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

by Rose Lemberg

[\(Concluded from BCS #229\)](#)

* * *

Move the fifth: a new geometry of light

I woke up to the sound of tambourines. Disoriented, I flung an arm over my eyes and reached out to my star, only to be gently pushed back into my body. And it did not feel right, all planes and angles and aching, as if parts of my spirit were floating above it, no longer sure how to belong.

The tambourines continued, artless and insistent like hammers over my ears. “Stop,” I groaned, and one by one they stopped, those overeager retainers of mine who sought to wake me so urgently and without touching. “At least get me better musicians.”

But it was not the time to jest. Some time between our parting and my waking, the Raker had found and slain an assassin, whose body was now laid out in one of the storage rooms under a now-useless guard. And worse yet, a letter had

been discovered in Nihitu's chambers, a letter written in my hand, in which she was ordered to leave.

I accepted a cup of honeyed water from Urwaru and drank it slowly, giving myself time to adjust to wakefulness and to the news. I had not ordered Nihitu away. But—I was not blameless. In my unspoken grief and then infatuation, I had been unkind. I escaped from her, ordered her away at every turn. I told her, just yesterday, that her presence would not be needed.

“I have not penned such a letter.”

Wordlessly, Marvushi e Garazd offered me the scroll, and I unrolled it, scanning the lines. It was beautifully written, harsh yet ornate, perfectly mimicking my tone should I ever have chosen to convey such a message. And my handwriting—flawless. How had Nihitu reacted? Was this the letter that would break the tenets of trust and siblinghood between myself and the Great Lion, the letter which would send our peoples into a senseless war? The Tumbleweed Star had tried to reach me last night, I remembered, and I had pushed it away.

I reached out with my mind now but found not even a shadow of the great tumbleweed.

Marvushi e Garazd peered into my face. “It must be the work of the assassin.”

I shook my head. “This work is too intricate for one of Ladder's.” But there were other people here who could mimic

my handwriting with skill; archivists, librarians, and scribes abounded in my informal University on the Tiles, and many here were familiar with my hand.

My retainers muttered among themselves. What reason would there be for anyone to banish Nihitu, to hurt me in this way? Unless, of course, the Raker—

I silenced them with the wave of my hand. “I refuse to suspect him.” Nihitu would, of course, which made this no easier.

My retainers spoke at once. They might as well have played the tambourines. Pain lurked behind my eyes; I needed more sleep, or at least some quiet.

I waved them all down, then turned to Urwaru. “Do you suspect him?”

She tilted her head. I admired the sprays of white blossom that adorned her braid, a fragrant testimony of her love of gardening lore, which she practiced in off-study hours. Urwaru was brilliant—but not a trusting person. When she had first come to my city, she gave her name as Laaguti Birdwing, borrowed from her famous rebel predecessor. Only in time did she reveal her given name, Nadda Urwaru Rihzal. She had been a famous rebel on her own accord, long imprisoned by the ruler of Niyaz before breaking out and coming here.

“I would suspect anyone, my teacher.”

Of course you would.

I turned next to Marvushi, who had stayed silent throughout the din, not even a handbell between their fingers. “Do you suspect him?”

They inclined their head, like Urwaru had done before. “My teacher, I would ask you to go by feminine forms for me today.”

I smiled back. “Of course.” Marvushi’s fluidity felt familiar, reassuring, like a reminder that my realm existed, and within it the beacon of the Sandbird Festival, which I had created long ago for people who, like me, sought to change their bodyshape and who desired the company of others, and the help and joy that it brought.

“I do not suspect him,” she said. “We got to talking yesterday, after my class. I judge this to be straightforward—if he chooses to attack, he will do so directly.”

So reassured, I let myself be dressed in exquisite but comfortable clothing, a dress of embroidered sandbirds and a wide sash woven of reedcloth and beaded likewise with sandbirds, and over these garments, jewelry of gold and cast brass water birds fashioned in the southern realm of Lepaleh. For my still-aching feet I donned beaded golden slippers, smiling just slightly at this recently renewed desire of mine for more elaborate decoration; this was familiar, was welcome, like

an echo of approaching footsteps of an old friend returned to me from the sands.

