



Issue #229 • July 6, 2017

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A PORTRAIT OF THE DESERT IN PERSONAGES OF POWER, PT. I

by Rose Lemberg

Move the first: *The stars we still remember them*

Two thousand years ago, they say, a wise man of Keshet counted the stars that blazed and glittered in the orphaned nighttime sky. Satisfied with his arithmetic, he pressed the numbers into the yielding clay and baked the tablet in an oven, and stored it away from curious eyes.

Some years later again he counted the burning stars of the firmament—and took out the tablet, and counted again.

Twelve stars were missing.

Alarmed, the Starcounter brought his palms together and prayed to Bird. He prayed so ardently that the goddess appeared to him in the likeness of the harptail, and in her long blue tail the twelve missing stars were strung.

Yet others say that the Starcounter was a woman, and that the goddess appeared to her in the likeness of the long-legged sandbird, the stars barely visible in her tail of wind and melted dust. “Come with me,” she said, “and I will show you a place where they fall.” And so the Starcounter donned

pale yellow clothing and pulled on her goatskin traveling boots. She left the mountains of Keshet to follow Bird north, to collect her missing miscounted stars.

The Starcounter followed the sandbird until her boots frayed and tore, and he followed the harptail until his clothes dried up and tattered in the desert sun and his skin was as ancient as sweat-stained leather. Then the great Bird stopped her flight, and shook her tail. Eleven stars fell to the sands, and where they fell, waterwells appeared. The Starcounter drank from the water and walled off a city there; and she called that city Che Mazri, which means Eleven Wells.

Having blessed the new city, the goddess soared up to the sky, but the twelfth star was still tangled in the feathers of her tail. Afraid to let go, afraid to fall, the orphaned star gathered darkness into itself, and weighted Bird down with desperate doubt. She cried out in a great voice, and eleven sandbirds arose from the desert and sang to her, and she danced for them in swirls of heavy light, faster and faster above the windblown waves of grit, forgetting herself, forgetting the world, until she shook the twelfth star off.

Ladder caught it.

* * *

An old royal on the tiles

I ascended to the Tumbleweed Garden in the early morning, before classes began, before my advanced students or anyone else sought to bother me with questions or supplications, charts of magic or new designs. I stood barefoot on the tiles and felt the desert change.

Was it the air that stirred against my forehead, its dry touch acknowledging each wrinkle with a lover's fondness? Was it some quality of the light? Or was it perhaps a birth I felt, a yet unseen descent of fiery sandbirds that prophesy the season? My body stirred in response to that thought, each bone calling out to the future, the past, to the times in-between when I'd danced my body's change at the Sandbird Festival and helped many others to do so. My flesh, though full with memories, did not yet yearn for transition. My spirit, content for the time being with the body's present form, voiced no objections over posture, over timbre of voice or the shape of my shadow—all feelings with which I have long become so familiar that I would greet their reappearance as I would any wandering friend returned to me from the sands. But that morning, no smile of recognition creased the corners of my mouth.

I drew my senses to the land. Under my feet it was covered with tiles, for which my University was named. Over the centuries I had asked artists to paint and bake and lay down these tiles—fantastic harptail birds in azure plumage,

scorpions, winged carriages driven by flame and wind. Under this divination the ground's clay rested, content in silence. Slightly to the northeast, below ground, I felt the edges of my star. Woven of delicate longer deepnames, the lacelike edges of it stirred with the breath of sleep.

They say no person can take more than three deepnames, those magical constructs that give the mind its power. Of all the combinations that a mind can hold, some name the Warlord's Triangle the mightiest, with its three single-syllable deepnames; others so praise my own configuration, the Royal House, with its two single-syllables and the third balancing two-syllable. But the star underhill, the star I guarded; my friend, that person who comforted me when I struggled: that ineffable flaming sphere was woven entirely of magic, of thousands and thousands of deepnames that shortened and intensified from surface to core, each distinct and yet connected to others in a song of mellow red.

I felt in the Hillstar no danger. No change.

Turning to the east, I sought out my star's twin where she roamed the desert. Encased in the body of the sacred Tumbleweed, that star was guarded in her peregrinations by a band of Loroli chosen—warriors and fire lions who speak the roads of dust into being. Ascertaining, too, that the Tumbleweed Star was not the source of my worry, I thought

myself mistaken, told myself that old age had stirred my senses into falsehood.

I had not turned my gaze to the west, nor to the northwest, finding much comfort in the desert and none in the distant treacherous sea; but later that day I was told of a criminal, and it was from the northwest that he was coming.

* * *

A lion, opals in her mane

When the Tumbleweed Star comes to a place of rest, those who follow her dim all fires and still their fingers from touching weapons and musical instruments. The Loroli fourthway speak out of the desert a weave of magic that covers the encampment in a canopy of dust, with only the star shining forth from its center, too big to contain. When finally all is quiet, and lions and people lie pacified around their great guardian, the Tumbleweed Star begins to speak.

Across great distances I hear her voice rolling over the sand, traipsing gently above bones of impossible beasts that perhaps had one day populated the desert. The Tumbleweed Star speaks to its twin sibling, the star to which I am tethered. She speaks of secrets I will never understand and do not want to overhear; of time above the clouds, of darknesses, of absences, of Bird. She speaks, too, of their unquiet sibling, the

twelfth star, whose presence I feel when I dare look southeast towards the school of assassins.

When she is done conversing with her twin, the Tumbleweed Star looks into my heart. The feeling is like a great sweep of whispering fire in vestments of dry sand; its passing is quieter and lighter than the conflagration of my star but no less gripping.

It was almost a year ago the Tumbleweed Star looked through me so, the death of my old guardian still a fresh wound. Soon after, a Loroli warrior arose from the sands and strode into Che Mazri, my city of eleven wells.

There are in the desert lionesses that are born maned, indistinguishable from male lions in behavior and looks. And there are in the desert such lions that are born maneless and those that look like lionesses but prefer to be known as lions. All those and others like them become known to me, for some seek me out to dance and to change their body's shape at the Sandbird Festival. But I had never before seen Nihitu.

She was young—barely twenty—yet within her I perceived a burning fire, a redness better suited to my star than to hers. She was a firstway, warrior and leader, stubborn and taciturn, reserved except at such times when reed pipes and drums called all people to dance. She became my guardian according

to the old laws, just as I had years ago sent one of my best warriors to serve as a guardian of the Loroli Great Lion.

It was Nihitu who brought me the news of a man who now strode through the desert, blood and adoration in his wake. He brought water forth from the dry sand where no wells had sprung before. He righted houses crumbling into dust and infused their walls with deepnames so they would stand forever; he built such structures that remained cool in the scorching heat and imbued them with designs as dark and potent as congealed blood. And he took lovers—perhaps against their will, though that was unclear—and he cared about no-one and suffered no person to stop him.

When she spoke of him, Nihitu's eyes hissed with fire and her hands clenched with rage. And yet his crimes, if crimes they were, happened far west from Loroli territories, and that judgment was not hers to make but mine.

It sat ill with her. I bade her to remain behind while I journeyed to find the truth of these reports, but she would not agree to let me go alone.

Yet I was born before her, and before her mother, and before her mother still, and my pride outweighed hers by the weight of centuries. Weary of grandeur and the preciousness of my age, I was all too eager for defiant and misguided deeds; and so I made my plans and waited. When Nihitu slept, her

waking body heavy with the magic of the dreaming wilds, I adorned her hair with opals and whispered from them a restful sleep. Not a soul stirred within the walls of my underhill palace as I donned my feather mareghe, tied the stilts to my feet, and was gone.

* * *

Move the second: but some no longer shine

At the northwestern edge of the desert, the springflower city of Niyaz has dipped the edges of her robes into the sea and girdled her waist with gates of pink-striated ivory. And in the desert's very heart, her rival, the city of Che Mazri, stood dusted in clay's shadow and clothed in memory of Bird's star-giving dance. Adorned in stories told by painted tiles, she lounged about carefree, inhaling the bitterness of burned liongrass brought to her braziers by the desert winds. The riches to be found in Che Mazri could be counted thus: sweet water in the wells and the learning in her university; the festival of the sandbird season; the star within her heart, and the wisdom of her royal keeper.

They say the ruler of Niyaz has feuded long with the old royal of Burri, while sandbird seasons came and went. For the ruler of Niyaz would satiate himself with treasures from the desert and beyond: veils embroidered with lions, bones—always bones—encrusted in emerald and humming in a sing-

song voice; exquisite weapons made to marvel at, that could not slice a fig. Traders brought their wares to the rainbow court of Niyaz, and warriors spread the spoils of war before his birdcage throne; and having examined each treasure carefully, the ruler of Niyaz would choose the best and lock it in his coffers. This angered the desert's Old Royal, for many a fine treasure from the sands would become thus hidden and many a story silenced forever.

There is a law in the city of Niyaz for women not to carry deepnames. Those who take magic by mistake or daring have their deepnames burned from them, so that women graced with the mind's power live in constant fear. It came to pass that some Niyazi women, dissatisfied with this, banded together. Having stolen from the ruler's coffers a considerable treasure in carpets and carved precious stone, they made their way on foot from Niyaz to Che Mazri and were granted shelter there.

The ensuing war between Niyaz and the desert kingdom of Burri lasted for twenty years.

After that, the Old Royal would no more accept Niyazi refugees, and the ruler of Niyaz grew even fiercer in his persecution of powerful women.

It was at that time that Laaguti Birdwing arose in Niyaz. With friends and lovers she had plotted revolution but had

been treacherously betrayed, imprisoned, then sprung free—and, with friends, had finally sought to escape the city of her birth.

The desert being closed, the rebels set their sights upon the undulating wave.

* * *

A guardian come from flaming sea

On stilts of horn and bone I leaped over the dark-enraptured desert. My shadow, cut out by the scissors of the stars into shapes delicate and frivolous, flew before me like a flock of sandbirds toward a far horizon.

All was quiet. Decades ago, the bones that made my stilts had lain upon this ground, revealed in the open fist of the wind for a much younger me to find in my wanderings across the desert. Thousands of years ago, or perhaps never, these bones had been encased in the flesh of beasts that roamed the sands before the sands were blown to cover them: lions with tails like serpents and manes of smoke, birds with plumage of carved cinnabar, lizards with feet and faces of youths.

Deeper yet beneath the ground, beneath these slumbering beasts and yet not hidden from my gaze, the magical grid of the land's deepnames sang to me, its long luminous lines unobstructed by the din of the city. Over the many layers of

desert and its histories, beneath the bejeweled scarves of the night, I ran on my stilts like a long-legged sandbird.

I let my bones grow hollow, birdlike. The feathers and folds of my mareghe thundered around me. I could not feel my age, my pain, my body and its changes; even memories tore off from me as I ran, until my clamoring cry turned night into dawn, and dawn into mid-morning heat far west and north of Che Mazri.

Hesitantly shifting on my stilts like a great sandbird stilled abruptly from flight, I waited for the sights and sounds of my human body to return to me.

A deep, resonant voice spoke. "I greet you, vision of Bird."

I could not understand emotions yet.

The sun cradled my head and ran down my limbs, hot and steady, purifying. I drew on the magic of my deepnames and folded my stilts, and stood once more a person on unsteady feet that shook with age and exhaustion.

I had been misguided to travel without a guardian. In a moment of transition between magical states I could easily be slain. There was a new ruler in Niyaz, and it was a custom of this dynasty to send an assassin to try to slay me, one of Ladder's own and trained in his school. The criminal I pursued could also be an assassin—

I smelled the speaker before I saw them. Blood and the desert and the far-off sea—no student of Ladder's would smell thus. Inhaling deeper, I felt the odor of roses, peppery and foreign, and with it a memory of ash, as if from a great burning that had been quenched by the wave. Here was a story that had traveled far indeed, not from Niyaz but from the west and seas beyond it.

The one who had spoken made no further speech but waited motionless for me to recover.

I blinked—first rapidly, birdlike, then with a more human tenderness. My eyes could parse at last beyond the heat and shadow.

Two figures. One seemed asleep, face down on a small, beautifully woven carpet. They were a person lean and—I felt— young, with olive-brown arms spread forward in supplication or embrace. Their long hair, a wave of dark brown, obscured their face. The runners had said “he,” but it was hard to tell, and knowing my own truths, I did not want to choose before I heard the stranger's truths from their own mouth.

The other looked like a woman, but that too would not help me know their truths. This standing person was not overly tall compared to me but solid. They wore a seafaring garment, a dun-colored korob belted under the armpits and again below the breasts and yet again at the waist. Their face was middle-

aged, weathered and lined by power's passage; their olive-brown skin was lighter than mine, and lighter than that of their sleeping companion's, as if unbaked by the desert sun. I'd have guessed them Niyazi but for a peculiar cast of the eyes.

No. They could not possibly be of Niyaz, for here was a person who, in a woman's likeness, felt to me accustomed to command, who drew without hesitation on their considerable might and stood unafraid of that magic being discovered.

I blinked and looked again. Their form undulated in the wind; the sun trickled through it just so. I would have noticed sooner, but I hadn't yet fully recovered my senses.

This person was dead.

I spoke at last, careful not to offer them guestright. "I greet you, spirit of the past who has not departed with Bird but has come instead into my land, for purposes to me unknown." I wanted to speak in Niyazi, for I now remembered the voice had spoken earlier that way, but the language of Niyaz lacked neutral forms, which I would use both for this person and for myself. I spoke in my own language. "I am the desert's Old Royal, ruler of Che Mazri and the keeper of her star."

They nodded to me, curt, equal to equal, and spoke in my language likewise. "I am Ranra Kekerri."

I shuddered, for accounts of one so named—ancient indeed, and conflicted between themselves—had long ago been

brought to my University on the Tiles by itinerant scholars and merchants. And now I knew the proper grammatical forms to use, for in this the accounts had not been conflicted: that Ranra Kekeru made herself known as a woman.

I opened my mouth, but before I could ask, Ranra's companion stirred and turned in their sleep. Among the dark strands of their hair I saw the glimmer of bones that shifted under my gaze into snake-chiseled combs and spiral hair-rings with scales of gold and emerald. With every breath the sleeping stranger drew, a very great power trickled into the sands. So intensely and so intricately was it held, even in sleep, that the earth itself rose to greet the stranger with these gifts of bone and jewels. I could not imagine how one like this could commit crimes.

"Don't judge in haste just because the earth offers him no judgment," the one called Ranra said.

Anger rose in me, even though I could not yet fully understand it. I shifted pronouns after her, trusting she knew his preference. "You are his guardian, and yet you allow your charge to romp around my land, to disturb and take as he pleases. What kind of a guardian are you?"

"I am more than his guardian. If I judged him, I would judge myself."

"And if you taught him?"

She laughed bitterly. “Taught him what? My own mistakes, which I do not regret? How to save one’s people after having led them to ruin? How to die and yet not to be borne aloft by Bird’s wings to the final rest? He does not want teaching. Pray he will learn nonetheless.”

Ranra’s companion did not wake despite our speech. There was something out of the ordinary in the way the stranger slept—an absence, as if he could or would not wake. The rug beneath him bore an embroidery of stylized roses. It was stained with blood,; perhaps his own, though I doubted it.

“He does not wake,” I said.

“No. I am speaking.”

The air above her head trembled and danced. I perceived her deepnames, three—like mine, but different. Three single-syllables. The Warlord’s Triangle, the world’s most dangerous configuration, known to shatter its bearers’ minds—but Ranra did not feel broken to me. Just alone—even though her ward was right there. Alone, like me, even though I had courtiers, and students, and even a guardian.

