The demon snickered. “Want, want, want.”

I sighed and stood, brushing the leaves from me. “Very well. Let’s go fetch it.”

Suddenly, the demon was tooth and claw, tearing at my pocket in its mad scramble to leave. “Master says I go now.”

I was alone before I could protest. With the slightest cough, the air around me flooded with the odor of sulfur as the tiny messenger vanished. “Fantastic,” I said.

I walked down the side of the gully, aware of the knives at my hips and the hands that craved them. Rutzer would never have taken this job. But if he had, he’d have seen the old man and sent in his young apprentice to take what needed taking while he watched and waited.

Godsdamn Ratzter.

I approached the cabin and knocked on its door.

* * *

The old man didn't come to the door on my first knock. Or my second. Or my seventh.

I raised my voice. "I know you're in there. I'm lost and could use some help."

Silence met my voice at first. Then, I heard the clearing of a voice. "No one lost in the Eldenwood gets this far. Who sent you?"

"No one sent me," I lied. Then, I opted for a bit of truth. "But you're right. I'm not lost. I came for you."

I heard a sigh, then heard the turning of the bolt in its lock. The door opened and the man stood before me now. Up close, he was older than I realized, his hair thin and white as it fell over his shoulders. His chest was narrow beneath muscular shoulders, and hanging in the center of a gay thatch of hair, the crystalline medallion guttered and smoldered with its power. One of the first tricks Gilga-Yar had taught me was how to smell the Art and its distant cousins. This was something rarer, and the possibilities frightened me.

The old man watched, his sharp blue eyes narrow at the sight of me. It seemed he was waiting for something, and since the only thing that truly made me uncomfortable were

awkward and stretched out silences, I spoke into it. “I am Shayna Westbrook. Of the Clancy Westbrook Run.”

He continued to wait, his eyes widening. I mistook it as familiarity with my name and smiled “You know me then?”

The old man shook his head slowly and leaned forward, sniffing at me with a raised eyebrow. “But you know me or surely you wouldn’t have come so far to find me. Who told you how to find me?” He sighed again, then pushed past me with a deliberate stride. “I require you to tell me. And to follow.”

He said it with resignation, and I had no interest in telling him that a second-rate demon had sent me here without knowing what I was to steal and whom I was to steal it from. But I fell in behind him as he moved off the porch and around back toward the shed.

He opened it and withdrew a shovel and a knife. “It doesn’t matter. Take these.”

I thought about hitting him and taking what Gilga-Yar was after. But this old man had me curious, and my patron’s lack of forthrightness with me made me want all the more to know what was going on. So I took the shovel and the knife. “What am I doing with these?”

He regarded me with an intensity that made me uncomfortable. “First,” he said, “you’ll walk north away from the house until you find the other graves. Then, you’ll dig a

grave. And after, if you truly love me and wish to serve me, you will climb into the grave and cut your throat.”

I handed them back to him. “I don’t think so.”

He didn’t take them. Instead, he staggered back, and for a moment I thought he might drop to the ground. “It’s you,” he said. His face flushed. “Finally, it’s *you*.”

Now it was my turn to step back. “Yes,” I said. “It’s me.” I felt something stirring in my stomach and didn’t like it at all. “Who are you?”

His eyes glistened with tears of what seemed like gratitude or wonder. “Who am I?” He chuckled. “Surely you know. I am Ansylus of Erok.”

In that moment I knew I’d been profoundly buggered by a god. Because even though it was impossible, it wasn’t: Ansylus of Erok, Ansylus the Conqueror, Ansylus the Enslaver. It had taken half the League of Wizards to bring him down two thousand years ago. It had brought about the treaty with the demons and restored the Art to them.

So this, I thought, is where they’d hidden him.

My eyes went back to the crystalline amulet around his neck. Because of what he wore and the things people still whispered about it, though it was long thought lost. “The Heart of Eylon,” I whispered.

“Aye,” Ansylus said. “And you are here to free me of it at long last.”

Bugged by a god. Bugged by Eylon himself, the god of love and loyalty. A tiny bit of divine heart lay buried beneath the crystal that focused it outward, bending those who beheld it to adore with abandon and obey to the utmost zig and zag.

Only it didn't seem to work on me. And because of that, and because Ansylus the Enslaver now wept tears of joy before me, I was thinking Rutzer had been right all along about working for the unders.

* * *

Now, back in the cabin, with mugs of something he'd distilled from potatoes warming our hands and our stomachs, Ansylus wept tears of remorse and regret.

“It's true what they say about complete power spawning utter evil,” he said, “and I've had millennia to ponder my sins. And the sins my sins begat.”

We'd been talking now for a few hours while drinking and sitting by his fire. Mostly, I listened, though early on I'd told him about Gilga-Yar. I saw no good reason not to.

And in exchange, he'd told his tale. Millennia of introspection after a decade of world domination. The blood of hundreds of thousands upon his hands, and a war with Heaven that would've brought down the world if the demons had not

been bargained with by the League. I felt a strange kinship with him – probably because of the spirits we were drinking – as he spoke. He described centuries of loneliness followed by a vast stretch of contentment, recognizing the imperative of his banishment. At first, he'd used the Heart to send those who found him away, bidding them to be silent. But with distance, eventually those silences turned to whispers of adoration. And those whispers turned into pilgrims on his porch.

And so, the small cemetery north of his cabin. "I have them do half the work. I do the other half and try to convince myself it's saving the world."

"It probably is saving the world," I told him. And the way I slurred the words told me that somehow, I'd managed to get myself drunk with this old tyrant instead of robbing him and getting out from under Gilga-Yar's contract once and for all.

He shrugged and nodded toward the pan on the stove. "More?"

I shook my head. "I've had plenty, old man. Too much even."

He smiled a drunken smile. "This is the first real conversation I've had since the demons put me here. My first with a human since I put this on." He touched the crystal, and I heard it hum beneath his fingers. He laughed. "And the first

woman I've spoken to who hasn't fallen madly in love with me and been willing to follow my slightest suggestion."

I snorted. "It's early yet."

His laugh became a bellow as he stood and clapped me on the shoulder. "Now *that* would be something," he said. "But I think it's time for you to sleep," he said. "Then tomorrow, you can kill me."

I have no idea why I didn't ask. Maybe some part of me knew. Or maybe I was just really drunk and on the job, which was something, oddly enough, that Ratzter *would* approve of. "Sometimes it's just good for the soul," he'd say in his own slurred voice. "Long as you don't mind the job going to hell."

And in this case, I actually *did* mind the job going to hell. To Gilga-Yar, specifically, and I think that's why I drank with the old man and took my time deciding what to do.

So I didn't ask at all about killing him. Instead, I let him guide me to his narrow bed and let him pull my boots and tuck me in like the father I never had. And I fell asleep listening to him wash our drinking mugs.

"I'll kill you in the morning," I mumbled into the drool I'd made on his pillow.

* * *

He was staring at me when I woke up, and I sat up quickly, reaching for knives I wasn't wearing.

“Good morning,” he said.

My head ached, and I rubbed it with one hand while using the other to accept the cup of cold water he offered me. “Mine’s hurting, too,” he said. Then he stood from the chair he’d straddled while waiting for me to awake.

I sipped the water, surprised at how terrible my mouth tasted after last night. Then I winced, calling up the memory of it. I drank from time to time but never on the job. I looked at the old man, at Ansylus. Never *with* the job. “So I’m killing you today?”

Ansylus smiled. “Yes. I dug my grave this morning. With the others. I thought it would be fitting.”

I took another drink of the water. “And why am I doing this exactly?”

“Because you can. You’re immune to it. Just like I was. So you kill me just like I killed the Prophetess Esthra Shau, and the Heart of Eylon then falls to you. You can give it to your master. It won’t serve or command his kind, but surely he knows that already.”

“Then what does *he* want with it?” I wondered aloud.

His smile faded. “That’s a problem for you to solve before you hand it over, I’ll wager.”

My own eyes narrowed. “Or a problem I should avoid shouldering in the first place.”

His lower lip quivered and he said nothing, though his eyes filled with anguish and tears. Finally, he spoke. “You could avoid it. Yes.”

“And you would wait until someone else came along who was immune.” Even as I said the words, I thought about the two thousand years that had passed while he waited here for me.

He bowed his head. “Yes. And if I must, I’ll bear it longer. My sins are my sins, and Eylon’s heart is my sin to bear until someone slays me and takes it from me.”

Bugged by gods indeed.

So after breakfast, we walked to the grave that he had dug and he knelt at the foot of it. I closed my eyes and pushed my knife into his heart, from behind, angling the blade down as I slid it into his trembling shoulder blade.

“Fare you well, Ansylus of Erok,” I whispered as he tipped, laughing, into his grave.

* * *

“So you are human,” the little girl said.

I looked up from the grave. “I am.”

The forest had changed around me, and then she appeared in the way that people appear in dreams, suddenly and without context, as my mind reeled to figure out her place.

“So are you going to take it? Are you going to put it on?” She squatted, brushing the grave’s dirt from the unfamiliar fabric of her dress.

I shook my head. “No. I’m not sure what I’ll do with it.” I met her eyes. “But I’ll not put it on.”

She smiled. “Good.”

And then she was gone, and the forest became something recognizable to me again. For a moment, I considered just leaving it, burying it beneath the dirt on the body of the man who had last commanded it. But even as I thought it, I thought of others coming after me, finding the cabin, finding the graves. Digging them up, one year or a thousand years from now, to find it waiting.

And to find a world waiting beyond the far edges of the Eldenwood.

I sighed, dropped into the grave, pulled the amulet from him, and tucked it into my pocket. Then, I covered his grave and returned to his cabin.

I stayed the night there, drinking more of his potato spirits until sleep insisted and I acquiesced. In the morning, I used his stocks to re-supply and then set out for home.

* * *

They trapped me when I exited the forest. They were silent and masked, but their hands bore the markings of the League

and I knew better than to resist them, despite who I worked for. The demons had fed the League wizards Art for centuries now but the wizards still held dominion, and even Gilga-Yar had a policy of not crossing them. “Tell them who you serve, and if they still require it, give it to them.” Whatever it was, ever in the past that had been his advice.

“You’re Gilga-Yar’s pet, I’ll wager,” the larger of the men said.

“Or he’s mine,” I said. After weeks traversing the Eldenwood, I was hoping they’d take me into custody. Hot food. Hot water. Warm bed.

“And you have the Heart then?”

I blinked. This was a change. “I do.”

He nodded to the others. “Bring her.”

The transition from running to horseback jarred my bones, but I suffered it, longing for the hospitality of a prisoner of the League. Gilga-Yar had friends among the wizards, favors I’d helped him perform over the years, so there was no doubt in my mind that I would be free eventually, the fruit of my labor still snug in my pocket.