“Follow me, then,” I said to Marvushi, and off I went, as I had just a few days ago, to the Raker’s guesting chambers. They were guarded by wardens who could not explain whether they planned to keep the enemies out or my guest inside; both, I gathered, and with equal efficacy. Having dismissed them, I established Marvushi at the door and went inside.

I did not know what I expected to find in this room with its elaborate carved shutters and carpets and the still, pre-dawn dimness of air; likely the Raker, pacing, curt and angry at having been guarded. But he was strewn on the bed, face-down in the spun covers, one leg tucked beneath the other, stirring only slightly with the deep breath of sleep. Ranra’s ghostly form floated cross-legged just over the side of the bed, as if she had been planning to sit but found a better solution.

“Greetings, sovereign of the sands.” She inclined her head to me formally. “I wish to apologize for my ward.”

I bowed. “No need. I do seek his discourse, but it is also fine for him to sleep.”

“For injuring you earlier,” she said.

I grunted. *It is nothing.* But it wasn’t. I was not injured. But I had been. *He has apologized, and I accepted his apology.* Had I?

“He sought to remedy it, I think, by killing your assailant. It was quickly done.”

I found words at last. “It is not your place to apologize for him, Ranra.” *Especially as he does not know of your presence.*

She said nothing. Waiting.

I said, “Some of my people think he wrote a letter in my hand, to deceive and drive away my guardian.”

“And so you suspect him.”

“No,” I said. And after a while, “Still. My guardian is gone.”

She shrugged. “You drove her away. Someone else wrote the letter, but it was your will that pushed her from your side, for why else would she believe such a message?”

“I did not know you had taken a liking to Nihitu. She pursued you through the desert—”

Ranra shrugged again. “It was done with conviction. She is a dreamway, and so she traveled through the dreaming wilds but also through the waking lands to find you, her ward, to protect you from mine. It was skillfully done. She has my respect.”

“She left me. There was an assassin at the palace.”

“A long time ago I endeavored to halt the heaving mountain. The disaster was more powerful than me. I leaned and toppled, poisoned by the fumes. Erigra caught me. Carried

me on their back, all the way down the slope, dodging smoldering stones and ash, to a place where I could recover.”

I nodded. I knew this tale, if not why she was telling it to me.

“At the end of our seafaring journey, I made agreements with the dreamway Taryca, to pass the boundaries of their underwater realm and land on that swamp-infested, uninhabited Coast which became my people’s new home. I made these agreements badly. Erigra had sought to warn me from that path—but I sent them away, and with vehemence. We did not speak for nearly twenty years, not until a war was about to break between the Taryca and my people over the sacred guardianship of the marsh. Which is to say, I understand.”

I thought, you understand the mistakes you made, yet does it prevent you from making new ones—or do you think it wise to drive your ward without his knowledge? The Warlord’s Triangle you carry has pressed your mind to dangerous and misguided deeds. This danger is well known. But you can resist it. Others have before.

I opened my mouth and closed it. She had told this story for me, about me, and I thought it cowardly to deflect.

“Nihitu has not caught me,” I said with bitterness. “Not once. Never. Another has caught me.”

“You grieve for your guardian,” she said.

I do not allow myself to grieve. People die. People always die.

“What was their name?”

I clutched my hands behind my back, pinched them until they hurt. “Dorazht i-Braru.” Not even in my mind had I allowed that name to be heard, lest the sound of it loosen me from my frame, but now I spoke. “Forty-five years. You’d think it’s nothing for someone as ancient as me. You think it’s nothing. People die. They pass like shadows.”

Ranra arched an eyebrow, as if to remind me with whom I was speaking. But now my grief had been unleashed, and my words with it.

“Not like you. She is gone. Truly gone. She was a Loroli firstway, and she leaped up into the dreaming wilds when she died, to join the Lucid Dreamer in the endless hunt.”

I breathed in deeply, to steady myself, with Ranra’s eyes on me. Not judging me. Simply listening.

“She caught me as I fell. So many times. I sought her counsel in all things. She was my closest friend, as close to me as my star.” I swallowed—tears, yes, I thought. Tears. “People die.” How often did this sentence fall from my lips? “The Tumbleweed Star and the Great Lion sent me another at once.”

“Nihitu.”