“I would invite you to my palace underhill,” I said on an impulse. “Hear more of your story.”

“But you do not invite him. Everyone is afraid.”

“I am not afraid.”

Indeed I felt no fear, just a certain darkening of air, a curling of my mood like the tendrils of salt on the waves of a shore I never had sought. The desert had always been enough.

“I would welcome your welcome if you would extend it to him, ruler of Che Mazri and the keeper of her star,” Ranra said, “for among the twelve triumphant stars that Bird had brought for us to live and thrive, some have gone out.”

A premonition crept into me, shook me like a tremor of old age. Beyond my body, somewhere to the east, the lacelike tendrils of my star waved softly. I felt no prohibition from it—but as in me, curiosity, and a certain detached air of one playing hard at indifference.

“You are both welcome, but please explain to your ward the rules of guestright here.”

“He does not know that I accompany him.”

“Then how could you reach an agreement, obtain his consent...?”

I felt a great run of fire from the east, coming—coming closer. Ranra lifted her arms and brought them down. Gusts of cold vapor descended upon the body of her sleeping companion and hid them both from view. For a moment I felt the mighty sea winds, heard the creaking of a ship in motion, smelled the indescribable odor of salt water—then the desert reasserted itself.

A tremor grew into a roaring funnel of sand. Out of that whirlwind leaped a great lion, fire-maned, its jaws agape with rage. Nihitu had caught up with me.

* * *

A thousand years had passed since Laaguti Birdwing and her companions found shelter in the islands of the west. Forgetting the laws and customs of Niyaz, they learned the geometry of deepnames from those wise and exuberant people who guarded the Star of the Tides. That star was one of the last to fall from Bird's burning tail, having hung closest to the Orphan. And though it fell and was caught, the Star of the Tides had no use for its new homeland. It slept restlessly, speaking to no-one, not even to its own people who kept it.

The spitfire star was anchored undersea, with the islands above it, held in place by the effort of many named strong. The wiser these people grew, the more effort was required to nurture the star under its wave. They founded new disciplines, invented many configurations of deepnames undreamed-of by those who lived on solid ground. The islanders grew prosperous from this knowledge. They built houses of singing coral to praise Bird and gave the most honor to those who held the most magic, though in this attitude they were not unique. The Niyazi rebels had long since married among them, leaving as memory only a few

words of their native speech submerged in the language of the isles.

Among those people there was a ruler whose might was tempered by wisdom: Ranra Kekeri. She bore the Royal House, a three-deepname configuration of one, one, and two syllables, long considered the most stable and benevolent in the land. She rose to power when young and retained it, guiding her people in the accomplishment of her will. The islands overran with gardens, the air grew heavy with odors of quince and persimmon, and the intricate coral towers rose so high as to rival those of Keshet. And yet, the Star of the Tides grew ever more uneasy in its slumber. The tremors in the ground grew heavy, the mountain range shook and spat fire into the darkening sky.

And so it became Ranra's ambition to resolve this imbalance once and for all, through a working of great magical innovation which became known as Ranra's Unbalancing.

* * *

And now the bone ornaments unravel themselves

Nihitu's lion paced where Ranra had stood just moments ago. She sniffed at the ground where the sleeping stranger had lain, shifted the sands with one paw, disgorging discolored bits of bone that looked nothing like the fine combs and hair-rings

which had, just moments earlier, adorned his hair. The lion circled me, her eyes aglow, then breathed out.

Blinded by the heat that pressed upon me from above, I did not see the transformation. I could have if I chose to—extended my magic, learned secrets not mine, made jest of ancient agreements that bound our peoples together in respect unbroken and unspoken. I did nothing until the heat dissipated and Nihitu the person stood before me. The rage that propelled her to wake from sleep that I had whispered into her, to run through the dreaming wilds after me, had drained away.

“What was that?” Horror mingled in her throat with wariness. “What *was* that?”

“A guardian from far-off seas, a spirit of seafoam that wanders the earth and means us no ill.”

I do not know what made me decide to trust Ranra, except that I wanted to trust her. From afar, the gossamer tendrils of my star waved at me, acknowledging my yearning. Even great powers grow weary of loneliness and seek solace among their kind; and if the sibling stars cry out to each other from underneath the earth, then why not old rulers?

“No, not that,” Nihitu said, and her face contorted. “The disturbance—something in the dreaming wilds above. A presence. Not Loroli. No dreamway ambassadors from other lands have announced themselves... and it was not some

monstrous menace from the entangled beyond, that I would recognize—no, it was something difficult, strange...”

I sighed. “The guardian protected the criminal, who was asleep when we spoke—could it have been him?”

“He’s a nameway, like you. What would he do so high in dreaming wilds, above the shallow dreams of your kind? Impossible.”

She eyed me warily and said no more on our way back to Che Mazri. I expected to be reprimanded, would welcome it even. My old guardian would call me a frivolous child who’d thought it an adventure to be bitten by snakes and pecked by vultures, or worse yet—to trail them triumphantly home; but the voice of my old friend has been stilled by death. Nihitu did not know me or trust me. And I had, like a frivolous child or one very old, escaped her care.

I should have apologized to Nihitu, but I did not, and silence trailed behind us as we traveled.

Children share their toys with each other, I thought, lovers embrace under the canopy of the sand-studded sky; drums call out to drums across the great desert; siblings speak in dreams; birds learn human words and converse with their keepers. Even the great powers of the earth get lonely and seek the discourse of their kind; then why not old rulers, why not even ghosts?

For three days in Che Mazri I kept my own counsel, closeted away even from my best advanced students Urwaru and Marvushi e Garazd. I opened books of magical geometry and closed them unread, unrolled ancient scrolls from Keshet, only to smell the dust of the desert roads they had traveled and roll them back again. I asked artists to paint serpents and winged scorpions for a new tile, but no design pleased me. It was three full days before the city rang with a tremor, sweet like drums and cymbals in my bones.

* * *

An architect of seafoam and spitfire

He came, he came through winding streets of dust and liongrass, above the stone roads, past the mudhouses with their grates of reed and carved arinha wood. Standing barefoot on the tiles of Starhill, I felt his progress towards the heart of Che Mazri, to me—unfolding, before my eyes, through my city's exhalation, through its nerve and sinew born of the desert and all its secrets.

He traveled floating through mid-air on the same bloodstained and rose-embroidered carpet I had seen under him in the desert. His mind, enfolded in a stronghold of uncountable deepnames, felt cold—and yet, deep inside it, brief but intense flashes of light beckoned me with a strange fascination. I saw the people of my city, named strong and

those lacking deepnames, pour out to the streets to watch and shudder, as attracted and apprehensive as I was.

I could not see his body from this distance—just his might, flexible and yet at the same time rigid, as if an architecture of steel had acquired will and desire. I stared until my eyes blurred into queasiness. I could not feel a trace of Ranra in the uproar.

Retainers and students came to take me away into the palace, but I breathed calmness into their lungs and steered them to leave. Alone and in a contemplative frame of mind I walked down to the gate of desert bone.

There, Nihitu waited. She did not speak to me, pretended not to hear me. When I tried to shift her with my power, a vision was revealed to me—four guardians with bodies of women and heads of lions, flush with the power of the dreaming wilds. Each spoke in turn the words that Nihitu refused to speak.

You are a ruler. No one dares oppose you when like a child you dodge your keepers—

to be bitten by snakes and pecked by vultures, then trail them triumphantly home—

violating ancient agreements made between your people and mine, agreements that weren't made to keep us prisoners to each other—

but to safeguard the twin stars which we nurture and to which we are bound.

And in the vision, Nihitu spoke last. “*You cannot shift me. I will do my duty.*”

Shamed and yet defiant, I averted my gaze from the vision and waited, clothed in my protective stronghold of deepnames and invisible to all but Nihitu, until the stranger floated up Starhill and stopped at last just outside the gate. The carpet drifted higher until his gaze was level with mine.

His face had features not unlike Ranra’s but more pronounced—a large nose and deepset brown eyes with that peculiar tilt. He looked only slightly older than twenty, nothing more than a youth, but shadows had grooved themselves into his skin and placed him beyond age. He wore his long hair braided in a crown and embellished with gray roses, the likes of which had never sprouted in the sands; among the shadow of their living petals, deepnames glinted.

I tried to look closer at this configuration. It was most definitely not the Warlord’s Triangle, but what I saw I could not quite discern.

The stranger inclined his head slightly to me, clearly oblivious to my cloaking of invisibility. “I am known as the Raker,” he said in Burrashti. His speech was accented but clear,

with no hesitation or self-consciousness one often cannot resist in a language not one's own.

"I am the sovereign of these sands," I replied, "the Old Royal of Che Mazri and the keeper of her star. What brings you to my house?"

He turned his head this way and that, looking for my house like every traveler before him. I smiled, expecting confusion—but his gaze turned slightly down and beyond me, where the palace walls lie sunken in the ground, and then deeper, beyond my woven wards. I felt the outer tendrils of my star shiver under his gaze.

He said, "Not everything must always be revealed."

A shiver ran through me, not unlike the shiver of my star's tendrils. I felt light-hearted, reckless, as I had not for dozens of years, as if tiny stars coursed in my blood and sparkled with danger and heat. *Oh youth*, I thought. *Not everything must always be revealed, you say, and yet my very presence loosens secrets, spills them from unwary hearts like wind into the sands. And once I bid you enter within these buried walls, you should not deem your secrets safe from my regard.*

Nihitu hissed behind me in the language of the Loroli. "Do not offer guestright to this criminal, Ruler of the Sands."

I spoke back in the same language. "I have already offered."

The stranger, oblivious to the meaning of our words, raised his eyebrows in inquiry.

“To have offered without consulting with me is to have broken the laws that bind our people,” Nihitu said. “I will recount this to the Great Lion.”

I frowned and turned away from Nihitu, to face the stranger again. The old Loroli guardian was my closest friend, but even if she were still alive I would have turned away from her now, to feel the desert course through my veins once more with the exhilaration and recklessness of youth.

I spoke to the Raker. “I will reveal it to you.”

His mouth twisted into a sneer. I felt his gaze upon me as I opened for him the gates of the earth and led him deep into Starhill, where cymbals and tambourines adorned his passing and the rarest of carpets and the most bejeweled of cushions were spread out for feasting, and where young people flocked to him like velvet blackwing butterflies to flame.

* * *

Move the third: *what knowledge do you seek of me*

In Keshet they tell that most ancient story of how the Starcounter followed Bird north into the sands of Burri; and there Bird's eleven stars tumbled to the ground to become the eleven wells of Che Mazri.

But I, the ruler of Che Mazri, know better than the storytellers of Keshet: for there is but one star here, and one there has always been since that first Birdcoming. But it was indeed here that she danced, here above the great Burri desert. She swooped where the guardians gathered, those from all peoples who journeyed from over the world to make music to guide and greet her coming. The goddess danced to this music, and as the eleven stars fell, the guardians danced with the goddess and caught them.

Long after the guardians left with their stars, the goddess still danced with the twelfth star in her tail. Below her, Ladder waited. He made no music. Like a hunting grai he stood motionless, watching Bird's struggle in rapt and devouring silence, until the last star tumbled down into his waiting hands.

The star that Ladder caught was called the Orphan, black and viscous like the treacherous tar sand. In Ladder's hands the twelfth star smoldered and blistered with the weight of Bird's own doubt, the darkest of her thoughts, with despair that hangs inescapable and complete before the morning sun's first striation across the desert sky.

So burdened, Ladder walked away, and as he walked he sang that song he had refused to Bird, a song he imbued with the power to conceal his path so none would follow him but

those who heard that music. He walked a ways to the east until he stood, at last, in a place no different from any other.

There the desert parted for him, birthing of itself a ring of stones and then another, until a court of sandstone terraces arrayed itself around him. And where he stomped on the ground a circular trapdoor was revealed, hammered of sky-metal and incised with ancient symbols. There, beneath this trapdoor, under the Ladder's great court, the Star of Assassins now lives.

It is the Star of Suicides, for souls of suicides feed it; and it is said that at night Ladder lights a candle and sings to summon those who would train in his school. It is whispered sometimes that his pupils, those who hear the music, are themselves would-be suicides or those whom Bird disdained for crimes inadvertent but so terrible as to weigh the soul with oozing tar and send it reeling to Ladder's court. These youths he trains to kill and to feed the souls of those so killed to his ever-hungry, viscous star.

And it is said that the Orphan, disdained by its siblings, keeps grudges. There is no greater prize for it than the souls of the other great keepers of the stars who are its siblings. Among those starkeepers, no soul is more precious to it than the soul of the one who has of old ruled the sands from the City of Eleven Wells; for while the other guardians had

departed with their stars, this ruler stayed there hidden with the Hillstar in their hands and witnessed Ladder's secret.

* * *

In the honeycomb library

Long after the laughter and screams of the revelers faded into a dusk of silence, I paced restlessly upon the dark-tiled floors of my library. My advanced student, Urwaru, arranged for me tomes from the Southern academies and notebooks from the West and from the North, written in scripts I'd learned in long centuries of my life. I thanked Urwaru for her help and sent her away, for I did not want anyone to be a witness to my research.

There are three ways for a starkeeper to die. To pass onto the wings of Bird and be carried by her aloft like ordinary souls is a fate seldom chosen by us; how much better in final weariness to reach out to the deepname-woven body of one's star, to be absorbed and held until it is time for a rebirth.

The third way to die is to be slain.

With a sigh, I closed my mind to that fear. Instead, I unwound my scrolls to seek out the name of Ranra Kekeru and immersed myself in all the stories of her fall. Here was one starkeeper who had nothing to fear from Ladder's assassins; for her spitfire star was dead, submerged and becalmed at last by the wave.

I sighed and rolled the scrolls back into their snake-leather casings. I did not know if I would leave or simply pace again upon the nighttime tiles, but I was stopped in my tracks by a person in the same salt-stained korob, an apparition that floated through the beehive walls to halt before me. Her silver-black hair was braided and belted to her body with leather under-arm belts, as is formal in the seafaring west.

I inclined my head to her in greeting. “Welcome, Ranra,” I said. “I was not sure if you had entered my walls.”

“I have no love for your guardian.”

“Because she hates your ward?”

“So are our loyalties declared,” said Ranra, “for all we might chafe against them.”

“Why *did* he come here?” I asked. “What does he seek?”

“I have guided him here.”

“Against his will?”

Ranra shrugged. “Without his knowledge, rather. Not everything must always be revealed.”

I shuddered. Certainly not, and I myself revealed and hid so many things—and yet, to guide one’s ward to travel so far and so perilously, and without his will, felt to me like a betrayal.

“He is a great-great-great-grandchild of mine,” Ranra said, as if to justify her actions, but that did not ease my mind.

“Why did you guide him here, then?”

“To seek the knowledge of the stars,” she said, and in her eyes I saw a hunger. “The stars as they fell, those vast and glorious globes of deepnames carried by Bird, the stars to which we guardians are bound.”

“Why?” I asked, and felt as if an understanding glistened just on the edge of my senses. “Why do you guide him then to seek the knowledge of the stars?”

She sighed, hovering, hesitating. But my secret-spilling pull must have worked on her at last, for she answered, “Because among the twelve triumphant stars that Bird had brought to us, for us to live and thrive, mine has gone out.”