The wizard’s camp lay nestled in the hills that marked the southernmost boundary of the wood and the beginning of the Emperor’s Way. It spread out, a kaleidoscope of tents and

wagons, with the wizard's tent the largest and leaking purple smoke from its top.

The Leaguesmen escorted me to that tent, relieving me of my knives before pushing me gently through silk curtains too flimsy for the autumn cold. Warm air met me and I met my first wizard face to face. His skin had gone pale and his hair a thin silver from a lifetime of using the Art, his eyes rheumy but sparking with intelligence.

When he spoke, his voice was as silver as his hair. "You are Shayna Westbrook. Of the Clancy Westbrook Run. Thiefmaiden of Gilga-Yar."

"Yes."

I thought he would introduce himself, invite me to sit. He did not. He lay back in his cushions and regarded me carefully while sipping at a pipe made of white bone.

I shifted uncomfortably beneath his gaze.

"The League is aware of your recent acquisition. Its delivery cannot be permitted."

I reached into my pocket. "If you know I'm Gilga-Yar's thief, then you also know I have instructions to yield to the League in all of my business dealings for him." I withdrew the amulet. "Who should I give it to?"

His eyes narrowed with rage, but none of it touched his voice. "Put the abominable thing away. It is yours to bear now.

You who were so short-sighted to have taken it in the first place.”

I put it away. “Has Gilga-Yar been summoned?”

“Gilga-Yar,” he said in a measured tone, “has been executed by his own kind as per the ordinances of the treaty with respect to treason.”

I felt my legs go weak, and it surprised me.

He continued. “The sentence was carried out as soon as it was determined that you had taken the Heart.”

Something cold flooded my stomach. “Then Gilga-Yar is dead?”

The wizard nodded. “And you are returning to the Eldenwood with what you stole.”

I felt it whispering now in my pocket. It was a quiet voice, a still voice. A sure voice. *Wear me, and the League will do your bidding. Wear me now, and take me off later. But wear me.*

Could I? Put it on and take it off? I knew better. If that were the case, Ansylys would’ve laid aside his burden long ago. Once I wore it, no matter the power I wielded and how I did so, that Heart of Eylon would be mine until someone immune to it, someone like me, came and took it.

“I will not,” I said aloud. The wizard blinked, thinking I to him. He didn’t realize I was talking to that bit of a god in my pocket that had bugged me.

But in the wizard’s slow blink, the tent fell away and I stood in the forest once again. The little girl smiled. “I’m glad,” she said.

The wrongness of the forest raised the hair on my arms. Wrong not in a bad way but in a way that evoked fear and trembling nonetheless. The lines and light of it were...*other than*. “Who are you? Where did the wizard go? Where are we?”

“I am Taemyl. The wizard was never here. You are among the Trees of Pantheon.”

Orphaned thieves get little in the way of formal schooling, but I knew of Taemyl. And Pantheon. “You are Eylon’s daughter.” I looked around. The wood was quiet around us, though I suspected other eyes upon us, other ears to catch our words.

She nodded. “I am.”

“And you want your father’s heart?”

She nodded again. “I do. It was never meant for your kind.”

Your kind. Looking at her, it was easy to forget she wasn’t what than she seemed. But the more I studied this little girl, the less I trusted her. It was the eyes. They were too old and

held no humanity within them. Still, it was her father's heart, and I did not want it for my own. I found myself more and more wishing I'd listened to Rutzer about the unders.

I reached into my pocket and withdrew the necklace and its crystal amulet. I held it toward her and waited for her uplifted, empty hand to slide beneath mine. As it did, our eyes met and I shuddered.

Then I released the Heart of Eylon and felt the forest twist itself back into the Eldenwood I stood in, Ansylus's open grave still before me.

"Didn't I do this already?" No one answered my rhetorical question. So I lifted the shovel once again to finish burying my dead, cursing the Pantheon and everyone in it as I did so.

* * *

"And so," Gilga-Yar said in a low voice, "you gave it to her?"

His minion had re-appeared when I reached the edge of the Eldenwood for what, to me, seemed my second return trip. And for only the third time in fifteen years under contract, the Grand Old Demon brought me over to his plane to stand in in his sweltering office beneath the flames of Raya's Consuming Veil. He sat behind his desk and avoided eye contact with me.

"Yes," I answered. "I did. I believed you were dead and that the League intended banishment for me."

He chuckled. “The gods cannot be trusted to deal plainly.”

Nor could the demons, I thought but did not say. Instead, I waited, my stomach churning from the heat and the heaviness of this dark, twisted place.

“Still, you could have put it on,” he said.

Now I met his eyes. “Is that what you intended with it?”

He smiled but didn’t answer. Instead, he repeated himself and matched the intensity of my level gaze. “You could have put it on.”

“No,” I said. “I could not.”

“Yes,” he said. “I see.” He started rummaging through the papers on his desk, and it was something about the way he did it that betrayed him. He found an old document and held it up. “Your contract,” he said. “I’ve decided to release you from it.”

“But I returned to you empty-handed.”

And the last time Gilga-Yar ever met my eyes, I realized that he’d intended it to be that way from the start. I didn’t know what price he’d exacted from the Pantheon, but for reasons of his own, he’d removed something dangerous from the world and curried favor with the old powers. “Yes,” he said. Then he smiled, his teeth sharp and glistening. “You have served me well.”

With a flick of his wrist, his office and its oppressive heat fell away as I found myself standing in the market of Pan Shao Crossing near the Danubii border. There was a pouch in my belt that I hadn't seen before. I took it, opened it, and poured a handful of the diamonds into my hand.

He had served me well too, and, blessing him, I went first for the money-changer and then for the tavern.

I wanted the potato spirits, but the very idea of it was foreign in this forsaken corner of the world. So instead, I settled for fermented samaberry juice served as cold as the cellars in this place could make it, which wasn't cold at all. I stood at the bar while I drank, and every part of me noticed the young man when he sidled up beside me.

He was beautiful, and my heart raced to look at him. His hair was golden and his eyes were bright and blue like skies after a desert storm. Even his smell caused my breath to catch, and when he smiled at me, I felt my hands shaking as they gripped at the edge of the bar.

“Thank you,” he said, “for giving me back my heart.”

The little girl was waiting for him by the door, and she waved to me and smiled as he bent to kiss me upon the forehead.

As he walked out into the desert sun, I waved back and wondered what I'd unleashed upon the world by bringing him

back into it. And another part wondered whether or not it was entirely bad. Regardless, I hoped my life could be finished now with the likes gods and demons.

“To free agency,” I said to the barmaid who’d caught my eye earlier. She caught it even moreso now that my body was flushed and tingling from the love god’s presence. And she’d felt the effects of Eylon’s charms as well, I’d wager from the wideness in her eyes and the way her nostrils flared.

She smiled at me. “To free agency,” she said.

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Ken Scholes is the author of four novels and over forty short stories. His fantasy series The Psalms of Isaak has been published internationally to critical acclaim and a scattering of awards. His short fiction has been collected into two volumes available from Fairwood Press. A third volume, Blue Yonders, Grateful Pies and Other Fanciful Feasts, releases in August 2015. Ken has a degree in History from Western Washington University. He is a native of the Pacific Northwest and makes his home in Saint Helens, Oregon,

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GRANDMOTHER-NAI-LEYLIT'S CLOTH OF WINDS

by Rose Lemberg

Grandmother kept her cloth of winds in the orange room, a storage chamber painted in fire and lit to a translucent glow by dozens of floating candlebulbs created by the older women's magic. As a small child, I remember hiding between the legs of a polished pearwood commode, safe and stuffy-warm behind the ancient embroidered material that draped it, hiding—just to be sure—also behind the veil of my hair. Grandmother-nai-Leylit would come in always just before the afternoon meal, and her smell—saffron and skin and millet dough—spread through the room like perfume. Her shuffling steps rang for me a music more exalted and mysterious than the holy sounds of the dawn-song that drifted each morning from behind the white walls of the men's inner quarter.

I would watch from the darkness of my veils as grandmother unlocked the walnut cupboard, one of many pieces of storage in the room. She would pull from it, her brown age-spotted hands shaking slightly, a basewood box ribbed in razu ivory and guarded by nails of hammered iron.

Gently, as if deep in prayer, she would lift the lid and pull from the box an invisible cloth.

Lacking the magic of deepnames myself, then and now, I could not see what she held, but I could hear a faint crinkling, a movement of small threads of air as they restlessly wound around each other. I watched grandmother bury her face in this cloth, inhale it, pull her kaftan sleeves up and trace the length of it along her bare lower arms, before with a sigh she would put it back.

A few years later my brother was born, and my mothers left again for a trading venture through the southern deserts. I did not see a trace of them nor hear any word before I grew too big to hide under the pearwood commode. Then a letter, torn and filthy, arrived from the south to say that my mothers were now staying in Zhaglit-Beyond-Walls, a place nobody in the quarter had heard of.

My brother Kimriel, now three, did not talk. With my mothers so far and the day of his entrance to the men's inner quarter only a year away, we were growing more and more anxious. The scholars would not admit a wordless child, but all our teaching and cajoling led to nothing.

One day, grandmother-nai-Leylit brought us children openly into the orange room. Kimriel wailed and struggled in my arms, his face bewildered, eyes darting from one strongbox

to another. I hoped, I prayed she'd let him touch the fabric made of wind. I wanted miracles, I wanted him to touch the cloth and break out in a torrent of blessed speech, in great sentences of Old Khana that only the scholars know. I wanted to shake the gatekeepers of the inner quarter, men bearded and veiled and unknown to me, to shout at them to let my Kimi in; I knew, I knew even if they refused to believe, that behind the white walls of the men's domain there waited for him a greatness. He'd been named after the men's god, the singer, Kimrí, Bird's brother, and like the goddess Bird I yearned to shelter him under my wings from all that hurts, and then to send him triumphantly forth. But I did not know how to help him.

When grandmother-nai-Leylit opened the cupboard and the box and pulled out the cloth of winds, Kimi's eyes focused on it. Even as a young child that had not yet taken magic he could see it, hinting at an aptitude greater than mine by far. Grandmother-nai-Leylit guided his hands to touch the cloth, but no great torrent of speech burst forth from Kimi's mouth. It took me a moment to realize he'd fallen silent—not wailing, mumbling, or fidgeting even. His small fingers held tightly to what I could not see; a homecoming.

When Kimi turned four, the traditional age for a male child to depart the women's quarters and pass through to the

men's domain, the scholars would not take him. Another four years they granted him, four years of reprieve during which he could begin to speak and gain acceptance to the men's side of the quarter, where to learn his Birdseed letters and the deeds of holy artifice. I watched over him, watchful as Bird. Unnoticed by grandmothers and protected from the idle questions of other girls and women by the fierceness of my glare, Kimriel would spin around and around, his face gleeful, his arms spread wide as if he would fly.