“Not even a day passed before she was dispatched, all fresh and full of ardor.” *Don’t do this. Don’t go to that place. Be careful. How dare he— You’re too withered, too old—* “She gave me advice before I asked for it. Advice whose purpose was to restrain me, to keep me in check, as if I was a babe to be corralled.”

“Do you want her back?” Ranra said.

I want my old guardian back. How self-absorbed was I, to wish for someone who left, who died easily after a long and full life, who was glad, in the end, to go?

I shrugged. “War may break out because of this, though I think the Great Lion will reach out to me before acting.”

“You should tell her about your grief,” Ranra said.

“She is gone.”

“I do not think she went back home, Old Royal. I remember well the disturbance of her coming, and I think I feel it still.” And then, “I can endeavor to find her for you, if you want.”

I crossed my arms and waited—for myself, for the great tiredness in my heart to settle, but to no avail. Why was she offering this to me? When I met her, I yearned so much for a friend, a friend of my age, but now I was not sure. How much of it was a desire for companionship, and how much misplaced grief?

“Why are you offering this to me?”

“When Erigra Lilún and I quarreled, we did not speak for nearly twenty years. Another interceded in the end. A friend from the Taryca people with whom we were about to go to war. I offer this to you in their memory, that we found the lost companionship between us again because of that offer.”

I nodded. Yes, this had the reverberation of truth. “Then... tell her that I did not write that letter. And that I would talk to her. And I give you my thanks.”

Ranra unfurled, swishing past me, through the wall. After some moments I sat down on the bedding by the Raker’s sprawling form. Not touching. He would not wake while Ranra was afield. Here, unobserved and yet not truly alone, I let loose the weight of my grief. Outside, Marvushi e Garazd guarded my secrets.

* * *

Unraveling, careful as a shadow

I did not expect the Raker to wake soon, and so I was startled when he stirred. I fought the urge to rise, to leave—for I had been waiting for Ranra and would need to explain my presence; but I did not get up. Just wiped my eyes with a corner of my robe.

The Raker rolled around. His arm touched me, then withdrew. His eyes flew open and locked on mine.

He regarded me for a long time, while his lips moved, as if to tell me something. Time and time again I thought he would speak, but he halted, the words dripping unspoken into silence like moisture drips from honey crystal in the caverns.

He was beautiful like this, this too-intense stranger with his hairy chest and his dark, dark eyes and his youth and his power and his hurt that lurked always beneath the surface, and the words he'd dared to say to me, and that he would seek to protect me, now that my guardian had gone missing. I did not speak, just looked at him. I had been waiting for Ranra, was worried now why the Raker would snap back to wakefulness and what it meant for her, but that was for later. Not now.

He tucked his arms behind his head and looked at me again, his body more relaxed, and the small smile curved up the corner of his mouth. "You came to answer my question, or you came to berate me about the assassin. Which one?"

Neither. I came to talk to Ranra about my guardian. But this was not true. I had, indeed, come to talk to the Raker about the assassin, except that he'd been asleep. It seemed a very long time ago.

I cleared my throat. "I came to tell you that I accept your apology. And not because of the assassin."

He nodded, his smile fading. “I appreciate that. And though you do not berate me, I will say this: I should have waited for your guardian to hunt this person.”

“Yes?”

“They sought to harm you in your own home, and I am your guest, and that warranted my action. But their death did not occur in the usual fashion. Bird did not take them.”

I nodded. Of course not.

“This troubles me,” he said.

“The Orphan takes the souls of Ladder’s assassins into itself, and also of those slain by Ladder’s assassins. They do not travel up with Bird.”

“I did not know this.” He mulled on this in silence for a while, then— “So this is the true danger of those attacks, that you would be devoured by the Orphan.”

“It is so.”

“Are you afraid?”

“I am tethered to my star,” I said, evasive, “as all the starkeepers of old. In danger, I give my memories and parts of my self to the Hillstar, and it safeguards them for the next Royal. My rebirth, if you will.”

“It is not the same.” He chewed his lip. “Then I am glad I acted, even though I doubted this death.” Then, “Are you glad?”

A lump formed in my throat, and I swallowed it, searching for the right answer, finding nothing I could give him just then. *Yes. No. It's complicated, more complicated than you can begin to guess.* I gave him a different truth instead. "I want to answer your question."

That slight smile flickered back. He shifted to his side and propped his head on his bent arm. "Yes?"