You said so before. I made to question her further, but she was gone. The eight-sided doors of the library opened to admit Nihitu and a small delegation of courtiers, indignant and bristling. The Raker had taken lovers, they said, lovers who had come to him and were harmed.

* * *

In cloths of smoldering dawn

Having visited the wounded I now walked, troubled and pondering, towards the Raker’s guesting chambers. Nihitu accompanied me, but though she attempted discourse, I kept my silence. His lovers made no complaint. They felt dazed to me but not beyond reason, and not in distress or despair; all

three seemed in good humor. It was their relatives and friends who came to see me. I healed the wounds easily. Yet this ease was deceptive, for I was a three-named strong, a wielder of the Royal House and ancient in the ways of power. How easily would wounds be healed in the smaller towns and encampments he'd visited in his trek through my lands? He had a singular power; why didn't he heal his lovers?

I walked so, Nihitu at my heels, until I reached the guesting chambers and entered them without knocking.

He was awake. He sat on the bed, one leg folded and arms crossed. The long crown of his hair, unbraided now, fell shining over his bare torso. He wore loose pants of tan cloth, desert-made and without adornment. I made note to myself to keep my guest better clothed, for there had been no baggage train—not even a bag; indeed, he had carried nothing at all with him save the carpet of roses and his reticent ghostly companion, whose presence I did not now discern.

His face twisted when I entered, and the same arrogant smile tilted his lips.

“How delightful,” he said, “That you should come to scold me.”

“In the name of the Great Lion and the agreements you have made,” hissed Nihitu in my ear, “you must remind this criminal of the rules of guestright, make him understand that

you protect your people, that in this place such behaviors would not be allowed—”

I turned to her. This person was my guardian, the best of Loroli chosen, who by the ancient agreements was allowed to shepherd me. I saw in her a youthful ardor to make of herself a presence with heft and power to sway me, not realizing yet that such power I afforded only to friends. And while the old guardian was my friend, Nihitu was not yet a friend of mine.

I felt no anger. But it would not do to reproach me in the name of the Great Lion, for we were equals and allies of old—not rivals or subjects to each other, nor horrors with which to cow each other into submission.

I spoke directly into Nihitu’s mind in that ancient language once shared by my people and the Loroli and taught only to our truest scholars and to their firstway; even if Nihitu could not speak it with fluency, she would understand. *I bid you to guard my dignity and leave. In my domain I am protected by the Hillstar and what power I had woven, through these centuries past, into these walls.*

It was harsher than I had intended, but she did leave. She appeared calm, but I knew better than to accept that armor as truth. I would talk to her later. For now, I directed my gaze again to my guest.

He gazed back at me. His lips had lost their smirk. I had expected a jibe, a contest of wits, I expected him to jest over the altercation he had just witnessed—but he gave me only silence, and a kind of grave consideration.

I saw now that if I came to scold him, as a parent would scold an unruly child, then it would come to naught. He would bend to no will but his own, though perhaps his will, for all his might, was yet not fully formed.

I would not change my discourse. He would hear my questions, if not Nihitu's burning anger and threats.

“You took lovers of my people,” I said. “Your pleasure and theirs is not my concern. In my house, the people are constrained by consent alone. Yet some of them have sustained injuries beyond what is common in pleasure. They made no complaint. And yet they seemed to me delirious, and I was not sure they were fully aware of what they had agreed to experience. I would hear this tale from your lips.”

He turned away slightly, as if to conceal from me some pain or hesitation. When he faced me again, it was with a now-familiar sneer. “Consent is the only measure of what is permitted. You think I violate it? No. I will not stand so accused. They want it. They want me to take, and to take without limits. This is why they come to me. I take because

they offer, because they ask, and because I tell them what I will do, and they consent, and I enjoy it.”

There was more to it. I wanted to unravel it with care. “You would take—even onto an injury? Death?”

His eyes glinted, defiant. “Not onto death. But they beg me for it. Your people, too. They beg for dissolution, the ultimate crown of the pleasures I offer. They beg for the greatest pain under the skywing of Bird, they beg to be folded into a redness studded with deepnames of the stars until the world itself folds back, until all truths are sung through this pain like piercing knives, until Bird comes to pluck them at last from my guiding hands, from the world; for no world shall ever compare to my arms short of Her own embrace, far more glorious than mine.”

He crossed his arms at his chest, looked away. Spoke. “I am tempted.”

I saw now how his lovers would not say no, would seek him out even, for what he offered glistened now between us, that rarest jewel of magic, might, and yearning that would tempt beyond the world, yes. And I saw, too, his belief that he did no wrong—for even if he’d kill, the goddess would embrace those souls and carry them aloft. And he himself craved that—I felt in him that hunger, that singular addiction to Bird’s presence that would sometimes seize the most powerful mages, those who could see her coming for the dead, who would kill to

experience it again and again. Many of our histories' famous generals felt this pull, those who wielded the Warlord's Triangle; some of them, not caring much for defeat or victory as long as it brought Bird closer, led even their own troops to death.

I had known of such crimes of yore—and always thought them crimes of loneliness.

He waited perhaps, for an accusation, for a change in the tone of my voice. Oh, it was a bitter vision. My power was older and mellower than his, subtler in its effects. My people did not beg me to grant them pain or death, but they craved my approval, my guidance. They spoke of my kindness. But my touch wasn't kind. It revealed; like the desert wind reveals the ancient bones, so did my presence strip the hearts of persons, baring secrets that glistened and bled. My guest was not immune to this pull. He had spoken plainly of his yearning—and yet, he now waited only for my disapproval, as if an approval or kindness could never be won and thus should not even be sought.

To all this I said, "I understand."

He pursed his lips. I saw Ranra in him then, for he, too, attempted to explain himself further. "Nobody ever says no."

"Of course they don't. They can't withstand you. Can't resist your pull. And so you have never truly known consent."

He bared his teeth. “That’s what you say. That’s what you think. You think me a monster, you think my might makes me a criminal simply for daring to live and thus exert my *pull*.” The veneer of his arrogance crumbled. His deepnames hissed awake, disheveled and snakelike over his head. “You’re not the first, you know, to say that I should be caged like a dangerous beast or else exiled against a danger of any future crimes, that I should be broken away from people who crave my presence simply because it is so strong as to overpower.”

I clasped my hands behind my back and bowed, for I am tall and this was not the time to tower over him. “My guest,” I said, “The words of hurt you repeated belong to other people. They are not mine.”

“No? You don’t think me monstrous? A criminal? Your guardian does. You do not say these words, but you still you say that I have never known consent. How can that be? I ask. I always ask.”

I am not kind, for all that my demeanor is often mistaken for kindness. I do not seek to soothe and comfort. But I do seek to teach. Teaching—true teaching—brings with it no comfort but pain, the most exquisite pain that is the exertion of a student in response to me, and its reward: expansion. Growth. And it is knowledge, too, that I seek, the delicious pain of my own expansion, my change. Curiosity settled over me now, the

same curiosity I felt when I sensed him from afar, earlier, on the tiles—a shrugging-off of danger, the thrill of his uniqueness and my desire to shift him like no one could before.

I was moved, and I did not resist it. I said, “Then ask *me*.”

The Raker seemed taken aback. Then he looked me up and down. Disdain crept back into his gaze. I took a step back and straightened, suddenly keenly aware of the aching in my bones, the way my skin sagged and stretched over them. I had not prepared for this, that he would contemplate my body, that he would reject the asking simply because I was old, old and folded into my skin. Or was it the current shape of my body that he contemplated? No, not that; from his choice of lovers I knew that he had multiple preferences, like myself. And yet I did not intend this to become real in this way—so raw, so fast. My offer was only an exercise of the mind. I did not expect him to consider it in truth, in the flesh, in my flesh. But he did. His gaze mesmerized me in place as his disdain gave way to a slow and pleasurable calculation.

He spoke, languid like honey that pours out of the honey crystal cracked with a craftsman’s careful precision. “I would take you by the throat and know its beating under my hand. I would watch all the years you have lived as they bleed from your eyes in your fear. I would pierce your skin with my deepnames, a thousand quills. I would set each quill aflame

until you are feathered in heat so unbearably perfect that you would sing, sing for me like the old guardians had sung to the stars. I would quench my thirst in you then, I'd feast on that old, old pain of yours that nobody hears but the sands. What say you?"

I swallowed, shuddering. Of course they said yes to such vision, such grandeur. He made them brilliant as he took. He meant it, too. Such beauty he would see in me—my power, my pain, my need—like no one else before, oh, not for a long, long time.

That old pain I was not ready to face.

I turned my mind to my star, to the comforting soft tendrils of its outer mantle. It was because of my star that I did not feel alone, that I had no need for crimes. Why was this powerful spirit untethered, untaught, matched to no great star? What failure of the goddess was this, to cast him roiling into my path? And yet I'd felt so alone. Now, yes, I would crave what he had offered.

I squeezed out, "No." It fell from my lips, rough and without embellishment. A rare two-sided lesson, this, and I would cherish it.

"You want it," he said.

"Perhaps. Yet, as you see, I am able to refuse."

He smiled. It was not a smirk. “Oh yes. Yes, I see. I like your lessons better than at the university.”

I smiled back. Nothing much escaped him.

I was thinking through my reply when he suddenly said, “Now, you ask.”

Ah. Ah.

I began to pace. Did I want him? Not in the way he spoke of; not to be overpowered or acted upon. But—but—I wanted something. Yes. To be seen, and to see. To experience his power and to touch him with mine. To have my secrets unravel for him even as I unraveled his.

Would I ask?

I paced.

What did I know of him? That he sought to inflict pain upon agreeing lovers, yet people were pulled to him so strongly that their consent was marred by a diminishing of choice. That he did not heal them. That their friends and relatives called him a criminal. That his guardian, whom he did not know, pushed and prodded him to come here for reasons unknown to me.

How reckless would all of this make him? How alone?

That he craved to kill so Bird would come.

That he had not done so.

I paced and paced. In such a short time feelings had blossomed in my skin.

I did not want to cage him or to bind him, nor did I want to cage or bind myself. He wanted to control me in my age and splendor, and I, in my way, sought the same: to shape his wild will to the ways I thought true, and thus I sought to act upon him. But much more would be required before I could give him these truths of myself. And so I asked—not his consent yet, for I was not decided; but a question.

“Tell me,” I said, “Do you ever say no?”

For a long moment, the world stood still. Then, he recoiled.

Blood flowed away from his face. His deepnames reared once more, not snakes but rods of metal that bent and folded themselves into an iron crown.

He looked tightly wound and frozen, his spirit far, far away from me in some horrible vision.

This was not my intention. Whatever this was, it was not my intention.

“Forgive me,” I said.

“Leave me,” he said. Tight with effort. “Now.”

I did as he asked of me.

* * *

A lion dismissed

Nihitu waited for me outside the Raker's chambers, her face taut with anger and need.

I nodded at her but did not speak. The Raker occupied my mind—his challenge, the way he recoiled, as if my words had grazed and bled a wound he would hide from me, from everyone. Far stranger even than that, I still did not know what deepnames he held; just the glitter and daze of them, as if of whispering steel, as if of serpents. His configuration did not feel to me like a Warlord's Triangle, and yet, how could it be anything different? Many short names—the mind would not hold more than three—

Nihitu ran after me. I did not realize that I was walking, or how fast, or that I was walking away from her, until she placed her hand on my arm.

“Old Royal, my ward,” she asked, “Have you told him—?”

I faced her, surfacing slowly from my thoughts. I took hold of her hand and removed it. “I would ask you to ask, next time.”

She did not even apologize. Perhaps she did not even notice that she had touched me. “What has transpired? Has he hurt you?”

I shrugged. “He asked me a question.”

“A question?”

I sighed. “He asked if I would satisfy his desire.”

“What?” Nihitu eyed me with alarm. “How—? Did he attempt force?”

“No, no. Just asked. I think he always asks.”

“How dare he,” she spat, “to mock you so! I will tear him apart for this, I will protect your honor!”

I was taken aback by her words and her tone. “He did not mock me.”

“No?” Nihitu’s voice lost nothing of its vehemence. “Then how could he be so vile, to fling himself at everything that moves?”

I stopped, and she stopped too, attending only to my motions and not the implication of her words.

I said, careful to conceal my sudden anger, “Is that what you see in me?”

“Forgive me?” She bit her lip, becoming aware of her misstep—perhaps. Perhaps not.

I spoke, clear and cold. “That I could only be desired by a rake who falls for any creature that comes into their path and without discernment? Is it my age? Or is it, perhaps, my shifting?” Among her kin, only the fourthway changed their gender and their bodyshape freely, a change deemed undignified for a firstway such as Nihitu.

“No, not your shifting,” she said, a little too fast and with great fervor.

My age, then—for she did now eye me, much as the Raker had done; but where his gaze on my body grew warm and calculating, hers grew only more and more perplexed, as if shocked that a body as weathered as mine could still harbor desire and be regarded likewise, much less by a person her age.

She licked her lips at last. “You want him?”

I sighed, unsure whether to be comfortable with this line of questioning. “Perhaps. I have not decided. Why would it matter to you?”

“Because I am to protect you.”

I crossed my arms. Certainly the Great Lion had explained to her the nature of her guardianship, but in truth she had not yet encountered this situation in all the time spent by my side. I had not taken lovers in many years. I’d assumed that I was simply growing older. But now I felt as if plum wine, not blood, was circling in my veins.

I spoke, more curtly than I’d intended. “My liaisons, such as they might be, are not in the purview of your guardianship.” To my old guardian I had made no such statements, but she had always been discreet.

Nihitu frowned. “It is the purpose of my guardianship that you will not be slain.”

“He is no assassin,” I snapped.

“How can you be sure?” She snapped back, “How can you be sure he’s not dangerous?”

“I am sure he’s not one of Ladder’s assassins,” I said. “By his magic I am sure.” But I did not say what I should have said, that I did not yet know if he was dangerous, that he probably was, perhaps in ways more unpredictable than that of an assassin, but that because he was not an assassin I would be tempted to trust him. I wanted to trust him—the splendor of his mind, and also because he was wild, and because of that pain of his, and because he had offered me something that others had not dared to offer for centuries, bowing always to my power. And I had delighted in that, for sure, taken pleasure in the supplication of those who sought to bask in my regard. Yet if I tired of it, if I came to desire something else, something old and nearly forgotten, or yet something new, then I was on my own—and on my own was where I’d found myself for many years now, tired of my own grandeur’s ready influence—just as he himself felt alone, desired something more than he had known before.

But plum wine, not blood, caroused now in my veins—and so I explained nothing.

I said, “If you are so wary of him, then be his guide tomorrow. Show him the things that do not arouse your ire. Walk with him through the classes held on my painted tiles,

and in the tumbleweed garden. Let him see the library, and join any classes or study circles, if he wants. Let my students Urwaru or Marvushi e Garazd help you in this task.”

I waved Nihitu off without waiting for a reply, as one waves off a common retainer. She was not my retainer. I should have talked to her, should have bared my heart and listened to her concern, but her earlier words and brash demeanor had scraped me.

She did not argue with my order, but simply nodded and withdrew. I listened to her steps recede, relieved for the weight of her presence to be removed, relieved to be at last in silence. But it wasn't long before I descended the narrow ladders to the chambers far below ground and sought the companionship of my star.