My friend Gitit-nai-Lur took to following us to the courtyards nestled under the outer walls of the quarter. Outside these rough-hewn gray boulders lay the city of Niyaz, fabled with its trade and splendor, anointed in persimmon perfume. Everything about it frightened and enticed us—the Niyazi men oiled their beards and donned brightly colored garments; behind these walls they walked unveiled and spoke loudly. The women, radiant in billowing silk dresses and adorned in beads, were stripped of magic according to an age-old tradition. This deed, so repulsive and incomprehensible to us, was to them joyous, marking passage from childhood into adulthood. In time we'd step out of the quarter as grownups, as traders. We would venture into the city, and out of it, through the carved Desert Gate. But it was not yet our time.

In courtyards so close and yet so far from that world, we would watch Kimi's grounded gyre; Gitit would mutter words in the trade tongues of the desert, which she was trying valiantly to learn. I'd help her sometimes. Languages came easily to me. Under the shadow of the walls we'd say *spidersilk*, *basinewood*, *glass*, *honey crystal* to each other in Maiva'at and Surun' and Burrashti. In these words lived for us the dream of all what lay beyond the quarter, beyond even the city—the desert embroidered in heat, the people in their tents of leather strung with bells and globes of fireglass. We spoke of *flatweave carpet*, *madder*, *garnet*, *globes of fireglass* and of each other in that heat, protected by the benevolence of the ancient trade routes.

Kimi got used to my friend. Gitit learned to draw on her deepnames and send forth bubbles of multicolored air. Kimi would laugh when they landed on his fingers and winked out like tiny candlebulbs or fireflies.

Grandmother-nai-Leylit found it more and more difficult to walk. She made a spare set of keys for my other grandmother, grandmother-nai-Tammah. I would bring Kimriel to the orange room when he was inconsolable, and my other grandmother, tall and willowy under her shawls of spidersilk gauze, would pull the cloth of winds out of the casket for Kimi. The weave of the rustling winds calmed him. It made

him happy. It made me happy with the kind of happiness that comes from wanting a person you love to be content in a hundred ways that have nothing to do with aspirations of propriety.

At eight, Kimriël could say a few words—*sunset, box, no, fish*; not nearly enough to pass into the scholars' domain, locked now from him forever. We would no longer be allowed to call him after the men's god, so the grandmothers took the name Kimriël away, together with his young child's clothing. They named him my sister, Zohra, and dressed now her in garments appropriate for a girl. Though Kimi would not answer to Zohra, no longer did we have to worry about her fate beyond the men's white walls, no longer would we struggle to teach her the words of scholars.

But the relief from that pressure had thrust me suddenly into the center of my grandmothers' regard. In all those years of adolescence I had spent watching Birdlike over my sister, I had not taken a deepname, had not even thought about magic. Now, at fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, they insisted I should take a deepname if I wanted to be marriageable, and desirable as a partner in an oreg, a women's trading group.

I shrugged it off. I had no aptitude for magic, could not sense it like Kimi or my friends. Marriage would happen as it would, and I could not care less whether some man behind the

inner walls would be a master artificer or a floorsweep. I would see him a few times a year at most, in the perpetual semi-darkness of the ritual chambers; most of my time I would spend with my oreg, whether trading or at home.

And as for an oreg, well. Gitit-nai-Lur, that most beautiful girl with her dark lustrous skin and her eyes unpainted by kohl, had deepnames enough for both of us. An oreg was more than the deepnames held by its members.

But even though I had not succumbed to the soul's darkness that comes to so many who yearn in vain for the mind's power, I was growing restless. I wanted to venture beyond the quarter's outer walls, beyond the city, to trade, but grandmother-nai-Tammah begged me to stay and help watch over my sister while grandmother-nai-Leylit grew more and more frail. Gitit-nai-Lur, with her two deepnames, received many offers from trading groups both new and established, but she stayed behind with me out of sheer stubbornness.

Later that year, grandmother-nai-Tammah constructed a rolling chair for grandmother-nai-Leylit. It was made of white metal and deepname-powered, though I could not see exactly how the light of deepnames operated it; it was a work of artifice and thus forbidden to women. Grandmother-nai-Leylit could steer it with her mind. It had annoyed me in the years past when grandmother-nai-Tammah would do those mannish

things, but now I was heartened to think that she'd not asked for permission, for surely such would not have been granted.

A few months after that, grandmother-nai-Leylit could no longer steer the chair. I rolled her around in it, and she would lay her hand, wrinkled and calloused and warm, over mine; she smelled of cardamom and bitter medicine, and her once-bright eyes now showed a map of a country unknown that spread under the desert in spidersilk webs of red.

I'd wheel the chair into the orange room and open the box for my grandmother, pull the cloth of winds out for her—still invisible in my hands but heavy with the weight of unshed tears—and lay it against her cheek. She would tilt her head to her shoulder and sing quietly, in the language of the Surun', a lullaby. She shouldn't do so, but I had not the heart to remind her of rules.

We all woke up that night, those of us with magic and those of us without. Kimi began to wail—*fish, fish, fish, fish*—I thought at first of how she couldn't know that women are forbidden from song; and only then with a jolt, with the sinking in my stomach, I recognized the Surun' melody. Wrapped in fear's emptiness I listened hard for what only the strongest in magic are given to see, for the goddess coming.

Bird has many shapes—finch and eagle, sandpiper and turtledove—and yet she comes, they say, in a single visage for

the soul's final exhalation. I heard nothing, saw nothing, I swear. None of us were strong enough to see what shape she took for my grandmother—but an invisible wing, rough like calloused fingers, brushed my cheek as the goddess bore my grandmother's soul aloft.

* * *

Grandmother-nai-Tammah and I had not been close before this death. She seemed too aloof, detached. She'd make frequent and not at all hushed supplications to Bird to allow her to be reborn a man, and sometimes I'd see her walk through the quarter in a man's kaftan and veils, like a scholar who had found himself on the wrong side of the wall.

As a child, I was fascinated and frightened; as an adolescent I was angry that a grandmother of mine would taunt the laws this way. Now I followed grandmother-nai-Tammah around, making cup after cup of red tea for her or accepting the cups she brewed for me. In silence we sat and stared each into her own distance as we blew on the scalding water to cool. My thoughts from years past made me uncomfortable, uneasy for having judged an elder with whom I now shared this grief; and even if she wouldn't share it, how could I judge what she wanted to be in her next life or how she felt now and yet bristle at the thought of my Kimi being judged?

Day after day we sat with our tea, while my sister played nearby in the orange room. Grandmother-nai-Tammah no longer locked the box. I wondered many times whether she wanted Kimi to damage or misplace the cloth of winds, but it did not happen.

One day grandmother-nai-Tammah spoke to me, as if to continue a conversation we had never begun. “Beyond the city,” she said, “in the heart of the desert, the sandhills crest and fall, shifted about by the hand of the wind. Sometimes the wind blows so mighty it cuts through the layers of sand, through the years, revealing bones of perished animals too winsome to exist. People of the Surun’ treasure these, and so do the Maiva’at. The best of their weavers know how to listen to the bones. In plain threads of spidersilk they then embroider these beasts, fantastical and forgotten, onto carpets dyed with weld and madder.”

I nodded, not feeling the need for speech.

“Each tribe has its own designs, shapes formal and solemn to embody the memories of the bones. Each tribe has its own materials—spidersilk and wool, sisal and reeds and thin leather cords. Yet only among the snake-Surun’ is there a tradition of weaving from air.”

She said nothing more, expecting perhaps a question.

Later, Gitit-nai-Lur would ask me why I had not asked, her eyes bright with secrets and dreams of the desert. “A cloth of winds! A whole tradition of it, not just a single fragment but a whole carpet, carpets! Oh, such a treasure to bring back from a trading venture, to unroll before the ruler of the city!”

I do not know why it made me uneasy to think of the cloth of winds in its box, the invisible heaviness of it alive with threadlike winds. They held within them still the smell of my grandmother’s fingers, the softness of her cheek—and more, images and feelings I could not express: the desert where it had been woven, exhaling the day’s accumulated heat into the night; the patient touch of weavers unknown to me. My heart recoiled at the thought of such a treasure spread before the ruler of Niyaz. I had never seen the Shah, but heard plenty of stories—of our women ridiculed or even assaulted on streets outside of the quarter and then not protected by the law; of our traders imprisoned; of his coffers, in which all matter of treasure lay without ever seeing a person’s loving gaze. I did not want the cloth of winds to feel that loneliness. I scolded myself for letting it become a person to me, because the first thing a trader learns is not to become attached to trade goods.

I brought Gitit-nai-Lur and the stoked flames of her curiosity to my grandmothers’ rooms. But though grandmother-nai-Tammah looked my friend up and down with

approval, she was unenthused by Gitit's questioning. "If you desire to bring such a treasure to the ruler of Niyaz, then you are nothing but a fool."

"Explain to me, trader Bashri," said Gitit-nai-Lur, frustrated curiosity lending forcefulness to her voice. "What is so wrong in this? So foolish? Is it not what Khana traders do?"

"You do not understand." Grandmother-nai-Tammah sighed and passed a hand over her eyes. "There is no need for you to scour the desert for the best woven treasure to bring before the ruler of Niyaz in his rainbow-tiered court. He already has it."

Grandmother's words stirred something in me, a yearning I could not explain. "Yes?" I whispered.

"Yes."

She fell silent. Gitit and I just sat there, determined to wait her out, occasionally refreshing her tea. Kimi ran out and circled us curiously once, twice, thrice, then stole a cardamom cookie from the tray of tea and hopped one-legged into the orange room.

At last, grandmother-nai-Tammah relented.

"It begins with Zurya, a woman of the Maiva'at, who sang a supplication to Bird so beautifully that the goddess gave her the gift to spin with her voice alone, multicolored threads that sang with indigo and weld and the finest red madder." She paused to

take a sip of tea. “And it begins also with a woman of the Khana named Bashri-nai-Leylit, whose lovers took her name and formed an oreg.”

We sighed at the first mention of that name while grandmother’s voice continued to weave for us her heart’s story.

“And it continues with the ruler of Niyaz, who imprisoned the youngest of the oreg, Bashri-nai-Divrah. The crime was that of showing her face unveiled beyond the walls of the Khana quarter, her magic plain for all to see; for outside these walls, they do not allow women to hold deepnames, unless they are Khana and properly veiled. And so it passed that Bashri-nai-Leylit and Bashri-nai-Tammah went to the rainbow-tiered court to plead for their lover’s life; for her veil had been torn away by tormentors, and through no ill intent had she defied the law.”

Between each sliver of the tale, grandmother-nai-Tammah would take a sip of tea; and between each sliver of the tale we breathed, Gitit’s hand tight in mine and shivering like a sparrow.