"I do not know how to answer it yet."

"Ah." The Raker fell back against the cushions and exhaled. "And you came here at night to wake me and tell me this?"

You are impatient. Impatient and persistent.

I ignored his question. "I thought I would struggle with your youth, the difference between us, but I do not. Perhaps I would have, if I were younger, but everyone has been too young for centuries now." I cleared my throat. "You are of age and make your own decisions, just as I make mine. I do not know how to measure your singular power and I do not pry, but I regard you as my equal. This is rare."

"I am glad it is rare for you. This is the first, for me. It makes—it means—" He stumbled, then changed the direction of his words. "It has been good for me to contemplate your 'no', though a 'yes' would be sweeter. Especially now."

He turned towards me again, all shadows and warm skin and those eyes, and this was my home, and he my equal, and at that moment nothing else mattered. “Touch me,” I commanded, “Like you would touch me in the library, when I leaned against your shoulder.”

He reached with his hand and dragged the knuckles over the wrinkles and folds of my cheek. When I had imagined his touch, I wondered if it would make me feel younger. It did not. I felt old, old and perfectly myself as I feel when I run through the desert alone in my feather mareghe. But now I felt it with him. In this moment.

He said, “You are devastatingly beautiful.” His thumb moved to my lips.

An indescribable feeling flooded me, dark and viscous as aged honey. *Yes, I was going to say. Yes. As you want. It is folly. But as you want.*

I opened my lips to speak it—and he fell back against the cushions with a sigh. His eyes closed.

I spun around to face Ranra. “You. You have vile timing.”

“I have seen your guardian, but she did not see me. She brushed me away as if I was a speck of dust. Her power threw me out of the dreaming. Yet I know where she is and I can show you where—”

I waved Ranra down. “You cannot keep doing this. This is not right. You need to stop deceiving him. Manipulating him. You need to tell him.”

“We are not separable. We cannot meet face to face.”

“I can unravel that.” I did not know exactly how, but I remembered encountering it before, in another life, and my star would have the memory and the power to assist. “Meanwhile, you could ask for an intermediary—just as you had acted for me, I can act for you.”

“No,” she snarled. “Not yet. Not yet!”

“I would insist...”

“Because I interrupted your tryst?”

I looked away from her, to the Raker. He slept now, shallowly, and his chest rose and fell, stirring the shadows of his body.

“You would be surprised to learn that I want nothing better than to speak with you. About him. But I took this errand upon myself for an old memory’s sake, and so instead I say this: your duty is with your guardian.”

“I want to trust you.” I clasped my hands behind me, painfully, to keep myself from pacing. “From the moment I met you I wanted to trust you. Because, if you would know, I am alone, and my guardian dead, and I am surrounded by youths who have never experienced starlore—even if they studied it—

and I am starving.” And I did not know why I was telling her this, except that it was how I felt, how I still felt. So I made that recklessness my weapon and spoke my truth with abandon. “I am starving for the companionship of my peers. And you understood. You would talk to my guardian, which I took for an act of a friend. But now you return without her, and you continue to conceal your presence from your ward, and you want me to leave the palace, so forgive me if I do not rush headlong into trust.”

Her form wavered, then reasserted itself. She spoke, as if through a veil of great effort. “I would never harm you. You are so important.”

Ah, but *so important* was not the same as *friend*. So many truths could our words reveal.

“Why is it then that I am so important?” I asked, watching as her form wavered, thinned out, filled out again. A kind of far-away roaring filled my ears, as if of the sea. Only a short time ago this sound had been unfamiliar, but now I was well used to it.

“You understand starlore,” Ranra said. “Do you understand what happens to the threads of the grid when a star becomes extinguished?”

“Yes,” I said. “A burn is created in the fabric of the grid. Neighboring threads of the grid are pulled or become

unraveled. The star-wound takes many centuries to heal, and even if it heals, the grid weakens in that place. A perfect example of this phenomenon is the Katra-Araigen borderlands, where the Katran mouse-star—” I interrupted myself mid-lecture, a habit often difficult to break. “Yes, Ranra. I know. I am the preeminent living authority.”

“I studied this extensively, before and after I died.” She flickered. Flickered. Flickered. Her form acquired a purple sheen. Then, “We do not have a lot of time. You should go see your guardian.”