* * *

Of all these tales but slivers left to us

He opened the trapdoor and made of his soul a ladder and dipped it into the abyss beneath his court. This done, he descended to converse with the Orphan, to pit his will against its will.

And thus it came to pass that the Orphan, the star that refused at first to fall or choose a guardian, had chosen—a man as ruthless and vast as itself, with despair and darkness to rival its own.

In the sandstone court above the open trapdoor, all was quiet. And yet a careful stranger, if such could be found, would observe a peculiar tenderness in the weave of the ladder and hear a sigh that reverberated upwards from the abyss.

* * *

A vision of quince and the fall

So comforted I was by the subtle heat of my star that I did not notice when Ranra floated into the star-greeting chamber. So still she was, so motionless. Her clothing blended in the darkness to a kind of mild shadow. Only the absence of heat where she stood had alerted me to her presence.

“Ranra,” I said. A greeting. It disconcerted me that she had come so deep into my underground palace uninvited, so close to the surface of my star; and yet I was glad—even relieved—to see her. I yearned for her discourse, but she was silent at first, looking past me where the tendrils of Hillstar reached out in faint curiosity towards her floating form then withdrew with a slight shudder as she stretched a hesitant hand towards it.

“You and I have been guardians,” I said. For that reason alone I felt at ease with her, for so much is revealed to us starkeepers that is concealed even from the most powerful named strong. I was curious to exchange starlore with her, but even more I simply yearned for company of one who was like

me—and not a bristling youth like Nihitu or even the Raker, whose enormous desires had scalded more than I cared to admit. In their company I had been seized by restlessness. Ranra, with her becalmed eyes and translucency of color, seemed to offer the ease I now sought.

“You are a guardian and I the same,” she said, not shifting much. Again she extended a hand. From my star a clay-red tendril of light, made up of delicate five-syllable deepnames, reached out towards her and yet again recoiled before touch. “I would exchange starlore with you, as guardians do.”

I inclined my head. “What knowledge do you seek of me?”

“Your star and you are intertwined.”

I nodded. For all I had been eager to be seen, this was a revelation uncomfortably close—yet I should have expected no different of one who in turn had guarded a star. “Your star and you were different?”

She spoke, not in reaction to my words. “When you breathe, your dormant deepnames extend towards the one you guard, and are reassured by the touch of ten thousand deepnames; when you glide over the desert in a sandbird’s plumage—” for indeed, I had first met her as just such a shape —“the tendrils of your star follow, unfold, experience through your body and your mind that which should not be accessible to stars.”

I asked again. “Your star and yourself did not share such a bond?”

And yet again she continued but not to answer me. “And when your star’s fiery twin reaches out across the waves of sandhills, touches your heart with the insistence of an old friend, the domains of the desert you have traversed and ruled become revealed to it as well.”

To her. For all that my stars were twins, they differed. My star had no dream of being embodied in flesh, conceiving itself only as a burnished globe of light made out of tens of thousands of deepnames. The Tumbleweed Star, for all she too was made of deepnames condensed into a ball inside the sacred tumbleweed, sometimes envisioned herself in a person’s body: a middle-aged Loroli woman with laughing yellow eyes. But I did not suggest this language to Ranra.

Unmoved, I repeated my question for the third time. “Your star and you did not share such a bond?”

“My star is gone, Old Royal. My star, the restless sleeper, was quenched by the tide.”

I clasped my hands behind my back and kept silent, waiting her out, for I would have from her the knowledge equal to what she had gleaned from me.

She sighed. “We were tethered to it, but it did not know us. It slept. Oh, how it slept, as restless as a traveler tormented by

a swarm that comes in dreams; and it paid no less attention to us than it would to such vermin.”

“And your guardian, the first one, they did not speak to it? They did not teach you this lore?”

“The star was asleep as it fell,” Ranra said. “It was asleep still when Semperí carried it out of the desert to the shores of the evening sea, asleep and scalding their arms with blue fire. We learned what we could. So hard we learned, so desperately we sought to converse with it. And yet it slept.”

“I remember Semperí,” I said. One of the last guardians to depart with a star, the star that clung almost as long as the Orphan, that had breathed the noxious fumes of the Orphan’s breath, that had slumbered through it all in angry buzzing. I was not quite the same as that First Royal, and yet I remembered them all, each one of the other guardians who caught the stars—and I remember pressing their names onto the clay that I carried, before that too became too heavy for my grip and I let it go and stretched up my arms instead for the Hillstar.

Ranra regarded me for a while, then said, “There is a lore I sought. A new geometry of light beyond the restrictions of the magical tenets we all learn. A law that multiplies and is vibrant and hangs between each of us in a glittering web.”

I did not follow her meaning precisely, and yet her words stirred the small hairs on the nape of my neck. “Did you find it?”

“I?” She laughed bitterly. “I? Let me tell you what I found—a heaving mountain and my people dying. Everything, dying. The mountain, my people, the star, myself. Folding and folding forever, falling through the ground into the maelstrom below.”

Her speech, so calm and unwavering before, acquired a frantic sheen. “Erigra caught me as I fell—and if they hadn’t, if Erigra hadn’t, then my people would have perished—and almost all of them perished—this instead of glory, instead of the new geometry I sought. I had to act—because of what Erigra had done, I could not die. I had to save what I could. I broke my mind, the mind which bore the Royal House, like yours, the mind that had envisioned the new lore—I broke my mind, so it is forever now afflicted with the Warlord’s Triangle.”

Ranra had spoken so quickly, with such vehemence, that I would have been lost if I hadn’t known parts of the story already. Ranra’s lover, Erigra Lilún, whose books about quince had reached even the desert—poetry, and pruning instructions for the tree which would never grow in this soil but which was now cultivated from the northern Lysinara to Niyaz—that was the person who had carried Ranra away from the erupting

mountain. They kept watch just enough for her to recover and act.

“I do not know this new geometry,” I said.

She shook her head and floated closer. Her hand, reaching now to me, touched the sleeve of my kaftan. “I alarmed you. Forgive me.”

“It is all right,” I said, but it wasn’t, for my star now changed color, became brick-dark, its tendrils withdrawn. I felt dizzy, as if the air, too, receded from the room. Yet I persevered. “Can I help you?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Oh, yes. You can teach him starlore.”

“I want nothing better,” I said, with a sincerity that surprised even me. With all my heart I wanted to teach him, to show him the desert in all its power and secrets, deepnames blended into the grains of sand, the lines of the earth-grid buried so deep that even the questing wind could not reach them; the perfect translucency of the air just before dawn; the immense heat-quivering sky. “It is my desire to teach him.”

“Good,” she said. “Good. Teach him starlore. Teach him expansion.” She turned from me and floated away, through the walls of my star-room, out of sight.

I had yearned for Ranra's discourse and I wanted to teach her ward, but now my hands and forearms puckered with pinpricks, as if some heavy noxious residue clung to my skin.

* * *

Move the fourth: *If not to fall like they had fallen*

I have made a habit of going out, each fifth-day and eleventh-day morning, to make the rounds of my classes. With the help of my retainers, I don the light-colored spidersilk dress embroidered with Loroli pinwheels, and over it a glass-beaded vest of green rough silk, and sandals with gold and orange stripes. It had not lately been my custom to adorn myself, but this morning I was seized by whimsy. I summoned my deepnames, the Royal House of one, one, and two syllables; but instead of great feats of magic, I touched with my power each and every glass bead on my vest, imbuing them with memory of their past, of sandgrains before the Maiva'at glass singers translated them into their shapes. The grains of sand inside the glass beads bloomed into tiny flowers, gray roses and quince blossoms and that flower the Raker had shown me, perhaps unawares: alyta, a three-petal pale bloom that grows in a small, sea-hugging country called the Coast.

I had sent Nihitu to shepherd the Raker, and so my advanced student Urwaru would accompany me instead. Urwaru's hair was braided to the left and slung over the

shoulder in the fashion of Laaguti and other Niyazi women rebels, for she had been such a rebel before she came to me, shortly after I decided to again admit Niyazi students. Urwaru was a consummate writer with a careful and precise hand but taciturn of demeanor, and so we spoke little as we walked.

Under the clear-scented morning sky, the courtyards brimmed with students of all ages who received tutelage from my best named strong, and—once every starweek—from myself. I visited the children first, those who had not yet taken deepnames but who sought instruction; under the supervision of older students, they ran on the painted tiles, shrieking and laughing at each other. A few stood separately with serious expressions, puffing up their cheeks as if ready to burst. I encouraged each of them equally, for there was no knowing which ones would take deepnames and of what power.

In the next courtyard just north of the tumbleweed gardens, a group of teenage mages sat on tiles painted with scorpions and bees. These youths were named strong, all with a single longer deepname and without much power; but they did their breathing exercises eagerly under the direction of my advanced student Marvushi e Garazd. And it was in Marvushi's class that I found my guest, sitting cross-legged on the tiles, his lip curving up just slightly as he saw me. Nihitu stood behind him, arms crossed at her chest, a blank expression on her face.

Marvushi of the Surun' people was the second of my best students. Four years ago they came here with their husband Garazd, a serious and silent man who eagerly joined my guard. Marvushi was neither serious, nor silent, nor a man, and they delighted both in starlore and in teaching children. That last was a constant source of disapproval from Urwaru, who stood now with her arms crossed and lips pursed. "Forgive me, teacher, but your guest seems too advanced to be planted among babes."

The Raker smiled in response to Urwaru's words. "I enjoyed the lesson."

I said, "I'm sure you're used to something else at Mainland Katra University."

"Yes? The buildings clogged with age-old deepnames and even more ancient grids? The Katran professors who hated me for my power, all the more offensive to them because of my Coastal provenance?" He shook his head, as if to shake that memory. There was more to this tale. But I was patient.

A long moment passed before he looked at me again.

"They do not teach this, anyway."

"This?"

"Breath." And then, in a quieter voice, "*The might of language lies in breath.*"

"*Exhale one syllable,*" I said. Just in case I was mistaken.

He smiled. *“A mighty gust of air—
these deepnames hold the magic of the land.”*

We grinned at each other as Nihitu frowned, and Urwaru likewise. Marvushi, I noticed, hid a smile.

I said, “Some books have reached you, I see.”

“I studied Burrashti to read them.” The Raker’s face acquired a subtle glow, quite different from what I’d seen before—neither ravenous nor withdrawn. I, too, felt a soft kind of feeling unfold in my chest. “I have many more books to show you, that you have never seen.”

“I have no doubt.” And edges of that hunger creased again a corner of his mouth.

He crossed his arms. I became painfully aware of him, there in the unfolding warmth of mid-morning, his olive-brown skin baked by the sun in his travels, the small dark hairs on his bare arms; his fingers, long and powerful and poised just so. My gaze would have traveled yet further if not for Nihitu, who coughed indignantly into her fist.

I cleared my throat as well, still smiling. “Come to the honeycomb library, then. After sunset.”

“If your guardian consents,” he spoke. His voice was playful, with no underlying edge, but Nihitu bristled.

“This guardian has been told it’s none of their concern.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” I said, more harshly than I had intended. “Your presence will not be needed.”

“I’ll come then,” he said. “To ask you a question.”

I nodded to him and left with my other guards, ignoring Nihitu. As if she did not exist.

I continued my rounds, in anticipation of the evening and the questions he might ask. It was not Nihitu’s fault that my old keeper was gone, nor that she had been sent here, but I did not want to think about her stubbornness or her sternness.

I completed the rounds and returned to the palace and the many meetings in which to discuss the affairs of Burri. On the edge of my senses I felt the Tumbleweed Star, reaching across the desert and trying to touch my mind. But for once I pushed the awareness of the Tumbleweed Star away from me and paid her summons no heed, thinking instead how he’d worn one of the dresses I’d sent him, a light brown gown embroidered with sandbirds, and how his hair touched his arms.

Plum wine for blood.

I was too old to succumb to anything easily. I would be guarded with him when he came. But now, alone, I had no wish to be sober.

* * *

The heat and splendor of that pain

He came to the honeycomb library at dusk, long after the hour I had named. In semi-darkness, his form glimmered with the subtle heat of star-born iron that had tumbled into the desert, almost-cooled, never-cooled. His deepnames glistened from his head like incursions of mica, hovering on the edge of my perception, edging me to guess how many deepnames there were, what configuration, a question that for all my learning and age I hadn't yet seemed to be able to deeply consider. As the Raker drew closer, the heat of him intensified, the feeling of iron and heft—and a desire rose in me to reach out and feel the texture of that surface, to learn what distances he had traversed to come to me. I kept my control and stood still, intent on my body's reactions, my mind, weighing in myself what could now pass.

He spoke, and his voice reverberated along my ribcage, heavy and languid. There was no pain in it, only intent. "Have you considered my offer?"

The Raker lifted his right hand, not touching. His fingers flexed as if he was gripping my neck, and his lips curved in that familiar disdainful smile, his pleasure.

I savored this and my body's yearning response, its need. But I was in no hurry. "I see that you did not accept my previous answer," I said.

He shrugged. “Your answer was a lesson. I enjoyed it.” He held my gaze and spoke slowly, as if to make sure I followed. “Now I ask again, and I wait for an answer which is not a lesson. Whatever it may be.”

“I thought you would ask me of starlore.”

To that, he only shrugged.

I turned away from him slightly, giving myself the space to think. Silence stretched between us, barely stirring the softness of air.

I considered how long it had been since I had entertained such a proposition. Remembering Nihitu’s recoil, I considered also how very few people dared to imagine the Old Royal fit for any propositions, my power too vast and my body too shriveled, its pain and decay imperfectly held by my power, and by my star. But he saw me, and that in itself sent a delicious shiver down my spine.

And now, having finished contemplating myself, I turned to contemplate him. His suggestion that I lean into his fingers, his grip, offer myself while he, perhaps, continued to conceal.

I let my upper lip curl up to mirror his. “I will not lie; it has been long since I entertained such an offer. It tempts me. As I am sure your offers had tempted many others before you stood at my gate and asked for entrance.”

“None like you,” he said.

Yes. None like me.

And yet you have not answered my question. Have you ever said no? But now I needed to know something else instead. “Before I decide, then, answer my question.”

He lowered his gripping hand, and the smile faded. I felt his heat withdraw. I spoke quickly to dispel the shadow of dangers past. “No, not that question. Another.”

“Ah.”

The smirk did not return. But neither did his presence grow colder. Just hovering there. Wary.

Oh, youth.

I could see it now, knew the answer before I questioned him. And yet, I spoke. “If I satisfy your desire, will you contemplate the reverse?”

He tilted his head, as if considering me anew, considering me with a cold and dreadful finality.

“I do not submit.”

There was an edge to his voice, and the deepnames that had been faint and hidden in his mind like mica slivers flared now to a blinding ferocity, then faded again. Afterimages floated in my eyes, too many to count, too many for anyone’s magic.

I did not ask you to submit. I wanted you to hear what I wanted, just as I heard you—and yet you made assumptions,

and you rejected without hearing. How can I trust you to hold the full vastness of me, what mastery of yourself you will offer me to savor, to trust, if you are so afraid? But I did not speak this. I was very old and he was young and hurting, and no one had ever said no to him before. No one could ever be trusted.

“You do not trust,” I said. “I understand.”

“You understand?” he snarled. “What do you understand, now that you’ve decided that I harbor this desire after I told you I’m not interested?”

His speech lost polish, became rougher, the sounds and lilts of his homeland more pronounced than before. I spoke carefully into that cresting wave.