“The ruler of Niyaz would not relent, unless, he said, the greatest treasure ever woven would be his. And so the two remaining traders Bashri set out to the great desert until they reached the leather tents, bell-strung, that housed a tribe of the

Maiva'at." Grandmother stopped there, allowing our traveling minds to catch up with her story. "It was there that Zurya had sung her supplications to Bird, it was there that she had been rewarded with the gift of spinning from Bird's own feathers. But now, clouds of dust and dullness of despair veiled the encampment.

"Help us, help us, traders of the people of the Khana,' cried Zurya's kinsmen. 'For the threads she sang have cocooned her body,' and so the Bashri women, having prayed to Bird, pulled on the threads of song that hung from Zurya's mouth and freed her."

"Weighted with the wealth of threads that sang of weld and pomegranate, the traders Bashri walked again across the desert. Where the wind reveals and hides the great depths in the sand, they saw bones of such creatures as have never tread on solid ground—a flying razu beast, a lizard longer than my arm and made of entirely of letters, a skeleton of a two-headed bird with a crest of bone feathers, a stag on crane's feet, a dog with a forehead studded with rubies. And with each revelation, small winds came to us and sang to the song-threads that we carried and wound around them like mating snakes."

I wasn't sure if grandmother had noticed abandoning the language of *they* for the language of *we*, but I wasn't about to remind her while in my mind the threads of song and the small

threadlike winds conversed in the language of lovers. Gitit-nai-Lur drew on her shorter deepname to heat the tea remaining in the pot, and I poured another round, grateful for the magic. I did not want to get up.

“We came at last, burdened with treads of song and accompanied by small winds, to the tents of the snake-Surun’. There, under awnings once painted in serpents gold and green that were now faded to mere traces of pigment, sat Benesret e Nand e Divyát, a weaver, who took the threads away from us and made them into a carpet. With undyed threads of spidersilk she then embroidered over it the visions of the beasts we saw as we have never seen them: the great razu in flight, its tusks of ivory curled towards the stars; the bird, two-headed and illustrious, drumming with four sticks held tight in beak and claw; the lizard made of letters from a language dead before the trade routes began; and between these images, a hundred roses golden like the sand. Joyfully burdened with Benesret’s carpet, we walked across the desert back home.”

Gitit-nai-Lur and I exchanged a glance. Neither of us interrupted the story, but grandmother’s unspoken secrets yawned from it like lions.

“The ruler of Niyaz delighted in this vision, for truly such a treasure had never before been woven, nor such threads as these ever spun. He offered us our weight in gold, but when we

asked instead for Bashri-nai-Divrah, he said she was already dead. And so we were blood-paid and sent off, and the Shah locked the carpet away in his coffers, where it can neither show its colors nor sing.”

Later, Gitit-nai-Lur and I talked about what grandmother said and what she did not say—how she told me that the snake-Surun’ weave from air, but the carpet the Shah hid away had been woven from song; and how she had not spoken of the cloth of winds, even though it had come from this story.

* * *

Grandmother’s visions kept me awake that night, and when I slept at last, I found myself in the desert, above a gaping hole in the sand. Something stirred at the bottom, a treasure of bones and emerald green. I teetered on the edge, yearning and afraid to step forward, until I was jolted out of the dream and back to my cushions.

In the small hours before dawn I dozed off again, to dream of the Shah’s prisons and faceless women wailing behind bars, beneath the ground. Their magic had been taken away from them, as well as their tongues, so they could neither light a candlebulb nor speak. Unable to break away from this vision I walked down the corridors, peering into the cells. I saw Khana women, their kaftans and sharovar smeared with dirt; Niyazi

women in soiled dresses; even foreign women, their torn garments strange to my eyes.

I knew that soon I would see grandmother-nai-Divrah, one I had never known, never touched. The thought of it filled me with dread, and yet I kept walking.

I was saved from that vision by the dawn-song that came wafting from the men's side of the quarter. The holy melody crested up and up, clearing up the putrefying odor of my dreams, to soar at last with *Kimrí, Kimrí, Kimrí, Kimrí* as the dawn burst out behind the curtained windows of my room.

"How long does it take to weave and embroider a carpet?" I asked the next day of Gitit-nai-Lur while we watched over spinning Kimi in an overgrown courtyard by the wall. My head buzzed.

"Firefly," said Kimi, and Gitit weaved her fingers absent-mindedly in the air, producing tiny lights for Kimi to catch and laugh at while we talked.

"How long?" Gitit-nai-Lur pursed her lips. "A month at least, when people are weaving together. I have not heard from my elders of women weaving alone, although I guess it would not be impossible..."

"I want to know more about these women," I said. Zurya of the Maiva'at, whose song so glorious at the beginning of grandmother's story had turned into a constricting cocoon by

its end; and Benesret e Nand e Divyát, who must have woven for a month, and maybe not alone, while my grandmothers presumably waited—all this spoken over in a breath of my grandmother’s story.

There had been small winds, too, that had accompanied my grandmothers to the snake-Surun’ camp, and I wanted to know how that ended. “I want to know this story, I want to feel it in my bones...”

“I want to travel to these lands,” Gitit-nai-Lur said, wistfulness rising in her voice. Her grandmothers of the Lur oreg had been famous traders, and she had grown up on stories of trade and danger. Her mothers too had been famous for their ventures. Even though Gitit had stayed with me, she would not be content to be idle for much longer. “I want to trade for the carpets of winds and song, if not for the Shah Niyaz, then for the sheer glory of it, a tale for our granddaughters.”

“Then we must find something to do about Kimi. Grandmother-” *is too old to watch her alone*, I wanted to say, and though the other women would take care of my sister, I worried they would not understand her ways, think her odd or even wrong, constrain her in the ways that we did not.

“We’ll take her with us,” said Gitit-nai-Lur. “I’m sure between us we will manage, especially if we find a third to join our oreg.”

But with one of us lacking magic and another lacking speech, we found ourselves at a disadvantage. We kept sending girls away who bid for Gitit alone, or for Gitit and me without Kimi; later, we argued with friend after friend about the wisdom of our decisions, and Gitit-nai-Lur was growing progressively angrier. “If I hear one more girl tell me with tearful concern how difficult this child will be to manage on the road, I swear I’ll shape my power into a fish and whack her.”

I giggled into my fist, much of my sadness drained away, though not all of it.

“We’ll have to do it. Just us,” said Gitit.

My sister, oblivious, once again chased after Gitit’s magical lights. Kimi had learned two new words this month, *firefly* and *cookie*, and used both to gleefully to ask for favors. I watched her with water in my eyes, wishing fervently that the joy I felt at these small words from my sister would be shared by all who saw us. “An oreg of two is unstable,” I said. “Are you sure?”

“It’s either that or the fish.”

And so we opened our dowry caskets and blended them like lovers do, and with that money purchased trade goods from the men: mechanical rods, instruments to measure the

heat, pens that secreted ink inside them, and deepname-reinforced parchment. We bought jewelry of the most glorious kind, bracelets and necklaces shaped like butterflies that fluttered and kept the wearer cool in the desert heat; chains of balls that unfolded into fragrant blooms with the advent of cooler hours and closed again at sleeping time; and glorious rings set with beetles and bees. And we found a mechanical cart to carry it all, not large for a person but serviceable enough until we could afford better. Thus equipped, we went to deliver our news to grandmother-nai-Tammah.

“And will you take the name Gitit?” she asked us. It was customary for an oreg to be fully formed and named before the first journey, but we were neither formed, nor named.

“We have agreed to wait with the naming until we find a third,” I said, though I doubted by now that that would ever happen.

Grandmother pursed her lips, unsurprised but not especially happy at this development. “Nothing in this family runs true to course,” she said with some bitterness, “struggle as we might to fit in the great pattern our lives must make.”

“How is *your* life not true to course?” said my lover, ever brash when frustrated.

“Hah,” said grandmother-nai-Tammah.

“You have lived your life as Khana women must,” Gitit insisted. “You were part of an oreg of three and traded and brought children into the world, and they in turn brought children of their own, some even daughters to carry your name. It’s not your fault that Bashri-nai-Divrah was killed. There is nothing else in your life that deviates from the pattern.”

To this grandmother made no response.

“You should come with us,” I said, thinking of her alone and not a granddaughter nearby to pour her tea or listen to her silences. “If things do not run true to course, then what is one more?”

She waved me away. “I am old, not shaped for young women’s travels.” But she brought the cloth of winds out to us, locked again in its box, and handed me the key.

I averted my eyes, embarrassed. Had she given her heart’s treasure up for Kimi’s sake, or had she simply wanted it gone, to be torn out of her like the grief for grandmother-nai-Leylit? I could not quite tell.

As soon as we left grandmother’s rooms, Gitit-nai-Lur hissed at me, “I cannot believe she just implied that having you and Kimi for granddaughters meant her life deviated from the true course!”

“I am not sure that’s what she meant. There is more.” I spoke of my grandmother’s supplications to Bird, and of her late-night walks in veils and scholars’ garb.

But Gitit remained unconvinced. “No, she worries about what is proper. This is the woman who told you you wouldn’t be able to get married or join an oreg without magic, this is the woman who worried that Kimi...”

“I, too, worry about Kimi.” It was painful to think about, impossible to put in words what I felt—that both grandmothers Bashri wanted what was best for us, had said hurtful words out of love, tried to bend us to that pattern out of love, had let go at last with love and sadness, letting us just be. How I did not feel anything wrong with not having magic, did not feel there was anything wrong with Kimi for being herself, and yet I worried about Kimi and grew—not angry, that was for Gitit—but sad at our attempts to form an oreg.

“If anything deviates from the right pattern,” said Gitit stubbornly, “it is not us, it is the world.”

There’s nothing wrong with you, I yearned to say, and yet you stay with us, but these words, too, were a part of that wrongness Gitit spoke about. So I swallowed them, and cried into her shoulder, and let her comfort me before we were ready to leave.

* * *

The first days of the journey taught us to miss grandmother-nai-Tammah. The things she'd done for Kimi slipped our notice. It now seemed the cardamom cookies and millet flatbreads had baked themselves, fish and greens had been set on plates pre-washed by air, free hours had appeared as if by magic when we needed them—time in which to learn about trade routes and to sit for tea with our numerous friends; clean clothing quietly replaced the garments my sister soiled. And even my grandmother's silences were, I now saw, a necessity, a cornerstone of Kimi's calm that now was gone from us.

Leaving the quarter we'd joined a small group of traders—two oregs of women about our mothers' age who had planned a joint venture to Burri. Once we passed through the outer gates, past the great stone guardians of the quarter and into the greater city of Niyaz, Kimi became overwhelmed with the sights and sounds of the streets—the endless stream of people and their carts, the noise and smells and garbage. With a sudden cry, she darted away from us and into the crowd.