“No. You sought me out because of starlore. I need to know why. And I must know why you conceal this from your ward.”

She nodded, impatiently. “Then I will explain the danger to you, sovereign of the sands, for all I hoped you already know it. What they now call Ranra’s Unbalancing—”

And with a swishing sound, she disappeared. There was a purple flash, the kind I witnessed many times when my Loroli guardians pulled their dreamshape from the dreaming wilds. I looked around, expecting a lion’s leap, but it wasn’t Nihitu.

The Raker’s eyes flew open. He pushed himself up in a sharp motion, his face twisted in anger.

* * *

Arrayed in flame

His names engaged, multiple slim towers of steel, more than three. More than four? A forest of names that combined and shifted and combined. The air became thin with the power of it. Nihitu, had she been here, would have attacked my guest, but outside of the chamber, Marvushi, who likely heard everything that came to pass, remained completely still.

I said, “This is the second time I am choosing not to defend myself against you.” The same recklessness gripped me, recklessness which was more powerful than my caution. “But if you want to harm me, you must first sever the tether between myself and my star. Any assassin would want to do that, though few are powerful enough to try.”

The Raker’s hands balled into fists. “I am not attacking you. Because I had before. Without wanting to. But my touch did not please you, and you could not even tell me to back off. You sent me to sleep instead.”

I stepped back. “What??”

He stared at me. Shook his head. “Then what in Bird’s name just happened here?”

I wanted to answer him. I wanted to know how he broke through whatever Ranra had constructed, which I perceived now as very thin threads of blue-gray light, floating torn and tattered around his body. But there were more important

things to address. “Your touch pleased me so much that I was going to say yes.”

He stepped closer to me, touching-close. So much had happened—so much sleeplessness, upheaval, so many secrets roiled and swirled around that even my pull would not loosen them all. And yet the heat of him anchored me, pulled at me. It was not the pull of his magic, which by now I have learned to deflect without much effort; it was his presence. His burning intensity. His interest.

“You were about to say yes. And then I fell asleep,” he said. “Just like that?”

I swallowed. “It wasn’t me.” *She should tell you this secret herself. I will insist, next time—*

“I believe you.” I saw something change in his eyes, something deliberate and yet wild as I felt him set aside the questioning and his anger. He lifted his hand again. A familiar motion. Offering this power to me. “And do you still want to say yes?”

I exhaled into that space, the tension of sleeplessness and Ladder and Nihitu and Ranra leaving my body. I, too, would put all this aside. It mattered less to me than this.

“Yes,” I hissed.

I thought he would move in at once, but he savored it, every sweet moment surging between us with the breath and the thumping of blood.

Then he smiled. His fingers closed on my neck.

I made a sound, I think, as if something desperate and birdlike had been locked in my throat. When his power flared, mine did as well.

It felt like the air emptied out of the room and power pooled in its space—the Raker's storm-dark, brooding, with flashes and pinpricks of lightning—and mine, orange and diffuse and throbbing with the edges of my star like clouds at sunset after Bird's fiery passing. His fingers against my throat felt white-hot like iron in tempering, but I did not cry out, suspended in the crucible of his touch, *held like I haven't been held since...*

He brought his other hand to my chest. His power floated in a thousand quills around me, quivering in the air, ready to pierce, yet waiting. Waiting.

suspended, like I haven't been since the dawn of time, when—

His eyes searched mine. For fear, I think, for he'd told me I would give it to him. It was not fear he would see now in my eyes, but pain, a pain so old, so deeply buried. I did not want to remember—

His hand moving up my chest, to my neck. His scent, heavy and potent like dry thunder. 'We will put aside our disagreements. I will make space for you.'

The Raker said, "I see it hurts. It hurts in ways we did not talk about."

I swallowed, and my throat strained against his hand. I did not want to speak. I did not want to talk about it. I did not want to remember.

He said, "Do you need me to stop?"

We'll always be together.

I forced out, "I cannot give you my fear."

"It is all right. I want you to be safe with me."

In me, you will be safe.

I said, "I do not want to be safe." Responding to him, or to *him*, I was not sure.

The Raker shook his head. "What do you need?"