“You cannot yet accept or reject my desire.” I smiled just a little, the way I smile when I walk into the room full of mages eager to learn from me and yet stiff in their pride. “Because you do not know it. It is not your submission that I want. But you told me what you wanted, and I would show you likewise what I want. That is all.”

His gaze slipped away from mine. And now his silence stretched between us, tense in the soft warm darkness of the room. I had relaxed into myself, but for him there was no relief from his tension, no escape from what haunted him, what cast this brittle shadow on his face in its unguarded moments. And truly I saw that he had revealed more to me than he had before,

perhaps to anyone; for my pull, older and subtler than his, had loosened the grip of many secrets.

I felt the change in him when it came, subtle sparks flashing along the ages of a dark sea. I thought he would turn away, leave, as he had ordered me to leave before, but now he looked at me again, and I felt his pull washing over me, throbbing against my throat. His desire, deep, all-consuming, driving his fear away as he issued a challenge.

“Then show me.”

I did not smile back. That small smile of a teacher to students had been inappropriate. I had underestimated him, for he was no student of mine, or of anyone. And he dared me now—not in trust, but in defiance, in curiosity, in an all-encompassing need I sensed in him to unfurl the edges of himself, to learn his shape, to hold in his grip both my knowledge, and yes, me. Oh, but such things I would give him. Such knowledge. Such pleasure. For he could travel with me in the ways no one had traveled before, travel farther, beyond the horizon, beyond time.

“Behold,” I sang, and opened wide my arms, without touching him. My power unfurled like fire born of Bird, fanned out in a conflagration of dust that stretched to the farthest edges of the desert. I breathed, and my breath was the wind that lifts the surface of the sands, reveals secrets long hidden in

catacombs of bone and blood-red gold that have once underrun the cities of ancient royals. And I brought my arms up and soared once again, carrying him in a sandstorm made of stars, encompassing him in my feathered mareghe, changing shape freely, man to woman to man to woman to sandbird to wind—

—and I felt his mind respond, felt our powers intertwining as we soared over this vision of the desert, a mighty wind never before seen, never before felt—such power, such pain—oh, how his desire would bleed out at last, my need birthing stars that sprouted in his darkness, the knowledge of time stretching for us until time itself was peeled back from the sands. Revealing a vision.

A younger Royal, myself and not myself, my predecessor, someone just like me, a brown-skinned tall person with short curled hair not yet gone white, a person who held between their fingers a condensed and bunished globe of red. The Royal crouched, casting their mind forward in time, pulling from it a concealment which was my home, the Starhill—a space that did not yet exist. The First Royal pulled this concealment over themselves—

To watch another. A figure massive and still, the swell of his shoulders clenching at me.

Ladder.

Above him, Bird danced the dance of pain, thrashing as the last, twelfth star, the Orphan, clung to her tail like a burr of iron and blood.

Ladder stood motionless, and only his face turned upwards towards the goddess. His lip curled up, almost like my guest's, as he contemplated her struggle, her dance, and his eyes shone with a hunger.

Abruptly, I folded my arms. I shouted, filling the room with my power, dozens of candlebulbs banishing the darkness, banishing the last cloying traces of the vision, or so I hoped, oh, so I hoped as I waved my shaking arms in the air.

“What was it?” the Raker asked. “What did I just witness?”

I gulped for air, the heat gone from me. “Forgive me for ruining such a moment with my memories,” I said, and my throat constricted with that feeling I wanted so much to forget.

“I want to know. Please.”

“Ladder,” I said. “And now you know how I came to be an enemy of the Headmaster of the Second School, why his assassins forever hunt me.”

“It was Bird, wasn't it. The very end of Bird's star-giving dance.”

I said nothing. The feelings washed over me, again, again. I had to decide if I needed to be alone.

“He enjoyed it,” the Raker said, and wonder crept into his voice. “He enjoyed watching Bird struggle.”

Yes, I thought. Yes, he enjoyed this vision of her thrashing, the taste of Bird’s blood falling on his tongue like congealed embers that burned him with that sharpness, with that pleasure greater even than the world. I said nothing, watching as the Raker began to pace.

And in his face, of course, that hunger.

I needed to look away, yet I watched him circle. It seemed to me that he was wondering now what it would take to look up and savor such a struggle, open his mouth and let his tongue burn with the black amber and tar of her blood.

I need to be alone.

He spoke. “You know, all those years, Bird—Bird has been the only constant, in all this. Ever since she came. Spreading her wings over me. Watching over me. No matter what I did. And now cannot help but blaspheme in my thoughts, cannot help but want—”

I forced myself to speak. “I need to be alone.”

The Raker’s head snapped up, his restlessness interrupted by the force of my words. A short silence. “Yes. Yes, of course.”

Long after he left me I stood there, fists clenched, pushing against the whirligig of my past. At last, I cursed myself for a fool and thought myself mistaken. I had assumed what the

Raker needed most from me was safety, but now I knew that an escape from pain was not his greatest, burning need. And I, I, who unfold the desert between my outstretched arms, who melt the buried royals' gold into noontime heat—I, in my learning, my wisdom, my power, my splendor—was I too safe to sate that need of his?

* * *

A night that never ends

Despairing of sleep, I tossed in my bed, consumed by memories of that vision and what came after. A deep, deep voice, as if speaking from an abyss. Wind, blowing downwards from sand terraces. Youths training under a still-compassionate morning sun. Where my youngest students learned breath, *his* learned shadow—the smallest movements of the muscle, imperceptible to the eye. Later in their training, they would learn to don white spidersilk clothing and never to sully it even with the smallest drop of spilled blood.

You deceived me. You spied on me.

“I stayed on my land.”

It was not yet your land, your land, your land, stranger from the south, it was not yet your land—

I woke up to that reverberation, rattling every bone in my withered skin. The air of my chamber hung heavy and cloying, full of the sour taste of my sweat. I did not scream this time,

but I drew on my power and banished that feeling in fire, in scourging light.

It was done. But I could not be still, as if some of that residue still clung to my arms.

I wanted to talk to my guardian.

My old guardian. Not Nihitu.

It had been almost a year, but I had not allowed that grief to settle in me. People die. When one is as old as I am, that grief is as commonplace as sand. No excuses. People come to me and they grow and they age and they pass, while I still rattle in the loose folds of my skin.

It is by choice. My star preserves me, and preserves what there is of me that is to be passed on when I go, memories of who I had been and what I had learned. Everything turns. It was nothing, I told myself. Nothing. And yet I had not allowed myself to mourn for my old guardian, and Nihitu's presence brought me no ease. I brought myself to think I should consult with her, tell her of these disturbances. It was my duty.

I flung open the doors of my chamber but found only sleepy servants behind it, crouching on their haunches by the door. No Nihitu. Grudgingly I accepted their help in dressing—a light-colored flax robe with bone beading, seven long chains of beaten gold—and I told them to stay as I walked down, deeper into Starhill, towards the honeycomb library.

There was no peace in the corridors. Shadows moved and whispered in a language I did not understand. A smell, as if of raw spidersilk, tickled my nostrils—both strange and deeply familiar, the subtle odor of the white robes worn by Ladder's assassins.

I flung my mind towards my star. It enveloped my mind. A few long moments feeling nothing but the unspeakable rush of its almost-scalding flow, and I was divested—of my memories of the years since this last happened, of the parts of myself that would be preserved until a new Royal, reborn, would reach out to claim them. And now I felt in myself the gnawing emptiness that accompanies such divestments, as if I hung suspended between breaths, waiting for death. Not ready to die. No, I wanted to live. But I had lived long, and if I was to be slain tonight, then—I told myself, then—

I waited in darkness, the tendrils of my star enveloping me in a cocoon of heat, until the smell receded and the air felt still again.

Beaded in sweat and shuddering, I stumbled towards the octagonal doors of my refuge. I would sit on the cushions by the desk and replenish myself with honeyed water, and then I would rest. My star had my memories and those parts of my self that I wanted preserved, but I had them as well. I had them all, still. A doubling, dizzying feeling.

I would rest. And then... I would restore myself by reading. I knew what I wanted to read, in the silence and safety of my aloneness: scrolls of starlore from Keshet, endless ledgers of stars in the sky. After that first Birdcoming, after my city of Che Mazri had been established and the first chambers of my palace dug in the ground, I had asked for and received the starcounts every year from the great University of Keshet.

But when I stepped through the octagonal doors into my refuge, I was not alone after all. The Raker was already there, sitting on cushions by one of the long, low round tables. Books and charts were spread before him, and numerous candlebulbs hung in the air above, illuminating the blue basine desk, a carafe of water, his bare chest, the now-familiar sleeping pants. His long hair was loosely braided and slung carelessly over one shoulder. He held a book in his left hand.

The Raker lifted his eyes and smiled at me. At the crown of his head, multiple dizzying deepnames shone subtly. "I could not sleep."

I opened my mouth to greet him, then closed it. I did not want him to see me this way. Shaken. I'd wanted to be alone. And then... I looked again, taken aback, recognizing the book he was reading—it was the *Accounts and Annals of The Twelve Stars*, which I had always kept under lock with the two pieces of my ancient broken tablet.

“I did not give you permission,” I said, rage growing out of my almost-death and my fear and his smile.

His brow creased, the smile sliding away. “I thought you wanted to show me your books.”

“Not this one.” I hobbled across the room on painful legs, and plucked the goatskin-bound volume from his hand. “Didn’t *under lock* mean *ask consent* to you? Or do you only ask when it is convenient?”

He recoiled, and his cheeks flushed with blood. “It was not locked. On the shelf. You said that you wanted to share. But of course, of course I should have known. You are so Bird-plucking eager to teach me, but everything must always be a lesson and every lesson to come from you. You are no different from all those others. Knowledge must always be given. Controlled. Never something that I truly learn.”

He got up and strode past me, and everything just sank in me. I grabbed his arm without thinking. “Don’t go.”

He pushed back, vehement. His deepnames reared up and combined into a dazzling structure of steel and light, rotating and unfolding in his rage. “Don’t. Touch me. Without. Permission.”

The force of his shove propelled me backwards, slammed me against the wall. I slid down to the floor. My ribcage hurt, but I made no movement to fight him. I shouldn’t have grabbed

him. Such actions were not my custom. It was a testimony to my distress, to the fear, that I did so. Unthinking.

I rasped, "It is dangerous out there."

"Yes?" He snarled back. "Your guardian will kill me for daring to resist you, Oh Teacher?" His deepname structure swayed, darkening, careening.

I shook my head, but it was the wrong motion, as dizziness swept over me. "Assassins. Someone was stalking me just now, coming here. I have no idea where Nihitu is."

He stared at me.

I tore my gaze away from his steely structure, to look at the book I still clutched in my hand. The familiar black goatskin binding, but it wasn't *Accounts and Annals of The Twelve Stars*. "Strong Builders of Che Mazri," I said, my voice failing. Of course.

"What did you think it was? *How to kill the Old Royal and Take Over The Great Burri Desert: A Foundational Discourse*?" He breathed in, deep. And again.

"There were two books made for me and bound in the same goatskin. I have not read this one in centuries. I forgot it existed." I made to stand up, then winced and desisted. The dizziness seemed to be worsening.

"I have no house," he said, his voice bitter. "But if I had a house, the rule of guestright would include the library."

“Yes. Of course. It does.”

“Yes?”

“I apologize. I made assumptions.”

The Raker continued to breathe. At last, his dazzling structure folded.

He said, “Are you badly hurt?”

“Not badly.” Maybe. I was not sure. “I had to call on my star... before. It is always difficult.”

I'd seen now what the others had seen. How his rage just flared, from nothing to everything. He would defend himself with an unthinking and immediate vehemence. Combine that with his proclivities in pleasure, and they would call him a criminal, see him as dangerous, a creature to be caged, or at least leashed.

I felt dizzy. More dizzy. I did not find it in myself to fault him, but I was too old to be thrown against the wall.

He chewed his lips. “I, too, apologize. I overreacted.”

I said nothing.

He stretched a hand out towards me, not touching. “I would help you up.”

“Not yet.”

He waited. Then he crouched on the floor by me and waited more. I waited as well, to feel better. But the dizziness and pain did not recede.

“Can you heal yourself?” There was worry in his voice. “Should I call someone?”

“You should offer to heal me.” *Like you should heal your lovers.* But I did not say it. We had flayed each other enough.

He hesitated, then spoke, in a voice that was barely above a whisper. “I do not know how.”

“They do not teach this either, at Mainland Katra University?”

He shook his head. “I do not know. Perhaps in third year.”

I exhaled. My first impulse was to instruct him, but he had made it clear that he did not want to be taught. So I waited more. Until I felt clearer. I drew on my deepnames and began to assess.

The body learns from wounds. But not immediately, for at first the body refuses to accept the wound, remembering only how it was before. In the short window of time before the body forgets, deepnames can be used to heal, or rather to undo.

This wasn't that bad. It could have been much worse.

I started to work, and as I did so, I noticed that the Raker, too, had drawn on his deepnames and was mirroring the structures I made with mine.

When I was done, he offered me his hand once again, and I took it. I felt very weak now but not dizzy, and he helped me to his reading cushions and poured me a glass of honeyed water

from the carafe. I drank it, leaning against his shoulder. The room was full of subtle heat and glimmering candlebulbs. And everything had changed.

“I did not want to harm you.” His voice was hesitant, and yet firm, and beneath that, I thought, he was hurting. “Just... just. Please. Ask me before... touching.”

“We are touching now,” I said.

“This is different.”

No. Yes. Maybe.

He lifted his right hand and brought it close to my face. “Can I?”

Not my neck. It did not feel like he wanted to touch my neck right now. Still, I did not know what I could say yes to, if anything. *No.* But I was not ready for that finality, either. “Not tonight.”

He took his hand away and drew a breath. I felt it against my back and shoulder. Then he shifted, still supporting me, but the touch of his body lessened. I was glad of it, I thought. I was not sure.

He spoke, not angry, but tight. “Let me summon someone.”

“No.”

We sat in silence, and I regarded the papers strewn on the desk, the books. Charts he had made, all of Che Mazri-style clay

buildings and the various modes of constructing their circular naming grids, and the junctures where deepnames would be planted.

It had always been hard to resist discourse about deepnames. “I wouldn’t have taken you for a builder.”

“What would you take me for, then?” he snapped, as if his residual anger had been pulled to a tautness then released. “An assassin?”

I let that go. I would let it all go. “I thought you would want to study starlore. Why else seek me out? Everybody knows...” Though now I thought about Nihitu’s early reports. The Raker had righted houses crumbling to dust, infused their walls with deepnames—I should have remembered this, but I had not.

“After our conversation, I thought you would want to learn more about Ladder.”

He shrugged. “I wanted to stop thinking about it.”

“And Strong Building is soothing.”

“Exactly.”

And it was soothing, too, to sit like this, leaning against his bare shoulder. We had both made false judgments and hurt each other. But now there was warmth, and silence, and the shining soft light of his floating candlebulbs.

When I felt stronger, he helped me to my chambers and delivered me to the hands of my startled wardens. I felt no assassins lurking in the corridors, but in truth, I was too tired and shaken to perceive much. He refused an offer of a guard when he bade me good night. I hoped that he would be careful.