Gitit and I were quick to chase her, but when we grabbed her by the arms she began to scream, high keening sounds familiar and yet forgotten over the years we'd lived in peace. I tried to embrace her, pull her tight to me and shelter her, but Kimi fought me like she did before the cloth of winds was first

placed in her hands. I wanted to pull the cloth out, but feared the other women and what they would say.

I waited for them to scold us for drawing attention, for taking such a child on the road, but the opposite happened. The elders of the Oshrat and Kelli oregs invited Kimi and me to ride in their large mechanical cart. They constructed a shielding of magic over it, so that the city and its people were reduced for us to rain that drummed a whisper upon the opaque gray veil. Inside this canopy Kimi and I sat together, she gradually calming enough to lay her head on my thigh. I opened the box of winds, and my sister pulled the heavy fabric over her head. There we sat, my fingers on the weave that sheltered Kimi's hair. The thread-winds felt to me as if wet with weeping—rain, regret.

I feared of what Gitit would say, or worse, would think—that these girls were right, who had bid for her and grimaced over Kimi. But in an hour or so she peeked under the veil and offered to replace me, smiling as if nothing was the matter. I felt more eager than I wanted to admit for a gulp of air and a glance of the city. Kimi clung to her as I jumped off the cart.

We'd reached the Desert Gate by then, its arch of rose-carved razu ivory glistening pink in the sun. I shied away from the Kelli elder, Kelli-nai-Marah, who walked beside the cart

and probably maintained the veil, but she greeted me with warmth.

“Don’t worry, child,” she said.

“I worry...”

“Yes,” she said, “I know. I know.” She patted me on the shoulder. “Your sister will calm in the desert. It is a good place for those that yearn for the quiet and wide spaces.”

Her kindness overwhelmed me. I wanted to embrace her, to cry, to rage the way Gitit would often rage at the injustice of the world. To beg forgiveness of Gitit, of Kimi, of myself for not knowing better, for having now to pretend that everything was all right. I should have stayed behind with my sister, tricked Gitit into leaving us behind, refused to ever become lovers. “I fear I made a horrible mistake...”

“Daughter,” she said, “your sister is not the first one, not the only one. Trust in the magnanimity of Bird.”

“Then why has Bird made her this way?” It was such a horrible thing to say that I slapped myself on the head, swallowing snot and tears together with my shame. If Bird hadn’t made her this way she would be behind the walls of the inner quarter now, studying the writ and praying to Kimrí, constructing automata, speaking in the scholars’ dialect of Khana peppered with old words the women did not learn. My

sister would not be a sister. My sister would be a stranger. My sister would not exist.

“I am sorry. Please don’t listen to me. I am sorry.”

“See?” The trader Kelli pointed out a short, heavily veiled woman that walked with the Oshrat oreg, the only one who had not greeted us when we joined. “Kelli-nai-Berurit will not speak to you, to any strangers. When she is upset, she cannot talk. The veil we constructed for your sister we first constructed for her. She is used to this road now. And if you need to ask, we chose her not out of pity, but because we love her.”

“Nobody wanted to choose us,” I said, the bitterness too much to swallow. *When not upset, your lover talks. My sister cannot.*

“Your time will come,” the elder Kelli said. She paid for our passage through the Desert gate and would accept no argument over it.

* * *

We parted with the traders Kelli and Oshrat at the crossroads. A throughway, paved and magically reinforced with bricks of compressed sand, would lead the seven older women through the craggy northern edges of the Burri desert, where water was scarce but reliably available at major oases, all the way eastwards to the Old Royal’s city of eleven wells.

It was at the crossroads that the elders Kelli and Oshrat formally invited us to join them in their venture. Kelli-nai-Marah spoke of the splendors of the terraced red city—the painted tiles of the royal tumbleweed garden, the smell of spices and dust, the markets where multicolored birds spoke poetry in the sixteen languages of the desert.

The elder Kelli spoke, too, of togetherness. “We say that it isn’t good for a Khana to travel alone, and there are reasons aplenty to keep old words close in the turbulent world. There is safety and firmness in the sisterhood we offer to each other.”

The women Kelli and Oshrat all nodded to this. Kelli-nai-Berurit, her gaze firmly on the ground, encouraged us likewise to travel with her oregs.

Gitit and I exchanged glances, each not wanting to accept the offer but feeling too guilty to reject that kindness. But we saw in each other’s eyes an unwillingness to swerve from the path marked by us in my grandmother’s silences, woven into the story of the cloth of winds. And so we took our leave from Oshrat and Kelli formally with traditional words and informally with hugs and tears, and steered the small cart down the lesser trodden paths that led south and into the great desert.

The unending freedom of that land, unknown to us and yet familiar from song and story, spread before us. It smelled like the carpets our mothers and grandmothers had brought back

from ventures, before they were rigorously beaten out in the streets: dust and wool and herbs that burned with just a hint of sweetness.

We walked in the early mornings and the evening's cool hours, childishly unafraid of brigands and thirst. Though I was without magic I read our path easily by the patterns made by the great embroidery of stars that stretched taut upon the needleframe of the sky. I named many kinds of low-hanging grass and shrubbery I recognized from the dried shapes and drawings that grandmother-nai-Tammah had shown me in her journeybooks back home, and I made teas for us and poultices for Gitit's bleeding feet. Kimi abandoned shoes and took to running joyfully around our cart and forward. Gitit made a string bracelet for her, reinforced with magic, so that she could roam without getting lost.

In the first week we met others, Khana traders and strangers from the desert and from lands far away. With all, we spoke respectfully and all spoke back to us likewise, and as luck shines upon fools and children, we were unhindered. Further south we traveled, following the sky-roads I believed would lead us to the tents of the snake band of the Surun'. The wind was quiet upon the land. We saw no bones, of wondrous beasts or otherwise.

The miracles began with small things—Kimi bringing back an emerald-eyed lizard that escaped before we could determine whether it was mechanical; the wind blowing in a great sudden gust as we hid from the desert heat in a small embroidered tent gifted to us by Gitit's grandmothers Lur; bones, always bones, that the wind left after it receded, small fragments bleached to a faint pink and yet striated differently from any razu ivory we'd studied. Kimi's solitary runs stretched longer, and her face browned to an even deeper hue, as did Gitit's.

We did not worry about Kimi's excursions until one day she brought in her clenched fist a brown lump that she bit over and over. She swallowed the thing before we could see what it was or twist it from her fingers.

In our hastily pitched tent we fussed over my wailing sister, feeling guilty and foolish for not imagining the kind of poisons Kimi could eat in the desert. Always before she'd been picky, reluctant to try new foods even with family, much less pick them from the ground; yet we should have considered this.

Gitit made fire with her magic, and I brewed poultice after poultice for Kimi. She'd have none of it, kicking and flailing and spitting with grim determination. Once again we felt keenly the absence of grandmother-nai-Tammah, for she had fed much bitterer medicine to Kimi without any apparent effort. We got lucky—either the thing she ate wasn't poisonous,

or stray drips of my boiling brews had done the deed; by nightfall, my sister looked no worse but for the wear we had inflicted upon her by our worry. Gitit and I were done for. Slumped with exhaustion, we slept like the dead through the night and into the morning, when we awoke to the incessant wailing of the wind.

It must have been going for some time, building up before it woke us, gusts that shook the tent and rattled the cart and climbed ever higher in pitch. Kimi, oblivious to the sounds, slept curled on the side with the cloth of winds draped over her face.

In whispers we consulted with each other. The tent pegs, reinforced with Gitit's magic, should hold even though they would have been stronger, more stable in a magical weave done by two. But perhaps we could further reinforce—

With a great push and a groan the tent was torn from its pegging and was tossed up and sideways, toppling the cart. The backlash flung me back and sideways, painfully into the dust, into—

—I lay on my back, staring up—

—all around me, a great ring of warriors, clothed in armor of polished bronze and headgear of enameled tin feathers that rattled in the wind; warriors with curved breasts and also beards, their faces lighter brown in color than my own, their

hands wrapped around pennons and spears. Between them prowled small lions, feather-maned and winged, that bared at me thin fangs of sharpened emerald. I struggled up as one of the warriors raised a hand, the bronze spear in it clutched to strike. I heard more than saw Gitit rush towards me with a great cry, thrown back with the wind's wailing. Kimi, hands outflung and laughing, spun forward—

“No!”

I do not know if I cried this or another. In-between the wind's great roar a man appeared, in Khana veils and a billowing kaftan, slicing through the army on flat planes of white metal painted over with the seedlike letters of the writ. In one hand he held a spear of blinding light, a work of magic so powerful it was visible even to me. Moving ever forward, the scholar swung the spear that spread into a fan of two, three, a thousand spears, sweeping into the warriors, sweeping through the warriors who folded like shadows and collapsed into the sand. The emerald-toothed beasts bared their teeth and growled, defiant, before the sleeve of the whirlwind was lowered over them, folded them in—and all went quiet.

Shaken and unsteady I rushed to the fallen Gitit, and our savior sped to my sister in a motion so achingly familiar I knew Grandmother-nai-Tammah before she lowered the veil.

In the moments that followed I had no time for thought. Gitit was injured and unconscious. Blood seeped from a spear-wound in her side where no spear remained. Kimi laughed and laughed in confusion, running around and around until with my help grandmother-nai-Tammah pitched her tent over our toppled but unharmed cart. Of our own tent there was no sign.

Grandmother draped the cloth of winds over Kimi, and I was too confused and shaken to contemplate what had just happened. Behind us, a great hole in the ground gaped, but I wouldn't have dared look into it even if grandmother hadn't pulled me inside the tent.

I brewed potion after potion while grandmother cleaned and dressed Gitit's wound. To distract and occupy my sister, Grandmother-nai-Tammah gave her a great lump of brown dough that looked familiar even to my dulled senses, but I continued to work, single-minded until grandmother proclaimed Gitit to be out of danger.

We moved camp later that night, after Gitit came to and asked for water. The hole in the ground had closed by then. The treacherous desert fell quiet, peaceful and placid as before.

I yearned to ask my grandmother a thousand questions, about the wounding memory of bronze-clad warriors and beasts of spiked emerald, about the wind, about her garb, her magic. She must have been a three-named strong—a miracle, a

rarity, a marvel that should have propelled her to great power, made her to sit in council, to lead a famous oreg of her own. And yet, though my grandmother-nai-Leylit had only a single deepname, grandmother-nai-Tammah, the stronger of them, had called her elder and had taken her name, Bashri. But I had a more urgent question to ask.

Settled anew in grandmother's tent, I waited to spring it until both Gitit and Kimi had fallen asleep. Grandmother-nai-Tammah sat, her back erect and her face half-turned away from me, expecting my speech as one expects a blow.

I spoke. "Back in Niyaz, I offered you to join us. You said no."

She said, "I meant to let you go. I gave my cloth away to you."

"I recognize the cake you fed the child, the poison we thought would slay her. You followed us veiled, knowing that we had no magic to see you. You spoke to Kimi, knowing that she could not tell us where she went and what she saw."