I need to be alone. To cleanse myself. But no, I did not want to be alone. I wanted to be held, held like the Raker still held me, one hand on my chest and another on my neck. I wanted to be seen, like he saw me. And I wanted him to see.

"Behold," I sang, letting my power expand, the orange vapor of my star catching fire, whooshing around us in a cleansing wave that swallowed the air and scorched away the ever-so-subtle smell of wet spidersilk. The fire congealed into

droplets of gold that rolled off our skins and disappeared. Somewhere outside, Marvushi coughed and then yelled out, “I’m unharmed!”

The Raker raised an eyebrow.

“Marvushi taught one of the classes you attended yesterday. She is an advanced student of mine and agreed to stand guard.”

The Raker nodded. “Yes, I remember them. Her.” His fingers moved on my neck, as if he wanted to relinquish the grip and yet was reluctant to do so.

I said, “Can I touch you?”

The Raker nodded, his gaze storm-dark on mine.

I placed my hands fingers-down on his naked torso, traced a path up to his chest. There the palms of my hands rested, where his body heaved with the exertion of doing nothing else. Through my hands, the orange haze of my power spread, touching him slowly with that heat I sometimes experience floating suspended in the outer tendrils of my star.

“He did not want me to touch him,” I said. “Never like this. Never as equal.” So much for the Raker’s secrets being the ones to spill—for now he knew me, knew the edges of my deepest heart. “I had ordered myself to forget.”

His right hand slid off my neck to join his other hand; and now we mirrored each other, hands on each other’s chests,

stormblack and orange swirling around our bodies like mating snakes.

“You are my equal,” he said. Then, “I, too, do not often like to be touched. But you ask. It is different. And I, too, do not want to be safe.”

I swallowed. “Please.” Desire swirled in me, dizzying and potent like the whirlwind. I closed my eyes and brought cold fire to lick away my dress and my adornments until I stood in nothing but skin. “Please. Give me the pain you promised.”

His power flared, deepnames morphing into pinpricks of lightning that floated all around me in his darkness, shaping themselves again into sharp shining quills. He began piercing my skin with them, each point of impact blooming with a thin cry as if of white metal, impossibly beautiful, faster and faster in a crescendo of pain so metal-white, so subtle, so pleasurable, so grand that I cried out with it, the grief for my old guardian and for my long-lost lover spilling out of me. Drops of clear diamond fluid ran down each quill, not yet free of me but outside me, trembling suspended at the edge of each needle.

The Raker’s hands moved away from my chest. He took a step back.

He surveyed me. Surveyed his work. And smiled.

It was glee, and wonder, and satisfaction, and he no longer felt like anyone else. He could have tried to crush me with

those feelings, his weight, his control, but I had not wanted that—and he did not.

That's it. It is simple. Always find lovers of your own size, I would tell him, if he'd wanted to be taught. *Those who would hold your need, those whose need you would hold.* He had not asked to be taught, but maybe he'd learn it from me anyway. And maybe I would learn this as well.

“So many things I learn from you,” he said. His right hand lifted, and I saw the single, perfect ball of fire suspended between his fingers. “I promised this to you,” he said. “Do you want it?”

I breathed, and as I breathed, the quills moved with my skin and stirred the air. It was good. So good. *He* never did things like this. *He* preferred—

The Raker's left hand, the one without the fire, touched the quills on my thigh. The pain was slight, but I cried out with the strangeness of it, jolts of power running up and down the short lengths, the warmth, his closeness, the floating darkness. “This. This is good.”

He extinguished the fire and began to touch the quills, with both hands, with power and pain like stars running over me, a cocoon of sparks—and I suddenly felt like shifting, I felt like at the Sandbird festival when fiery sandbirds fall from the sky and cocoon me so I can change my body, man and woman

and man and woman again. I pulled on that feeling of fullness, on bursting, I pulled on my power—and then I lit a perfect ball of flame to float between his fingers, like before. I was moved now to light the quills myself, but I wanted to give him that pleasure.

His fingers curved around the flame, and he grinned. I was breathless by then, but I managed to say, “I will transform. I will be without words. And then, if you want.”

“I want.” The sound of his voice, rasping against my skin. “I want your desire as much as I want mine. So yes. Yes.”

“Yes,” I echoed.