After he left, I summoned my councilors to warn them that a becalming power worked upon the palace, the handiwork of one or more of Ladder's students. It made people sluggish, inattentive. My power was such that it did not affect me, but it had served to isolate me for an assassin's blow. They argued that I should never have left my chambers—but I am prone to wanderings and do not consent to be constrained by fear; and in truth, the servants and wardens at my door would not have been strong enough to protect me from one of Ladder's assassins. This required personages of power, like Nihitu, who was still missing, or the Raker, who should have been asleep by then. In the end I accepted a guard of twelve, warriors and mages directed by my best students Urwaru and Marvushi e Garazd. The rest I ordered to search for Nihitu, or to find at least the reason for her disappearance.

I let the servants change my clothing and allowed a cup of buttered cardamom tea to be served, then sank at once into a dreamless sleep.

* * *

[\(Concluded in Pt. II, in BCS #230\)](#)

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Rose Lemberg is a queer immigrant from Eastern Europe. Their work has appeared in Strange Horizons, Interfictions, Uncanny, Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction Anthology, and multiple times previously in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, among other venues. Rose co-edits Stone Telling, a magazine of boundary-crossing poetry, with Shweta Narayan. They have 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). They are currently editing a new fiction anthology, An Alphabet of Embers. You can find Rose at roselemborg.net and @roselemborg, including links to their page on Patreon, where they post about Birdverse, the world in which their BCS stories and others take place.

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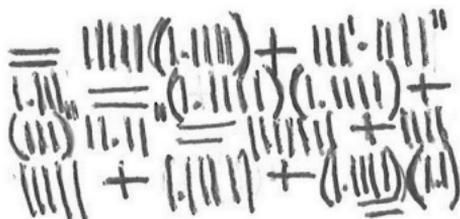
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ORA ET LABORA

by Theodore McCombs

Matins: the apse is dark. The monks in the choir stalls hunch over their parchment, noses hovering over scratching nibs. The novices in the back have the worst light, but the air is so still the thick standing candles offer poor illumination for everyone: just beads of flame on the wicks. Obb stares so fiercely into his calculations they deform into cross-hatches, into the coarse-cloth weave of his cassock:



He tears at a nail with his teeth. His fingerpads are bitter with ink. Beneath his work, the dark is rippling with bugs; they sleep in the oak joints and chew his legs throughout night offices. His skin is scarred with bites to his knees. His eyes are gummy with sleep. Divine offices are the hardest your first year, the novices tell him, just get through the first year, and your body changes what it wants. He'll wake for Matins at midnight like the night flowers in the cloister garden. Obb isn't

a night flower but a sack of coarse-cloth, left in a windowless cellar, chewed by vermin. Is there any idea so terrifying as being eaten in the dark?

* * *

Obb rises an hour before Prime. His shadow, in the sickly dormitory lamp, trawls over the other novices slumped headfirst into their straw pillows. He pads barefoot down the flickering galleries to the rear of the abbey, then crosses the meadow in the gray half-light: a cold, muddy shape in the mousy grass. The valley is covered in cottony morning mists caught in pine boughs. Faraway, a bleat of goats in pasture. Obb picks his way through the nunswood to a creek, where he washes like a bird. The pain of the freezing water relieves his itching legs, briefly.

He pulls off his cassock and cringes at his own reek of stale sweat on wool. It's summer, even in the mountains, and his feet have started to sour and crack inside his leather shoes. He sits in the bunch grass and peels dead skin off his soles, in milky sheets like cheesecloth. He splashes cold water on his face and scrubs, until he's shivering. The other novices are fouled with pimples and weird odors; they rush red-faced through the halls hiding erections under their books. Obb drags a wet rock over his pits until they smell like a wet rock.

He hasn't been punished for leaving the abbey to wash, not yet; the nunswood is the most obvious way to escape, so he's surprised no one stops him. They must know. A few brothers and sisters are already awake at that hour: he sees lamplight through the grates in their cell doors as he crosses each cloister. But the forest is too vast to cross on foot, and the goatherds will deliver you right back to the abbot like a muddy stray kid.

He prays sometimes, by the creek: not a number-prayer, but a word-prayer, to God the Mother: *Please, let me go home*. But what is home anymore? Is it his parents, whose faces his own bitterness will no longer let him see clearly? His older sister, who seemed to know before anyone he'd have to be obliterated? Is it having hours alone, not punctuated every third by divine offices—Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, Compline, Matins, Lauds—and the labor of infinite litanies?

He has been three months at the abbey of St. Riemann, but his life before is already blurring. He remembers his eyes sore from crying, as the abbey's snowed towers and spires first turned into view. He remembers his terror at the brothers—wrapped in dark coarse-cloth, circling him in the dusky chapter house, their skirts whisking over flagstones—

In nomine Patrie, et Matris, et Filie Oblatum

Two figures stood apart: the monk Wroński, his upper face a strip of shadow under his cowl, the lower half only a deep weathered grimace; and Sister Casorata, the matron of the boys' dormitory, in a white, roseate wimple. When he approached them to beg their help and offered his name, Wroński stopped him short with a gesture.

“We call you Oblate,” Sister Casorata explained, “until it is time for you to name yourself to us.”

(Oblate, from ‘oblation,’ from *oblatio*, a word from a language thousands of years dead; meaning ‘offering,’ meaning he’d been ‘offered,’ and received.)

“Your family has renounced you and donated you to the Church. The name they gave you is a lie,” said Wroński. “You never were their son or their brother. You are Disordered, a child of the Jack of Lies. Rejoice in your deliverance, and submit with gladness to God’s sacred labor.”

It wasn’t true, Obb repeated in his head, as Sister Casorata led him to the dormitory. His family loved him and remembered him; they’d never wanted to oblate him, they were forced; in a few days they would come for him.

The abbey blots out the horizon. Cassock in hand, he lets the mountain air dry him as he makes his way back up the slope under a noise of bells.

St. Riemann's is a massive limestone complex shagged with ivy and brown lichen, with eleven cloisters and seven square towers hoarding owls. There are two hundred eighty-one doors and four hundred ninety-nine stained windows; the abbot has counted. Along the church's nave, under every window, there are walnut reliquaries carved as women's busts, with intricate tresses and heavy expressions of pity. Inside are the skulls of martyrs of the sack of St. Riemann's, three hundred years ago, when the forest lay thick with sisters strung from branches.

* * *

If the brothers showed any patience in Obb's first three months, they want improvement in his second. Brother Wroński scrutinizes Obb's litanies and leaves mark-ups on his bunk, rashed in red circles. Obb is no good at these calculations: Why is he, and not some other sad fourteen-year-old, here? Every Disordered child must be obliterated to the Church, but what does that *mean*? He has ideas, but he doesn't like them: because Disorder does not refer to any external and visible imperfection, it must point to some internal defect that was still, somehow, visible. Like a dome built wrong.

Children in the city, his peers, his schoolmates, regarded the Disordered like sorcerers, with their books of mysterious diagrams. The ship captains who hired priests to offer

navigation prayers returned to port; those who didn't, might or might not. Merchants at the Bourse had nuns pray over trades to set wheat prices and reaped miracle profits. Every civic guild tithed clergy to consecrate its construction plans; decades ago, an unblest dome in the College of Sciences had collapsed and crushed dozens of only sons. Stories like these had convinced Obb's sister that the monasteries and convents secreted in the mountains were schools of magic where oblates learned spells to summon elemental spirits of spectacular power and beauty.

He cries himself to sleep, every night; it's impossible otherwise. Mosquitoes bite his face and ankles. Strange throttled cries and rustlings come from the end of the dormitory. The nights are swollen with rain that won't fall. The panic and hopelessness hits him hardest after dark, until he wants to thrash in his pallet. Instead he cries, silently, lying on his back so that his nose plugs up. He can't stand the idea of the others hearing him sniveling. He wakes with a sore throat and cracked lips.

It's wearing him down: this cycle of sleeping and hoping to wake to a different life, then finding all of it the same.

His parents will not come for him, he admits. It's a painful logic to yield to—oblation is mandatory, but why wouldn't they *fight* for him, their only son, no small thing, but that's what

he's become here: a small thing, in the mouth of something giant and old. He looks down and sees tears blotting his litanies, sees multiplications that abandon the laws of nature: fifth and seventh powers of nonsense, odd numbers hatching out of even products like moths wriggling out of cocoons.

He pushes aside his litanies and writes to the bishop:

I revere our Most Holy Church but I don't belong here I will never belong here. This isn't how my life is supposed to be please please I can't stay like this I can't spend my life here

For weeks after, he is vivid with anticipation of an answer. Between religious instruction classes he dawdles in the arcades over the courtyard, watching the mail carriages. He hears sister novices singing in the north chapel during Lauds: walled-up voices slipping under doors, passing through glass like light. Will he be punished? Obb isn't so naïve to think the abbot would simply let his letter post without reading it. Will the brothers now see Obb's bitterness written across his face? Or did they all write such letters as oblates, begging and bleating for their lives back?

* * *

Only the Disordered may manipulate the disordered numbers—Obb pictures this work like harvesting sprigs off a poisonous plant. But Obb's infinite litanies aren't truly disordered, or truly infinite for that matter, only novice

approximations: calculate out $x - x^3/3! + x^5/5! - x^7/7! + \dots$ for $x = 1.1110$, $x = 1.1111$, $x = 1.1112$, and so on and on, and on, and on. If x were a true disordered number, like the square root of two, $x = 1.414213562\dots$, the decimal would trail an infinite, never-repeating streak of digits and the calculation of $x^3/3!$ alone would occupy the remainder of Obb's life and the universe's life, and the life of all universes to come. So, he approximates to four decimal places; and even that, for $x^{11}/11!$, makes his eyes cross and takes hour after hour. Novices spent years compiling tables of these approximations, or copying out and verifying old rotting books of tables that smelled of vinegar.

Four months in, Obb still doesn't understand how this labor is supposed to glorify God. He knows that priests will use his calculations for engineering, navigation, and other important things. But it's still dull, even crazy-making. He still hasn't figured out how not to go deranged from boredom.

He tries taking each litany slowly, drawing each multiplication out with loving precision. The office ends with Obb stupefied, having accomplished half of nothing.

He tries rushing through the calculations, the top of his quill capering crazily. The office ends with Obb exhausted, his hand cramping, the bites on his legs crackling like fire.

There's something unsettling about approximating numbers with infinite decimal places to just four: a poor trade for the truth, Obb thinks. He remembers days before his oblation when he'd had another name and felt perfectly safe in happiness. His family was well-off and loving. He had a bright future. Then he lost all of it, out of nowhere; his entire life, and everything he'd understood life to be, collapsed without omens or dreams or warning into *this*; yet Disorder, the necessity of his oblation one day, must have always been there and he'd just failed to see it—his understanding only, and dangerously, approximate.

One afternoon he is watching the carriages when Brother Wroński confronts him with a sheaf of Obb's calculations: unacceptable, says Wroński; but the clatter of hooves on cobblestones muddles his words. Below, the stench of straw rotted in horse piss fugs the air; Obb is wondering where the horses have come from and where they're going, whether any reach his white city on a blue bay, where the sunwarmed walls smell of salt...

Wroński grabs Obb by the shoulders and Obb reels back into his own head.

"Pay attention, Oblate. Error has grave consequences. Your calculations here give our priests in the city precise angles and logarithms, and if your litanies are even one thousandth of

a percent off, their next multiplication is a tenth of a percent off, and so on until the roof falls in. Is that what you'd like? Is that worth your time? Do you want a dome to fall on your family?"

"That's fine," Obb says, wrenching himself out of Wroński's hands. He is ashamed to be so furious. "I'm fine with that. I never was their son, isn't that what you said? They let you take me *here*."

Wroński's response is swift and wordless. He hauls Obb downstairs by the wrist, asks the mail driver for his switch, and whips the backs of Obb's hands exactly six times, in front of everyone and their horses. The pain is sharp, white-hot, and over; leaving behind a warm, gluey throb as blood buds over his skin. "He hit me," he shouts at Sister Casorata, later, blind with tears, while she rubs stinging mash into his hands. "You *said*"—voice jumping, accusing—"you said to tell you if they touch me a way I don't like," and Casorata snaps at him, "That's not what I meant," and says, "I know it's hard to believe, but he's trying to spare you worse," then she tells him a stupid parable about pulling out pernicious weeds before they grow deeper roots. Obb's insolence isn't a weed, though; it's the last thing he has.

It's a bland, dumb parable, but it makes him think of what Wroński has said about errors exposing: how if you make an

error in the tenth decimal place but multiply this calculation by a hundred feet of wall, say, then by a hundred tons of roof work, and keep pressing this product in turn through more and more calculations, that flaw in that tenth decimal place rises to the eighth decimal place, then to the sixth, the fifth, the first, a whole number; like a monster from the dark canyons of the ocean rising and breaching. Obb lacks the doctrinal understanding to be certain, but he suspects his litanies are approximations of a true, perfect form; where the litany $x - x^3/3! + x^5/5! - x^7/7! + x^9/9! - x^{11}/11! + \dots$, when extended to its infinite length, becomes something else and strange, a function that twists like a snake. But the litanies he calculates during divine offices can only ever be approximations—even if he extended one to a hundred thousand places, and worked out $x^{99,999}/99,999! + x^{100,001}/100,001!$, *et cetera*, this wouldn't cure but only bury the imperfection, dormant, deep below the surface, powerful and secret.

* * *

Obb suspects too that the brothers and sisters of the abbey are approximate people. In religious instruction, at Vespers, at Lauds, he watches them gesture and bow and turn around at a noise following them; they are reedy or stout, dark or sallow, but in all of their faces, their lips curl a decimal place off. They have almost-expressions, almost-voices. He thinks of the bright

orange fish his father once showed him in a book of plates, with blots on their tails that serve as decoy faces for predators.

* * *

Lauds: hungry, cold, and dreaming, Obb processes to the dormitory for second sleep, and he catches in the dark a train of girls, in moon-white habits, filing out from the north chapel. One of them, a head taller than her companions, is muzzled. A rumor from last week: the sister novice who swallowed a carpenter's nail from her pallet frame. And, the month before: she knocked the new sister oblate across the head for her eyeglasses, crushed them underfoot, ate the shards right there. In the amber light of the candelabras, she glows like a house on fire.

That's Agatha, whispers another novice. Obb thinks of his letter to the bishop and feels he understands her. How long here before *he* has that much despair and courage?

From a window, he studies her during free hour, the novice Agatha, watched by a heavysset nun in the cloister garden. She sits under the sinewy quince tree, whose screen of twisting boughs cuts her figure up into small blooms of white habit, like the rosebushes around her. She's spread over her lap a sheet of parchment ruled in even, parallel lines; she is dropping handfuls of dress pins on to the paper. She counts something, records the number in a notebook, then sweeps the

pins into her hand and repeats: again, again. The falling pins shimmer like a trickle of water, and Obb sinks into a mysterious, painful longing to sit at her feet and listen to her arrange this unaccountable scene into a theorem.

* * *

The contraption is iron and leather, brown and brass. Obb barely gets a look before they hold him down shouting and force it over his head—it's a mask, a grotesque, with ass's ears, a long swinish snout, and brass-ringed eyeholes like big goggles. The abbot personally holds Obb by the shoulders as another monk fastens the straps and collars round his throat. Obb panics as the mask closes over him; it smells like mold and bad straw inside; but when he kicks or twists, the leather straps constrict his neck; he gasps, he fights, sucks air through his teeth, and lets out the scream he's been nursing for months.

The abbot says. "If you will act like a dumb brute, let others see you for a dumb brute."