"I changed my mind," grandmother said. "It is not good for a Khana to travel alone."

I gulped for breath. Grandmother-nai-Tammah had meant herself. She'd told us she was too old to travel, but what she had planned was to set out alone and leave us.

I turned away from her, and she from me. My face to the painted leather wall of the tent, I let silent tears fall, not quite lulling me to sleep. Later I turned around. Grandmother lay like a lump under a veil of magic that obscured her from the shoulders down. Her back was turned to me. I could not see her face, could not see whether she slept. Kimi snored quietly under the cloth of winds, and Gitit, numbed by my potions, slept also.

I lay on my back, counting invisible stars beyond the tent's leather canopy, unable to sleep, thinking, thinking. *I gave my cloth away to you*, she'd said as if it meant the world—but the cloth of winds had belonged to grandmother-nai-Leylit.

* * *

Gitit slept for eleven hours. When she woke up, grandmother and I took down the tent; Gitit was too weak to do anything but look, hands folded in her lap like nesting birds. Kimi danced around us, asking intermittently for cookies, gleeful at the shadows that fell like sticks around the tent's collapsing angles.

I did not want to talk to grandmother-nai-Tammah. She'd given Kimi another piece of cake and helped me hoist Gitit upon our trading chest, but she'd deceived us. She'd let us believe she was too fragile and old for our journey, and yet her mechanical shoes, wide and sturdy on their planes of white

metal, had carried her effortlessly through the desert. She was a three-named strong and could do whatever she wanted, and what she'd wanted was to travel alone.

On and on we journeyed, delayed in our progress by Gitit's weight on the mechanical chest too weak to carry her. Grandmother-nai-Tammah made small improvements, but there was only so much she could do in the desert, far from her underground workshop and tools.

For days and days I remained resolutely silent. Grandmother, too, stopped even greeting me. She slid after Kimi into the desert that trembled with the heat's music, returning only to break camp at high noon. We'd hoist the tent up, and she'd reinforce the pegs with her magic, three deepnames at three points making the structure stable enough that no wind could carry it away.

Even the act of it, simple and easy for a woman with so much power, reprimanded me for my uselessness. If I hadn't lacked deepnames, I could have reinforced Gitit's fastening. Even a single deepname, even a weak one, would have secured the magic that held the tent down, would not have failed us in the storm, would not have subjected us all to danger. Grandmother-nai-Tammah did not have to say anything. In the dimness of the tent we lay with our backs to each other, tense and miserable.

But the silence between us did not extend to Gitit. My lover, too weak to talk much, expressed gratitude at my grandmother's offers of tea, and inquired after her health—small things that left me with a strange bitter slithering in my stomach. One day Gitit asked my grandmother about her mechanical sliding shoes, and was treated to a lengthy story of Khana women who had established, centuries ago, an underground workshop for each other, even though holy artifice was forbidden to us.

I rushed out of the tent. It was either that or screaming.

Gitit came after me. I was too upset to turn around, shaking with anger that threatened to tear me apart from within, rising inside me with devouring intensity I had never before experienced.

“What is it, heart?”

“Why do you talk to her?” I snarled at Gitit, taken aback by my vehemence and yet unable to stop. “She lied to us. She wanted to travel alone. We are a burden to her!”

“How are we a burden? She...”

“Oh, *you* are not a burden,” I cried. “A two-named strong of good family, of course she'd talk to you. Any strong Khana would talk to you! You're wanted everywhere! Everywhere! It's Kimi and I that are redundant, even to our own...”

Gitit recoiled. “She is your *grandmother*, Aviya-nai-Bashri. She followed us and she *saved* us. But you can say whatever you need to say.”

My lover turned away, and back into to the tent she slid, leaving me alone to stare at desert shrubs alive with small winds. Somewhere to the east, the snake-band of the Surun’ traveled, weaving carpet after carpet from these threads of breath. To the south-east, singers of the Maiva’at plucked feather after sunset-colored feather from Bird’s triumphant plumage. And further east beyond these lands, beyond the Old Royal’s city of eleven wells, the Loroli people walked behind the blazing star that rolled inside their sacred tumbleweed. And even farther to the east, the crags, the grass-grown mountains, and beyond them, nothing. Oh, the lands of trade and splendor that the Khana women crossed, the lands well-told and yet unknown and new—they’d be as nothing to me now, an emptiness more barren than the desert. *Doesn’t she understand?* Did I? Did anyone?

A bird, long-legged and bent-beaked, dove down from the sun and slid close to me, spread herself into the sand whirls at my feet; dissolved to nothingness. And I felt nothing.

* * *

At sleep-time, Kimi brought the cloth of winds and spread it over my face. She’d never paid attention to my crying, to

anyone's, even though laughing and anger fascinated her; I do not know if she noticed my tears that time, or if the gesture was random. But I lay beneath the shivering touch of the winds, strangely comforted by the warmth that wasn't there, by the bitter and burned smells of liongrass and stillweed that came from another time. Kimi nestled next to me. Her left hand slid under my cheek and touched the cloth of winds. Afraid to move, I lay there. Just outside the tent, the voices of Gitit and grandmother-nai-Tammah began to weave together.

“You wanted to be free.” Gitit.

“Benesret said I could do it if I wanted. Yes, it would be difficult.”

“But you wouldn't,” said Gitit.

“The cloth of winds. The birds. They come down from the sun around this time of year, to dance the sandbird dance, the change. At that time, the sandbird festival would happen in the capital. They say the Old Royal went through the change, many times—and other people. It's harder for those with less magic, but a three-named strong could do it easily, with the help of friends.”

“And yet you wouldn't.”

“Not me. Bashri, she said...”

And silence.

Winds stirred on my face like snakes, warm with dreams and comforting. I could not scream or think or speak. Under my cheek, Kimi's hand made a fist.

“Tell me what she said.”

“That we should think of our lover imprisoned—and besides, what use would a man be in an oreg? The scholars would never accept me. And if I wanted to stay with them, how would we live? Wouldn't we have to hide it anyway, wouldn't I have to continue my life as a woman, dress as a woman, trade as a woman—and if I didn't, what would befall us? How would we live among others? How would our children marry? Didn't Bashri-nai-Divrah deserve a choice in this as well, a decision that would change her life entire? So many reasons to wait.”

“And you agreed.”

“Benesret—see, ah. Benesret. She made this cloth of winds for me, that would begin the spell, this promise-cloth, to come back anytime. I wanted to, after we found out what happened to Bashri-nai-Divrah. What did we have to lose now? But Bashri, Bashri-nai-Leylit, she was stricken. How could I do this to her, tear myself from her at such a time? She said that I could as a woman do all the things I wanted to do, that artifice and scholarship were still within my reach, that if I wanted still to travel and trade like a woman, to bake and to raise children like a woman, to fight and use powerful magic like a woman,

then why would I even want to change? What did it even matter?"

"But you wanted to."

"I wanted to," grandmother said. "It's not about what I do, as a man or as a woman. It is about how I feel, how I had always felt."

"Yes," said Gitit.

"And so I gave Bashri the cloth of winds. *When you're ready, tell me, give it back to me*, I said. *Accept me as I am, from north to south and back, a man, a woman, I will always love you, I will never leave you.*"

"Did she ever?"

"She gave the keys to me so I could give the cloth to the child," said my grandmother. "By then we were too set in our unhappiness, too tired to steer away. Like Zurya of the Maiva'at, the blessing of our love had turned into a cocoon that kept us constricted and silent until the end."

Long silence dripped. The winds lay still upon my cheeks like ropes. I felt the weight of it, that lightlessness that bound my grandmothers in stifling closeness, in tenderness that could not let them grow. I wanted to go out, to hug grandmother-nai-Tammah to me, to ask forgiveness for assuming that she did not want us because of magic or because of Kimi; but before I could stir, Gitit spoke again.

“But you are going now.”

“I did not think I would,” said grandmother-nai-Tammah. “I gave the cloth away. But I cannot. I cannot. I am going now.”

I lay there, thoughts of movement drained from me. *You’re going now. You will abandon us, you cannot bear to stay, you’re eager to abandon us. What matter why you shall abandon us?*

The winds whisked my tears away, lulled me at last into an uneasy sleep. I said nothing to grandmother-nai-Tammah when we set out again, I said nothing to either of them for days. I said nothing until we saw from afar the conical, bell-topped tents of the Surun’, until the hissing snakes of air and dust arose from the ground to greet us.

* * *

Kimi ran forward with a laugh, but grandmother grabbed her and pulled her back. “Stand still,” she hissed. My sister began to wail, hands reaching out towards an undulating vision of the serpent golden with the sun, its scales like triangular diamonds. “We have to wait for the guardians.”

On and on my sister cried, her body growing rigid and spasming, but grandmother’s grip did not slack.

A group of warriors approached us, walking slowly through dry stalks of whisperweed. They were men, deep brown in the desert heat and dressed in grassweave shirts and

skirts of leather. Their hair was styled as I have never seen—cut down to springly curls and shaved to nothing on the sides, in stripes of skin that patterned after snakes. Each of the men bore a spear of dark bronze—forged beneath the ground, said my books, engraved with symbols of men’s secret stories. So similar the weapons were to those the ghost-warriors had wielded that I barely held myself from gasping.

One of the men waved at the snakes of air and shining dust. I did not see his deepnames crowning him, but something almost shimmered as the snakes collapsed into the ground.

“Greetings, Khana traders,” he said. And then, “*Are you traders?*”

His companions looked at us with wariness.

“I am Bashri-nai-Tammah,” my grandmother said. “A Khana from Niyaz, but not a trader.” How careful was she to avert her gaze from me, how careful to avoid the word woman. “I come to you after an old friend, Benesret e Nand e Divyát, and by her invitation.”

The men exchanged glances, and their grips on spears tightened. “Is that so?”

“I bear her sign. It is a cloth of winds.” Never relaxing her grip on Kimi, grandmother pulled the cloth out of the pocket of her kaftan. Unprisoned from the darkness of the garment, the

winds whined and crackled as if before a storm, and stalks of dry grass buzzed and shook at our feet.

Grandmother, startled, tucked the cloth back in. “Benesret made it for me. She said come back any time.” Calmed by the winds, Kimi fell silent, but when grandmother-nai-Tammah hid the cloth, she sobbed again.

The leader turned to us. “And you? Do you also seek Benesret?”

I looked at Gitit, but her eyes remained fixed on the ground. With no recourse I spoke in Surun’, concentrating so hard on the enunciation that I forgot to be afraid of my words. “I am Aviya-nai-Bashri, trader, granddaughter of Bashri-nai-Tammah. This is my oreg-mate, Gitit-nai-Lur.” It grated even more to me now that we were oreg-mates and lovers, and yet we had not taken each other’s names, and lately had not exchanged even words. I barged on. “My sister...” I gulped, “Zohra-nai-Bashri, who goes by the name of Kimi...” Tight in grandmother’s arms, Kimi keened quietly, rocking back and forth as much as grandmother’s body would allow.

“Ah,” the man said. I could not guess his thoughts. Were we too strange, these generations, these silences, tensions? Why didn’t he ask after my sister? I did not know which felt better—the asking, the pity, the useless advice; or the turning away, the unseeing, the warding signs that mothers made

inside their sleeves as if I wouldn't notice after all those years—fingers moving to shield one against children born strange. The heart in my chest hung heavy and hollow, gnawed out by all the small hurts of what had already passed, of what was yet to pass. Neither Gitit nor grandmother would look at me.

The man motioned us to follow. His warriors flanked us, none of them giving us names or greetings. As we walked, the worry of it felt dull in me and pressing like the onset of nausea. The first thing I had felt in days.

My sister quieted. Hand gripped in grandmother's, she twisted backwards to look at—there, in the dust of the trail, the golden snake with triangular scales undulated in our wake, the boundary guardian not dismissed after all. The serpent's glimmer made a no-sound of the rain that falls in dreams. Around it, us, the air began to darken.

Shortly we reached the campsite with its conical leather tents. Small brown goats wandered in-between, not tethered, looking at us intruders with annoyance. The men led us to a large circular construction, a tent painted with serpents and strung with ropes of silver bells that made music like starlight falling. Inside it was hung with carpets, their colorful wool embroidered with plain spidersilk in triangles and squares arranged to symbolize the beasts that rose from buried bone. The tent's floor was strewn with sturdier weavings I recognized

to have been traded from further east, from the peoples of the Maiva'at and the Gehezi—thick-piled and rich with weld and madder.

Upon these carpets five women sat, the oldest in her fifties, the rest my age or younger. They were drinking tea. All turned to us, their fingers still spread with the weight of flat desert-style cups that curved slightly at the lip.

The man who brought us addressed the women in a language I did not know. I heard our names given, and the word Niyaz, and I saw the frown on his face. When he stopped, one of the women, middle-aged and stout, addressed us in Surun'. "Welcome. I am Naïr e Bulvát. My husband, Bulvát. My guests, Uiziya—"

"I know you," said the older woman so named. "You are the three-named strong for whom the winds came shivering, for whom the bones of the old warriors awoke, the one who carried Zurya's threads and yet refused to sing."

The one for whom old warriors awoke...?

"I'd sing," grandmother-nai-Tammah said, "not for the warriors or threads, but for myself, and yet it is forbidden for the women of the Khana, and so I kept quiet."

"I remember," said Uiziya, "how your stifled voice rattled inside you, a rotten walnut shriveled in its shell. Aunt Bene —..."

“Shhh,” said the one called Naïr e Bulvát. “Aunt.”

“No, I want to know,” said my grandmother, “I want to know what happened to Benesret.” She crossed her hands at her chest, and the women stared at her as if she’d just—

“We do not tell this tale. We do not say this name.”

Something shifted in the dimmed light of the tent. I saw—
heard—

But suddenly none of this mattered to me, for grandmother’s hands no longer held Kimi.

My sister wasn’t inside.

I dodged past the men, ignoring limbs and grabbing hands, ran out. My sister, knees in dirt, was just outside, thank —

—wrestling with the snake that wound around her arms in suffocating—

I rushed forward.

Stopped.

She wasn’t wrestling. Snake and child, enraptured by each other, wound against each other—Kimi, rocking slightly, giggled as the snake’s thick yellow body slithered past her cheek.

“The guardian will not harm her,” said someone. I turned to see a young woman, one of those who sat with Naïr; older and taller than me but not by much. She wore reddish

garments and simple ornaments of bronze. Her brown cheeks were rouged with orange. The other men and women poured out of the tent, surrounding my grandmother and my lover like cupped hands.

“Your grandchild is ready to take power,” said Uiziya.

“I thought she would, in the desert,” said grandmother-nai-Tammah, “when the warriors awoke and pursued us. I waited...”

“Yes?”

“And nothing.”

Nair said, “Look at the guardian, helped in shape by your grandchild’s curiosity. This power will not be born in defense or aggression.”

“If you say so,” said grandmother dubiously. It was intense emotions—anger, pain, fear—that prompted magically apt children to take deepnames on the threshold of youth.

Uiziya drew my grandmother and others back into the tent. I stayed behind with my sister and the young woman, Leivayi, as the snake and child spun around each other in the dust. Gitit stood with us too. She said nothing. Above us, Bird pecked out small bright holes in the dark cloth of the sky.

“Gitit,” I said in our own language. “Did you hear what she said, what they said? The warriors awoke because of

grandmother's magic, and then she waited to save us because Kimi—because Kimi should have taken a deepname, but Kimi—

My lover turned away from me.

“Gitit-”

“I do not want to hear.”

She walked off, back into the tent.

Leivayi stretched her arm out, and the snake guardian crawled over to her and wound around her shoulders, shining full, full, full with the day's accumulated heat, a shoulder-necklace of pure sun. She offered to take both of us to a sleeping place, and I was too exhausted to argue.

My sister was too confused to recognize danger, my grandmother too focused on herself and how that measured against what was proper; my lover too loyal to speak against the one who saved her life, no matter how that life had come to be endangered. Where did this leave me? Where?

Too stubborn to...

Too stubborn to...

I did not argue with Leivayi. She seemed to have no deepnames, and her tent was dark. It smelled of leather, wool, and sweat, and sleep.

* * *

Too stubborn to forgive.

In my dreams, snakes and children tangled under the star-embroidered sky. Grandmother-nai-Tammah sprouted wings and flew up, gleeful, unseeing. Her wings grew and grew. Joined where my grandmother's body used to be, the wings alone soared higher, intent on flight.

* * *

I went to see my grandmother the next day. In the tent with Nair and Uiziya she talked and talked, not paying attention to anything.

“You should talk to the men,” said Nair.

“No!” Was it fear that colored grandmother's voice so? “I do not want to talk to men. I want to talk to you...”

“If you're to be known as a man...”

Round and round they went. I entered and exited, intent to keep an eye on Kimi, but she seemed engrossed by the snake, and Leivayi watched over them both.

Towards the evening, Leivayi set up a small square loom and threaded it. My sister tangled the threads and laughed, but Leivayi patiently corrected her. She guided Kimi's hand in hers, repeating the same motion over and over.

And in Nair's tent, grandmother was still talking. “Who am I to say what I should or should not be called, whether I am or am not a man already? My grandchild is a girl because she cannot talk, but she is not a girl...”

“I don’t think your grandchild knows—*cares*—what tai is.” Nair used a pronoun common to many desert languages—*tai*, *taim*, *tair* in Surun’—that indicated ‘neither he nor she’. The Khana language lacked such a word, both in the speech the scholars used and in women’s talk. In Khana, a person was either she or he. In Khana, all the words were either she or he—carpets, carts, grains of sand, stars in the sky each had their chosen form, female or male. There was no escaping this, but the desert tongues lacked such a distinction. One could be anything. In Surun’.

“Your grandchild may never know, or it may never be important to taim. And because it is not important to taim it is not important to us what style of clothing tai wears, or whether tai chooses to spend tair days among men or among women. If tai were to learn Surun’, tai would ask to be called tai, or something else, when tai knows it. If it is important to taim. Tai might never know, we might never know. But *you* know. You have always known.”

“Yes, I have always known. And yet...”

“You always hesitated,” said Uiziya. “I thought it was because of your lover, but now that she is gone, I thought...”

“It’s all about Bashri. It’s always been about Bashri. After forty-four years... I do not know how to live otherwise, do not

know how to live in this world without Bashri, I do not know if I want to live...”

I left them. I sought out Gitit, sat by her side while she spoke to other women of carpets that might be woven for trade. We talked later that night, awkwardly, rediscovering words, rediscovering how they hurt.

“What is it that angers you,” she asked, “this thing about the elder-nai-Tammah?”

The truth burst out of me, the shape of it before this hidden even from myself. “I would not know how to talk to her if she is a man.”

Gitit frowned. “And what if I were a man?”

“Are you?” I asked. “Are you a man?”

“Does it matter?” she asked.

It doesn't—

No. It mattered. It mattered to *me*. I had never talked to scholars. Marriage did not scare me, but only because it would be such a formal thing, and such a needed thing, to beget lives—but it would not really *matter*. Marriage was not for closeness, not for conversations or journeys. For that one had lovers, oreg-mates. If Gitit were a man, how would we trade? How would we expand our oreg, raise our children, what would the other women say? Would she even stay with me? The scholars wouldn't accept this transformation, and in the

quarter she'd have to hide, so why break your heart changing anyway?

Only after Gitit left me I remembered, with a sticky rush of shame I remembered grandmother-nai-Tammah's words, of what my grandmother-nai-Leylit had told her. Almost the same. The same.

Dark had fallen. The stars keened above. Somewhere beyond the veil of that darkness my grandmother's soul could not find rest, her arms outstretched towards the cloth of winds.

* * *

Nair and Uziya constructed the large horizontal frame of the loom with the help of others, men and women. None of them would utter the name Benesret, would not speak of her story, but it seemed they'd keep her promise.

The women with deepnames began to sing quietly, drawing winds out of the sky to thread the warp. I could not see them, but I heard the sound they made when pulled taut on the loom—the snapping voice of strong, thin threads. Grandmother, wound tightly in veils and bent like a scholar over a tome of writ, paced around and around the construction.

Kimi learned the Surun' words for snake, thread, and hand. The large yellow snake still followed her, and Leivayi kept teaching her to weave. Other children would join them now, pulling and pushing and giving instructions to Kimi in

voices joking and serious. The youngest of these children, aged three, spoke far more better and fluidly than Kimi ever had.

They talked of my sister as *tai* now, but I did not. If Kimi had not decided, if Kimi did not know, then how would one pronoun be better than another? Besides, I spoke in Khana in my head, and there was no such thing as *tai*. *She*, I continued saying, *she*, defiant and guilt-gnawed, no longer sure whose truth was real. If only Kimi could tell me... but if Kimi could talk, she would be he. Perhaps not in her deepest heart; perhaps like grandmother-nai-Tammah she'd yearn for change, but she—he—would live in the inner quarter with the men, and would not be now traveling with me.

The day the frame was ready, Uiziya approached me. "It is better if those who love Bashri weave the cloth of transformation," she said. I answered awkwardly, said I did not know how. And besides, I had no deepnames to weave from wind. But when Naïr and Uiziya sat down to the loom, when Leivayi and the children joined them, I could not leave, or simply watch. I sat down by Naïr and asked to be taught.