The abbot's words buzz strangely in the hollows of the mask. It's his litanies, that's what they're punishing him for, Obb realizes: arithmetical errors. He cannot reply, because his mouth is stopped with an iron spike protruding behind the snout.

The shame mask has its own wicked momentum, so that in the corridors, when the other novices throw chalk at him and

he turns around, its weight lurches and nearly topples him over. Obb groans round the bit and his thirst bites because he knows he can't drink anything for hours more. The stench of previous wearers' old sweat drives him crazy; it's worse than the itching on his legs, which he can't reach now. He avoids, but catches anyway, his shadow in the windows—the day outside is rained into grays—and he's like a beast balancing on two legs, like they've taken a mule from the mill shaft and taught him to stand and carry books. The boys' teasing (encouraged by the brothers) is not so cruel, they pelt him with fatty chicken scraps but not rocks; still, Obb's pride is so raw that he staggers down the hours in a red rage.

The novices grab him and spin him in circles until he wants to vomit over the bit, until another boy steps in and cuffs somebody on the ear; still, Obb careens off in the wrong direction; he loses himself in stairs and halls he can neither recognize nor reject through the brass goggles. He starts to shake, because being late to class will mean another day in the mask. He sees a door he feels he knows, but when he enters, the equations on the board are unfamiliar and severe. And the students are sister novices, their expressions made opaque with strange knowledge. Agatha is there, muzzled but burning with intelligence. Obb reels back—he sees himself in their faces, monstrous and unimpressive.

In the shame mask he is unfit for divine offices and spends the time sweeping and scrubbing the church floor. His neck strains to hold his head upright when he bends forward; on his hands and knees, he settles the iron snout on the stone tiles and tracks his scrub brush out of the corner of one eye. He feels the floor's every flinty chip in his kneecaps. He scrapes the iron candelabras clean of their caked suety wax and hauls pails of water to the kitchen. Between pails and brooms his writing hand is in agony by afternoon. Wroński says if his litanies don't improve, this will be the rest of his life—not the mask but the labor. “Monks with no head for doctrine are cellarers and choristers. At worst, they work the latrines and stables.”

Unlike the other brothers, Wroński speaks to Obb no differently because of the grotesque locked over his head; or maybe Wroński goes around seeing ass's ears on everyone. “You're not stupid, Obb, but you are a fool.”

Obb hides in the crypts during the free hour, under heavy, low rib vaults.

An older boy, another novice, discovers him there among the stone saints. Obb flinches when this novice takes his wrist, but the boy sits on a bier opposite Obb and kneads the muscles in Obb's hands. Obb's eyes water, it feels so good and kind. This brother novice is sixteen, with thick brows and large, solemn eyes; his name is Bolyai. Bolyai tells Obb he once spent

forty-eight hours in the shame mask his first year, even slept in it. The boy's touch—the ease with which he presses his thumbs into Obb's aching palm—flusters Obb. Blood flushes through his fingers and up his wrists; he inhales the chalky crypt air sharply. Bolyai is all ease: his cowl back, he tosses his hair from his eyes and lamplight catches in his smile. “I hated it here at first. Believe me. Now I can't imagine life outside.” Obb squirms, but Bolyai holds on to his wrist and the flesh gives under the boy's powerful fingers.

For a long time, the crypt is quieter than any place Obb can remember, and the mask muffles even this absence, so that his imagination shapes the quiet into soundless footfalls, like it shapes strangers out of shadows and half-seen statues at the rims of his goggles. His silence does not seem to trouble Bolyai, who now advises him to sit taller at offices, never to hunch, because good posture helps his wrist-muscles over the long term. Obb finds he's already exasperated with his new friend.

“Come by my bunk tonight.” Bolyai stands and brushes the dust from his wrappings. He gives Obb's iron ears a playful stroke. “I'll do your other wrist, if you like it.”

Obb bites hard on the spike. The invitation paralyzes him, like some giant muscle running the length of his body has fallen asleep and will erupt in pins and needles if he moves.

* * *

Sister Casorata unfastens the throat straps and draws them tenderly away from Obb's flesh, which the weight has chafed raw. The dormitory is empty, ruddy with evening colors; all the others are at dinner. The sister cups Obb's chin and eases his jaw open. The bit, as it comes out, shines thickly with spit and mucus, like some just-calved animal. At last the mask comes off, and all the hot salt and stick on his face cools in the free air. Sister Casorata wipes down his face with a damp cloth and rubs salve into his neck. She offers a mirror but he shakes his suddenly light head; what if he looks and his face is the same.

She sneaks a bread roll from the folds of her sleeves. "What does that man know of pity," she keeps muttering. She squints at Obb. "The abbot, I'm sure you've realized, has no talent for doctrine. It humiliates him, so he humiliates others. Don't let this experience teach you anything but some more discipline with your litanies."

"I'm going to escape," Obb says. His voice is dry and weak. "I don't know how yet, but—" He takes a small bite of the roll, working his unfamiliar teeth.

She sighs. "If you only worked as hard to accept your lot here, Obb..." She sits and runs the cloth gently across his forehead. Her face is drawn, tired. "All of us were obliterated,

once. No one came to this life by choice, but most of us are content.”

“Happy?”

“Content.” She takes his hands. He lets them hang limp in hers.

Everyone wants Obb to be content here; so there is resistance, he decides, even a sort of nobility, in being miserable.

* * *

The sun dazzles the courtyard stonework, and the entry archway is so dark that the horses seem to form out of shadow as they emerge, drawing the mail carriage. Obb presses back into the wall as the horses pass; their enormous, sleepy black eyes dismiss him, and one lets fall a slop of shit. Brother Wroński sets a hand on Obb’s shoulder and they step forward together, Obb holding a letter up to the mail driver. It’s the height of summer, and the man’s face has the moistness and consistency of cake.

It is his second letter, this one to the royal governor. Obb suspects his letter to the bishop was confiscated, so he hands it personally to the mail. The driver expects a fee; Wroński fishes a copper out of his habit, but Obb grabs the coin and makes a fist around it, then counts to three. “I paid you,” he says,

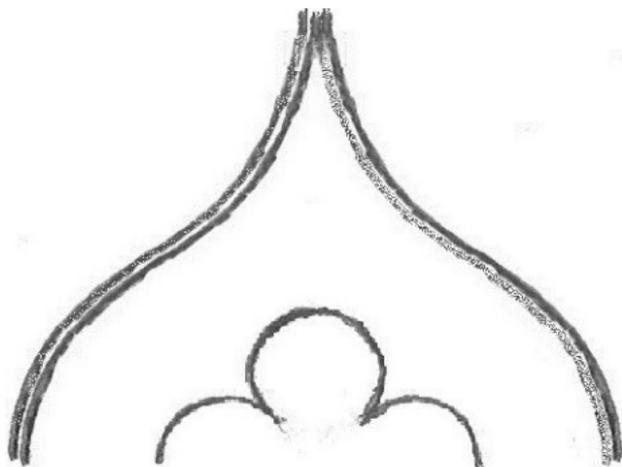
passing the copper up to the mailman. “Remember—I paid you, not him.”

Both men have the grace to accept Obb’s fiction without any visible pity.

Obb hates pity—compassion, as he sees it, is a blurring, demeaning virtue. The way his parents looked at him (sorrow-eyed, tucked lips) when he laughed too loudly or talked excitedly. Compassion clouds the truth, it introduces error. When he feels it, he’s tongue-tied and hobbled. When others feel it for him, pathetic. In this way, the abbey’s austerity is a relief. The stiff straw pillows and pallets, the cold stone floor as he processes in the dark, the winds howling over the roof, the mosquitoes in the night; the hours weeding the gardens, fingernails black with soil; the longer hours in the scriptorium, head numb with equations, lectures, and offices; his solitary icy rinses at dawn—he feels cleaner for it, more honest.

In theology classes Obb sits behind Bolyai, absorbed in the smooth currents of his hair, ignoring the proofs on the board but studying the shadows of tiny curls that run down either side of Bolyai’s neck. Bolyai’s hair, so black and straight, always looks wet, and parts perfectly over his left brow, although there are no combs or mirrors in the dormitory. Obb dogs him through the cloisters as the older boy, always a little pompous, points out scrolled corbels and ogee arches carved into the

stonework over doors: look, on each side of the arch, how the lower concave arc, curving one way, quietly becomes the upper convex arc, curving in the opposite way. It is an effect Obb has seen in his dreams of lines.



Bolyai focuses him on the subtle but exquisite pop of pleasure at this point of conversion. “That is the voice of Our Mother, Queen of Good Counsel, exciting us to bend our intentions to the will of Our Almighty Father.” Obb grins stupidly; he doesn’t believe a word of it, but he feels safe in the way Bolyai smiles at him. Mocking but not unkind—laughing at Obb’s anxiety when Obb can’t himself laugh. Bolyai is the type of personality that enjoys arranging and dictating things, and Obb’s new life needs arrangement.

Obb sleeps jackknifed on his side, his knees pulled to his chest. Some nights he wakes in the middle of first sleep and

hears sharp, unnerving breaths coming from down the rows of boys. From where Bolyai's bunk is, maybe. Obb knows what is happening but keeps that knowledge sunk under the surface of his thoughts. He lies absolutely still until the sounds stop, or he falls asleep and then dreams of dark shapes ribboning up from the bottom of a bay.

In the scriptorium, he finds Bolyai and Agatha, heads bent together over their books, seated under a rose window of radiant stained glass. They are scattered with colors; her white habit like a flowerbed, his face wine red and forest green. They are deep in concentration; Obb approaches, fearing to breathe too loudly. Agatha is the first to look up—it's the first time he's seen her face uncovered and she's pretty in an unsettling, porcelain way, like the figurine of an unnamed saint. When she smiles at him, shyly, tentatively, Obb sees the glass and nails she's swallowed, tearing at her intestines; he smiles back. She invites Obb to read with them and when Bolyai makes a quick impatient face, gives him a coy look. But soon Bolyai is his cheerfully intrusive self again, slipping two fingers into Obb's collar and tugging the cowl aside to see how Obb's bruises are healing.

Obb is too nervous to talk, but Agatha understands this and talks to him instead about her work: she is studying to be an Azarite, an order dedicated to random chance and

divination. Only nuns can learn their doctrines, since women are thought better suited to chaos; but sometimes the Azarites teach certain methods to the monks for specific application. Bolyai is studying religious economics, which require a basic knowledge of divination formulae. “I’m going to be Cardinal of the Bourse one day,” Bolyai says, in that irresistible confidence that makes the air brighter, the rafters and shadows of the scriptorium less awful. Obb tells them his concerns about infinity and error, and they sympathize. He tells them about the true function line his litanies seem to cluster around, like bulrushes keeping tight to a stream, and they lean in to hear him, so close he can feel the heat of their foreheads.

“She doesn’t need to wear the muzzle anymore?” Obb asks Bolyai, later, and he beams, “Not when she’s with me.” He spoke to Brother Ramanujan and promised to watch her. “She’s not a bad person,” Bolyai insists, “but she feels everything so strongly—and sometimes, it overwhelms her to the point she doesn’t know what she’s doing.” For a moment, Bolyai flickers and dims; then he takes Obb’s hand in his and squeezes, his fingers strong as ironwood.

“I don’t want to be here either,” Obb says, trying to control his own emotion. The longer Bolyai holds his hand, the more panicked he feels. “What right do they have to pen us up here?”

Bolyai looks at him guilelessly and says, “We’re Disordered,” and that’s that.

Something is out of joint in Obb, in Bolyai, Agatha, Wroński, Casorata, all of them. Six months in, Obb has passed from suspicion to disbelief. What could be wrong with *all* of them?

* * *

In Wroński’s cell, Obb confesses his dream of a function that snakes along the angelic axis in peaks and troughs. He can’t say where this vision came from, except his calculations at divine offices—hundreds on hundreds of approximate values falling into place along the snake-line in his head. The cell is cluttered and warmer than Wroński himself. Stacks of sketches and books texture the room, astronomical instruments crowd the pallet, but there is no iconography; only the expected figurine of the Offered Son, a womanly youth nailed to a wattle fence. An excitement comes over Wroński as he listens; he pushes up his sleeves and clears the straw from the floor on his hands and knees. He takes a piece of chalk and draws a line—



It’s the posture of the Offered Son: head bowed in pain, arms hooked over the fence’s top. And it’s the same function

Obb sees in dreams. “Do you realize what a rare talent that is?” Wroński cries, almost laughing. Against the wall, Obb hugs his knees; he doesn’t like Wroński’s excitement, and he doesn’t like the idea that his mind has been doing something, *changing*, outside his conscious control. “To plot several hundred coordinates—in your head!—from numerical methods. Extraordinary. That’s extraordinary!” Wroński’s pronounced forehead, usually a dome of wrinkles, is smooth, his eyes light with relief, the corners of his mouth pulling away from an old, old sadness.

Obb asks Casorata to translate this scene to him, since there’s no use asking Wroński for explanations. It’s Obb’s monthly lice inspection, and every so often Sister Casorata’s long fingers come into view over the basin, rolling a white speck between them as if she’s salting a dish. “The line you saw is the graph of a function we’re all familiar with, fundamental to Trinity doctrine. Our priests use it a great deal in their engineering ministries.” Obb’s hands and ankles buzz with bug bites, but Casorata snaps her fingers right by his ear when he tries to scratch them. “The function is easy to calculate for certain values, but for others, we have to use an approximation based on an infinite litany; you’ll learn how next year. It really is remarkable, Obb. To chart the function line from the

approximations you've been calculating. *Magnificat intellecta mea Dominum.*"

"Why did Brother Wroński look so relieved, though?"

"We're all relieved. You won't be consigned to drudge work, not with a gift for analysis like yours." Obb's heart sinks; everyone's happy to see him fall into the rhythm they have forced him into, to excel at work that suffocates him. He really must belong here, after all. Maybe this *is* his home, now: forever. Sister Casorata's muscular fingers dig through his hair and his head nods forward and back. "And it does happen, however rarely; of course there's always a risk, however small—of some unfortunate Ordered child coming here by mistake, misoblated... We still worry it could have happened to one of ours..."

Obb's skin crawls. *Misoblated*. There really are those who don't belong here; they have a word for it. He digs his fingernails into his palms to keep himself from shaking.

* * *

When he washes, he checks his face in the creek's reflection, so close to the water he can smell the vegetable matter at its bottom, the muck under the shivering skin of his image. What is Disorder supposed to look like, anyway? Isn't it something in the line of his cheek; a thinness, a weakness, in the bones under his eyes? How did his parents know to oblate

him, how did anyone know, if Disorder isn't something you can see?

* * *

After Prime, one morning: Brother Wroński waylays Obb; his face is paler than Obb has ever seen it. He holds a letter pressed between his thumb and forefinger so forcibly it contorts into a valley: Obb's third letter, the first two having gone unanswered. The crown prosecutor's office must have forwarded it to the abbey—Obb is shocked at their callousness.

I have been kidnapped, forced into the cloister against my will and against God's, I am the rare unfortunate Ordered child coming here—

“Misoblated! Where did you learn that term?” Wroński steers Obb by the shoulder into the chapter house, and the benches along the wall are like an empty audience: lives stolen for the abbey, what they might have been. Wroński pins him against the stones. “It's a deeply offensive term. An insult to everyone here, everything we work for, and a lie.”

“How do you know, Brother? How does anyone *know*.”