She gave me a comb of bone and gold and taught me to beat down the weft-weaves of the winds and push them tight against the ones that had come before. I did it by touch, marveling at the feel of compressed winds under my fingers, rougher than wool, prickly with sand and memory. Leivayi and

other weavers without deepnames likewise wielded combs, but Kimi threw hers away and insisted on threading by hand. Her laughter rang out like a pair of bronze sticks striking the sun.

“I’m glad you are working with us,” said Uiziya. “His lover wouldn’t, all those years ago.”

I cringed. The Surun’ people had already switched to the language of *he* with grandmother-nai-Tammah; even Gitit had begun oh so carefully to say not *grandmother* but *elder*, one of the rare words in the Khana language used for both women and men. Grandmother-nai-Tammah had decided on the change.

I alone could not change. I alone could not let go.

* * *

Gitit spoke to me now, small things. I lost all interest in trade, but with my permission she opened the trading chest and spread our wares, the butterflies whose fluttering brought chill, the splendid jewelry, the rods that extended and collapsed upon themselves.

She sat with those marvels under the awning of the large trade tent erected for the occasion, and women brought her tea in flat cups and goatmilk chilled with magic. At night sometimes we saw sandbirds fall down from the sky, strike sand, and dissolve with the hiss. In the city of eleven wells, the time of the sandbird dance was drawing nearer.

Gitit and I slept side by side now in the trading tent, but it had been too long since we'd made love. My body and heart yearned for hers, but thoughts and words lay cold between us like a spear of bronze forged far beneath the ground, where it is always cold.

* * *

It happened when the cloth was almost done—a surge of power, clear yet gentle, like a push against my ribcage. Kimi laughed, a small amazed sound. She thrust her hand up in the air. Out of her fingertips came lights, small fireflies more numerous and glowing brighter than Gitit's. They swarmed and flew and nestled on the threads.

And in that moment the whole cloth came alive before my eyes, all what I could not see before, the rainbow hues of it, the lightning running through some threads that had come from dry storms, swirling sand in others like a road of stars. My sister had taken a deepname.

Not like the usual explosions or waves of slamming anger, this nametaking was a thing of joy and glowing weft-threads, gentle. Kimi leapt up from the loom and began to spin, hands flapping at her sides, fingertips releasing more and more tiny lights that swam through the air and buzzed around her head.

It's better if those who love Bashri, weave...

Those who love her. Love him. Love her. Love him.

Why did it matter to me so much?

Those who love, weave...

I sought out Gitit that night after we had finished weaving. My lover sat to tea with women who had bought our wares. She did not want to talk to me, but I pleaded, and at last she relented. “I do not know if I am comfortable,” I said, “I don’t know if I’ll ever be, but I would give the cloth of winds back to you, I would sit down to weave for you if you wanted to change.” *I am confused, I do not know if what I think is right, but it is not right to make of my love a prison for you—for anyone...* “I cannot do it alone, Gitit, I have no deepnames, but with others—Kimi, too...”

She began to cry.

I cradled her to me, I whispered, “Love, I am no better than grandmother-nai-Leylit.”

“You are...”

“No, no. I would deny you, would deny myself, because I am not comfortable and I might never be with this, but it is you, it will always be you, I love you, I will never leave you.”

Grandmother-nai-Tammah had said those words to grandmother-nai-Leylit. Without these words we learned, these stories, these mistakes, we could not live. We could not grow. So life by life our lives were woven and compressed to

wholeness by the combs of our speech. “I don’t know if I can explain this, but we need words. Words.”

But Gitit drew me to her, and there was no need for words after all.

Later we lay on a tight-woven carpet in the darkness of the trading tent, and Gitit put her hand on my cheek. She laughed—a high-pitched and embarrassed sound. “To answer your question... no, I am not a man.”

“You aren’t?” I felt relief and simultaneously regret, regret at not needing to live through this, and what wisdoms loomed before me on that path like blood and rubies.

“I am sorry. I am... very much like everyone. I am not special. I am a girl, I have mediocre but nice magic, I love trading... I wanted to know... I wanted to know if you’d be as fierce for me as you are for Kimi, for Bashri-nai-Tammah-”

“Bah!” I screamed. “Bah! As if I would not—as if I would not love you because you are not...gah! Not untraditional enough!”

It’s then we heard a sound of winds. Of wings. Like rustling.

* * *

Outside, grandmother-nai-Tammah stood in veils of winds, arms up as if in prayer. Birds of bright fire fell down from the sky to wrap and wrap my elder in their wings

completely, head to toe. Bashri-nai-Tammah became a figure all of sandlight, then a figure no more—a cocoon, a ball of swirling feathers, night-beguiled.

All people in the Surun' camp woke up, went out to watch as streaks of sandlight fell and fell towards that conflagration; shooting stars from Bird. They stood, not talking, rocking slightly on their feet, and only Kimi ran around. Her waving fingers sent sparkles into the sky, to greet the birds, to dance; the snake-guardian undulated between her feet, nudging her away from the cocoon when the spinning brought her too close.

The night grew thin, and bird by bird, the starfall slowed. With a sigh, the last few sandbirds settled over my grandmother's glowing light. And then, slowly, they began to fade, to pour in grains of sand down to the ground.

It was then we heard it—singing—from behind the veil of fiery feathers. With the first rays of dawn the singing grew louder, clearer, more intense; grandmother's body cleared, with arms still raised up, singing for the first time the dawn-song—that sacred melody that scholars sent out every morning in supplication to the men's god, Bird's brother, Kimrí, that song the women were forbidden to sing.

With the last grains of sand pouring down to the ground, grandmother—grandfather?—walked over to us. He—he—looked glowing, radiant with light and newly made. His arms

spread to us in a blessing, in a wave of great and unfeigned happiness.

It was at this moment that Kimi sang, artlessly but with candor, a song without words that resembled the dawn-song and also a gurgled scream, and also choking. We laughed because we had no idea what to do, and whether Kimi should be permitted to sing, and whether that even mattered.

* * *

Grandfather was having trouble.

“You should go sit with men,” said Uziya. They had no problem sheltering a woman, or a person who was neither, but a man basking like a lizard in a woman’s tent was pronounced unseemly.

“I said already, I have no idea how to talk to your men... I am a Khana artificer, not that my people would accept me now, or ever...”

Grandfather had regrets.

“I cannot go back. I may have a man’s body now, but not the scholars’ learning, and our men would never accept me, and I am too old to simply wander into a different city and lie my way into a Khana quarter there... although I could try... I cannot even speak the way the scholars do!”

“Or you could stay here,” said Nair. “You really should talk to Bulvát.”

“And say what? I don’t know-”

Grandfather had hesitations.

“What should we call you now?” I asked.

“I want to still remain Bashri,” he said, “even if she wouldn’t approve. But it’s not just that she wouldn’t approve. Even to call myself nai-Tammah—for sure my grandmothers would not approve...” He cast his hands around himself. “I wish I could consult the writ! There must have been a precedent, a law... Unless they’d thrown all precedents out of the quarter...”

Grandfather had moments.

“Is there deeper meaning,” he asked Uiziya, “to my grandchild always walking around with the guardian snake? Kimi is quite powerful, I think, so it might be an omen-”

Said Uiziya, “Of course there is a deeper meaning.”

“Yes?”

“It’s a great secret.”

“Yes?”

“I will reveal it to you.”

“Yes?”

Uiziya whispered, “Your grandchild really likes snakes.”

Everybody around us burst into laughter, and grandfather was embarrassed enough to agree to go talk to Bulvát.

* * *

That night, Gitit and I stayed up to talk. She had traded richly while I wove, and now the chest was full of goods. We wanted to move. But not to go back to Niyaz yet—no, we wanted to go on, to trade among the Maiva’at, to ask from them the story of Zurya, to see with our own eyes how threads could be woven of song. And we wanted to learn the tale of Benesret, dark and beguiling at the edges of our minds. We wanted to travel southeast, to visit the bands of spider-Surun’ and spider-Gehezi, to trade for yarn as delicate and glimmering as rays of shooting stars.

But yet we couldn’t leave. Our Kimi seemed so happy here, fitting, learning under the sky’s unending open wings. Grandfather needed help to settle, to adjust, to grieve for that which could not be redone, for people and loves gone—and we, too, needed time to think, to talk through this, to figure out how to live with a grandfather who was of flesh and bone rather than a disembodied name of a scholar behind the wall. We weren’t sure if he’d want to travel on with us, or stay, or go home—if that was even possible. We were still getting used to “he”.

And we were talking more about “tai” now, how it meant—not a decision, but simply that Kimi had not decided, and therefore we should not decide either. But we could only do this in Surun’. There were so many things that we could say

and think in Surun' but not in our own language. We wanted at least to know what to call grandfather now; and he was not ready to name himself yet.

But it seemed that we were ready to name ourselves.

"I'll take your name," I said, "You are the strongest of us."

"Bah," she said. "I far prefer Aviya to Gitit."

"It is traditional for the oreg to be named after the strongest, unless there is something wrong with her..."

Gitit grimaced. "Try again."

I scratched my head.

"What difference will it make?," Gitit said. "Our lives already deviate from the great pattern."

"Hah," I said. "Are you trying to make me feel better about not having magic?"

"Aaaaa..." she moaned. "Enough, enough. You don't feel bad about not having magic. I like the name Aviya, I love you, why must you be this stubborn? Why can't you say yes for a change?"

You cannot still be worried that there's nothing strange about you... how to say this... "My dear trader-nai-Lur," I began.

"Please. Aviya-nai-Lur."

"Oh, very well," I said, exasperated. "But *you*'ll explain this to our grandchildren, I will want nothing to do with this."

She laughed. “I will be glad to tell this tale, grandmother-nai-Bashri.”

“Along with many others, oh grandmother-nai-Lur.”

“Oh yes,” she laughed. “Oh yes.”

There would be many other tales.

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Rose Lemberg is a queer immigrant from Eastern Europe. Her work has appeared in Strange Horizons, Interfictions, Uncanny, Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction anthology, and previously in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, among other venues. Rose co-edits Stone Telling, a magazine of boundary-crossing poetry, with Shweta Narayan. She has edited Here, We Cross, an anthology of queer and genderfluid speculative poetry from Stone Telling (Stone Bird Press), and The Moment of Change, an anthology of feminist speculative poetry (Aqueduct Press). She is currently editing a new fiction anthology, An Alphabet of Embers. You can find Rose at roselemborg.net and @roselemborg, including links to her

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COVER ART

“Migration,” by Julie Dillon



Julie Dillon is a freelance science fiction and fantasy artist from Northern California. She received her BFA in Fine Arts from Sacramento State University in 2005, with continued education at the Academy of Arts University in San Francisco and Watts Atelier. Her clients include Simon & Schuster, Penguin Books, Wizards of the Coast, and Paizo Publishing. She won the 2014 Hugo Award for Best Professional Artist. View more of her work online at www.juliedillonart.com.

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