Wroński's hand pulls back into its sleeve. His voice quivers: “If we imagine one case in a thousand, even then— No. Unheard of, a confirmed case. The nature of Disorder is that we never do know our true selves, after all.”

His gaze tears over Obb's face, as if the confirmation is there, plain for anyone to see: Obb is exactly where he should be, where he will stay the rest of his life.

* * *

Some migrating dark birds—grackles?—are flocking the oak trees. There can't be more than a hundred, but they sound like three thousand; they send up piercing, shrill calls like a metal axle grinding under a cart, and these cries echo through the valley in the white mists that trail like brides through the treetops. Obb notices. A few others notice and leave their game. They stand in a row looking out across the landscape. In the distance, a horn sounds.

An Inquisitor arrives in the afternoon. Novices in the theology classroom spot the red carriage, with the papal compass emblazoned in gold, making its way up the road. They set down their proofs and crowd at the windows. Brother Russell doesn't scold them but peers over their heads from where he stands, his hands gripping the lectern. Obb has once seen an Inquisitor's carriage, in the city, but it had been hard to see in the late dusk blues that shaded the street, and his father, livid, refused to speak of it.

Everyone gathers into the church for a High Mass to honor the Inquisitor and his retinue. The abbot unstores showy gold censers and monstrances from the treasury and lines the

brother and sister novices along the nave to sing grave hymns. The sound, under the vaults, is sharp and clear as glass, unbearably beautiful.

The Inquisitor is a slight man with thinning red hair and oval glasses, but the way he bows his head uncuriously as he processes down the central aisle, never once looking at the people around him, makes Obb nervous. Behind the Inquisitor is his dervish, a sort of doctrinal advisor, a tall woman veiled in fine red mosquito netting that covers her entire body and drags on the floor. All the bells of St. Riemann's seven towers are clamoring, bells big as houses, rattling church windows, their peals rolling like boulders down into the valley. Obb finds Agatha and waits to catch her eye, but she is staring at the veiled woman with a gray look of shock.

* * *

Obb is washing in the creek when shapes push through the bracken, on to the muddy bank. A weak light crests the mountains, but the dome of the sky is still black and starry; in this uncertain light, the figures recognize Obb, and he knows Bolyai's and Agatha's voices at once. He climbs out of the creek and they step into the clearing. They're in peasant clothes and carry haversacks and water skins. Agatha has hidden her hair in a shepherd-boy's cap—it's a shocking effect; Obb feels if he hadn't seen her before, he'd never know her for a sister.

“I can’t stay,” she says, embracing Obb. “He’ll take me and turn me into one of *them*, that woman... Their training, it—it breaks their minds...” She steps back, shaking. Bolyai holds her to him. How can they hope to escape through the forest? It’s impossible and Obb gets angry, thinking of its impossibility, but then Bolyai comes to him and hugs him and Obb’s thoughts get confused.

“You’re a good person,” Bolyai says, holding his face close to Obb’s. “Please, don’t tell anyone.” Obb feels he knows what Bolyai’s eyes are doing despite the morning dark.

“I won’t.”

Bolyai hesitates, then kisses Obb on the lips. It’s quick, but they both open their mouths. And Bolyai darts off. Obb’s head swims; he stands stiff, naked, dazed, and as Bolyai and Agatha disappear down the bank he hears the boy defending himself: “What? Everyone’s first is special.”

* * *

Obb lies on his back in the grass, drying, watching stars hide under spreading daylight. His body is all confusion: he’s crying, smiling broadly, he has a painful erection. His friends are gone and yet it’s invigorating, tremendous, to feel heartache over anything but his life before his oblation. Thin tears slide into his ears, into the cracked corners of his mouth. The cottonwoods overhead rasp in the breeze and shed airy

white clots of filaments that catch the dawn colors and swim out from every gesture of capture; they are so miraculously light that his hand's movement itself is heavy enough to fan them away. He cranes his head and squints as they thin into nothing.

* * *

Obb is true to his word; he is a little thrilled to be so true. The Inquisitor has asked to see Agatha; the day is dangerous. Obb protects her secret, but he can't lie, only refuse. He's stubborn about honor, but more basically he's missing whatever gland lets others switch facts with lifelike inventions on the spot; when Brother Ramanujan asks if he knows anything about Agatha, Obb swallows his words and stares petrified, wide-eyed, and thrilled. And when Brother Ramanujan brings over the abbot and the stupid cruel man harangues him, promises him a year in the shame mask, Obb turns dark red and quakes uncontrollably, as though the words he holds inside would crack the mountains apart.

"Please, we're worried for them," Sister Casorata says; she bends and meets his eyes, her pupils dancing. "They grew up in a city, like you—they know nothing about being on their own, out there." Obb does not begrudge her, but he says nothing.

Brother Wroński is at the door, looking startled. He and Casorata exchange an obscure glance. “She’s called for him, in the cloister garden.”

He nods stiffly to Obb. “Well, this should be interesting for you. Come.”

* * *

The Inquisitor’s dervish waits on a crooked wooden bench under the quince tree. The quince’s hundred-jointed boughs throw patchworks of brilliance and shadow over her red veils, which spread from her crown, over her obscured face, and pool in harsh colors at her feet. She shifts deliberately so the bench rocks on and off its uneven legs, knocking the flagstones, *pock-POCK, pock-POCK*. Obb starts to wobble as he advances.

Do her eyes move, examining him, under the red clouds of fabric?

“Brother Wroński tells me you have a gift for analysis,” she says. Her voice comes thick and husky through the mesh, and slow, swollen, awkward, like a voice in a dream.

Obb collects into himself, like a tortoise. His hands pull into his sleeves. “I won’t tell you where they’ve gone,” he says, “no matter what you or your master do to me.”

He tries to sharpen the words as they slide through his teeth, to cut through the sultry air, but the sun on his back makes him drowsy. His skin prickles with the first stirrings of

sweat. The dervish does not invite him to sit. She draws her head back, and her netting rustles softly.

“How old are you, little brother? Fourteen?”

Obb nods. He holds every muscle so that he doesn't shake.

She gathers her veils and folds her hands in her lap. “I hope that wasn't the last of your courage. I'd like to see more of that fire, if you have it.” She laughs—a ringing, affected laugh. “My ‘master’? Do I look like a dog to you, you pimple-faced shit?”

Obb's face goes so hot his scalp crackles. “I *don't* have pimples.”

“Why should you protect her? She seems a willful, nasty sort. You don't go round eating tacks and pencils, do you?”

“She didn't choose to be here.” He tries to be sullen, to sink his resentment in silence, but it keeps surging up out of him. If he isn't careful he'll blaspheme and be in front of the Inquisitor before he finishes his sentence.

The dervish rises, and her clouds of netting condense around her. “I heard you spent a day in a shame mask,” she says, and her voice drops lower. “Imagine spending years in one, little monk, except it's your own face, your own body that's wrong.” Her posture shifts, as she stands; Obb is bewildered to see, or to think he sees, a man under the reds; then the illusion

is gone. “I am so very familiar with being trapped in a life I didn’t choose.”

Obb cocks his head, forgetting his anger. “Are you...?”

The red figure stands motionless in the sun. The cloister is quiet, the arcades empty and shaded, the only movement the bees in the lavender. Obb recalls that some doctrines and orders are restricted by sex, only nuns can study divination, only men can be priests. Are the dervishes all cross-sexed, then? But then, he thinks, why would Agatha be afraid of becoming one herself, unless—

Obb lowers himself on to the bench and lets out a breath. He *is* a fool.

Dervishes, the dervish says, study the mysticism of numbers: the patterns of primes, the ranks of infinities, the powers and dominions of God’s angels. It is exhausting and baffling work that demands rigorous thought but produces no practical uses. Only the most Disordered, men and women born into the wrong lives, become mystics. She spreads all her fingers, examining them through the fabric. “They tell me I have a nervous condition,” she says. She wiggles her fingers and the fabric glimmers with light. “It makes my nerve ends prick at random. So they say. Do you know what I say? I say, I’m being bitten by ticks and fleas and ants and mosquitoes all over my body, at every hour of every day. They don’t believe

me, and I don't believe them. But the netting helps me believe them a little. Do you ever feel, little monk, that the world is eating you alive, a little more every moment?"

Obb's eyes swell with tears. It is exactly how he feels, but he's afraid to admit anything to her. "I'm not telling where they've gone."

"The runaways? They've gone into the nunswood, obviously. Stop underestimating me." She waves this off. "You know, I'm heels over head for you—*per caput que pedesque*, and all."

Obb goes very still. "What does—"

"Because you hate it here." She draws from her habit a bunch of pages and unfolds them, one, two, three. He can't see their script under the red fabric, but he is certain they are his letters. "Hate is an interesting thing. Well, Love gets the poems, but isn't there something grand about someone who never stops hating this awful place? By which I mean life itself."

"I was misoblated..."

"Nonsense. You're Disordered, you just don't know what that means." She steps closer, bowing under the crooked quince branches and their yellow-green apples. "I'm right, aren't I? No one's told you what 'Order' and 'Disorder' really are? Clergy are such fucking prudes."

Obb crosses his arms and ankles and pulls further into himself. His temples are pounding; he focuses on the function line from his dreams, a sea serpent undulating up, from dark, dinosaur depths... She sits by him and places a hand on his back. Her veils whisper over his cassock. “Go ahead and let it out. You must have an idea.”

He thinks of Bolyai, kissing him by the creek. And what the boys do to each other in the dormitory in the night. He *has* considered that possibility before—he knows most boys are doing those things with girls at their age—but rejected it because if that’s Disorder, then that belongs to Wroński, Casorata, everyone here. It means the abbot is that way too, which is a horrifying idea, not only because the abbot is ugly, but because it means he and the abbot are the same to the rest of the world. His spit sours on his tongue. The dervish hums. “Don’t feel you have to make it into a bigger shock, child.”

Her patience humiliates him. If he accepts what she is saying, he has been a fool all his life. Has everyone known but him? He feels sick, to think that something so tender and naked in him will be what everyone else knows about him, how they mark him, for the rest of his life. He spits and spits into the ground.

“That’s one I haven’t seen before.”

“Why? Why would they send us all here for that?”

“Fear. Low birth rates. They still think they can cull the trait—so they corral us in these dreary monasteries and put us to work ciphering out their civilization.”

“But it makes no sense! If that’s Disorder, what does it have to do with doctrine?”

“Makes sense?” she repeats to herself. “‘Makes’ sense.” In her arms, he feels her laugh. “*Ecce ancilla Domini*. Doctrine makes sense. The world wants sense, so we make it.”

“Some people here are bad at doctrine, even if they are Disordered.”

“It’s a funny thing, there doesn’t seem to be a reason at all why we are, and yet we *are*... Now, what do you think would happen to us if they thought we were no use at all?”

But Obb is still working his way through the implications. “If there are Disordered people who aren’t good at doctrine, does that mean there might be Ordered people who *can* learn it?”

“You’re not listening very well. If the laity decides we’re unnecessary—if their architects and engineers and naval astronomers could do their good works without tithing us—without us, do you see?—what do you suppose they would do with boys like you, and girls like me?”

It is the second time she asks that her meaning sinks in. He remembers a detail from the sack of St. Riemann's: that the town had raped the sisters before hanging them in the forest.

He tries to meet the shadow of her eyes behind her veils. He could scarcely imagine any world where the Church didn't absolutely control theology, Trinity doctrine, infinitesimals, the *analysis magna*, divination—anything with disordered numbers, any calculation more complex than arithmetic. But if he was following the dervish's argument, the bishops had only seen power and taken it, and told everybody else it was theirs alone.

"It's just a lie, then?" he asks—not as criticism, but she catches his chin anyway.

"Nothing about faith is ever 'just' a lie," she says. "There are no lies in religion. But there are concepts that grab the imagination and take root because they offer us solace—or utility. Is infinity a lie? A concept dreamed up in books thousands of years old from before the Floods. Is it a lie? It doesn't occur in nature. Yet without this concept you'll never know the red planet's perihelion or the volume of Gabriel's horn. Is it a lie?"

Obb nods. He is struggling to take everything in, but he perceives a new trust between them, so that he follows her words even when he doesn't understand.

“What happens when a layperson tries to study doctrine?” he asks, suspecting that, for once, he knows the answer.

“Then it’s heresy, Obb. You see now, why the Inquisitor pursues his office with such ruthlessness? He protects our claim to doctrine against those outside the Church—or in it. If they still burned heretics at the stake, he’d do it, to protect us. He has hatred enough, to do it. But it’s time for him to take on a sharp-minded clerk and train him up in the protection of the faith, such as it is. And Brother Wroński tells me you have a natural gift for analysis.”

Obb relaxes into the dervish’s arms, meeting a strange comfort there. He feels safe in her cynicism. Maybe the Inquisitor’s fearsomeness feels just as safe. Obb knows Sister Casorata doesn’t want him to become a cruel man. And he knows his parents would be horrified—but what loyalty does he owe them, their values, anymore? Over the scalloped roof tiles, crows settle on a procession of limestone sisters along the scriptorium roof, black against the sky and holding books open to the western light.

* * *

Compline: the Inquisitor’s carriage will travel by night. Brother Wroński intones the tutor’s blessing over Obb, full of misgivings. He’s told Obb how little he likes Obb’s choice and urged him to consider analytic geometry. But he said this

already resigned, his mind already at work on a more promising abstraction than mentorship. He means well, but Obb is no scholar.

The abbot bows to the Inquisitor and eyes Obb warily—wondering if Obb will remember him. Let him be afraid, let them all be afraid, in the villages and cities. Obb will remember.

Sister Casorata hands Obb his provisions for the journey. She begins a gesture as if she will push Obb's bangs out of his eyes; as if he will feel her firm fingers raking his hair one last time. But she is all formality, just as on his first day. He says to her quietly, I told you I'd escape.

Neither the Inquisitor nor the dervish say anything to Obb as he climbs into the carriage. The wheels shudder into ruts as the carriage leaves the courtyard. It is a clear night and the moon stipples the cottonwoods' waxy leaves with soft light, like a scatter of small bones. Obb imagines Bolyai and Agatha slipping through those trees, a pair of eternal fugitives always one night ahead of their pursuers. But he knows that in a few more days, if they haven't been found, they'll likely be dead. He lets the panic of this thought wash over him and off him.

But if they did make it out on their own, where would they go? Could they live together undetected, an ordinary couple in a city, unlucky in childbirth, like so many? And if he or she

couldn't help but pursue their studies on their own: if Agatha can't sleep for the power chance holds over her imagination, and if she closes the shutters and lights the lamp in the small hours of Lauds—dropping handfuls of dress pins on to ruled paper, flashing shivers of gold—would she and her dark-eyed husband one day be brought as heretics before Obb on his inquisitorial throne, robed in magisterial black?

“Well, Oblate,” the Inquisitor speaks at last, “have you chosen your name?”

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COVER ART

“Monument,” by Jeff Brown



Jeff Brown is a professional freelance artist from Saskatoon, SK, Canada, living in Cuernavaca, Mexico. In the world of book cover design and illustration, he has worked with over ninety book authors on more than two-hundred fifty covers. In the world of games, he has worked for companies such as Fantasy Flight Games, Pelgrane Press, and Logic Artists as a concept artist & illustrator. He currently does freelance work and long term projects. To see more of his work, visit jeffbrowngraphics.com.

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

ISSN: 1946-1076

Published by Firkin Press,
a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Literary Organization

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