He began to ignite the quills, one by one and then faster together, until I was feathered in them, in that unbearably perfect heat. It hurt, beyond, somewhere, but it was perfect, exquisite, this shifting that opened my chest as I sang what I wanted, not my regular shifting but something more ancient, something older, so old I had almost forgotten. A sandbird of fire and dunes, a being given from the sun, that falls hissing between the undulations of the sand, that arises to run on long, long legs which are not made of stilts. There was no pain now, only vastness, and an all-encompassing desire to open my wings to their full span, beyond this room, as wide as the desert horizon.

His hands wrapped around my long feathered neck with some tenderness. He looked around, but of course, we were underhill. There was no window, only the door. Just a short time ago I had carried him like this, but that had been a vision and needed no opening. This was not a vision.

I shifted on my long legs, the fiery feathers hissing softly. I was tall now, taller than my tall personshape, almost ceiling-tall, and my wings would have no space to unfold here. I rapped on the door sharply with my thin curved beak, and the Raker walked over to unlock and open its limewood shutters.

Outside, Marvushi's eyes widened in appreciation. She grinned, then took a few steps back to let us step out.

The Raker said to her, "This is strange."

"Marvelous, rather," Marvushi replied. "It is for these wonders I came to the capital."

"No, not that. That knowing what we did, what I did, you still smile."

Marvushi shrugged. "What's wrong with that? It's truly not my place to judge, though I do have these preferences myself."

I shifted on my feet, the fire and heat urging me to motion.

The Raker said, "I was expelled from my university for these preferences."

Marvushi grinned again. "Well, maybe you should enroll in this one."

I rapped my beak impatiently against one carved alabaster wall, and she apologized, then led us quickly towards a small side exit into the Tumbleweed Garden, a path I traversed many times in personshape. Marvushi flung open the grates.

The Raker wrapped his arms again around my neck.

Once outside, I spread my wings, wide, wide, wide like a joyful and powerful wind that lifts up veils of sand, and I hoisted him on my back with a single movement of my beak. A gurgling cry escaped my throat, and then I ran, unfolding my wings into the sky.

* * *

Move the sixth: to issue forth from hollow bone

One gust of wind was all it took to lift me into the air, paling to the dawn and swirling with the smallest particles of dust and the fumes of burnt liongrass. I glided down from Starhill, over the clay streets of Che Mazri already beginning to fill, in the barest gray light of pre-dawn, with traders and their carts, with animal handlers, with misguided apprentices eager to count the last melting stars, with poets staggering in sleeplessness. Having no desire to be spotted, I glided higher and away into the open desert.

I remember soaring like this, those years and lifetimes ago when this wind was all I had, when I'd pulled on my star, had borrowed deepnames from the land's grid until each feather

shone with the reflection of magic hidden under the sand. And it was now that I soared again, all my hurts and the creaking of my bones subsumed in the song I had not sung for anyone except Bird—but now I sang as I glided, and the Raker clung to my neck with all the weight of the stars she had borne in her tail all these dozens of my long lifetimes ago—and I had no desire to shake him off.

Not too far from Che Mazri I now glided over hills, sparsely covered by the grey thorns of sleepweed, and a watchful lizard turned their head to follow my flight. The land's naming grid shone from under the sand, long brilliant lines laid down by the First Ones, the foundation of the land all but invisible under Che Mazri's history. The Raker cried out with the wonder of the grid, and I glided even higher, to give him a better view, for it was for this vision I had brought him here.

I circled to the south, to where the bright lines of the land's naming grid disappeared into the horizon, to the far-off lands of Lepaleh that lay beyond my desert domain; and west, to where the springflower city of Niyaz, my rival and sometime enemy, now rested, brilliant in her splendor and arts; and then northwest, beyond the far horizon, to the small marsh-lights of his Coast; and north and northeast, to the treacherous lands I had no desire to see, where the swirling of magic dimmed and flickered. I completed my circling, gliding towards the lands of

the many wandering bands of the Maiva'at and the Surun', the Luhazi and the Gehezi, and the dreamway Loroli beyond them, where the vision of the Tumbleweed Star protected me from looking too deeply into Ladder's direction.

The Raker shouted again, his hand on my neck pushing down. I could not understand his words, but I dipped lower, into a haze of a vision. Figures, tall dim figures dancing in the mist, and in their hands thin ropes of shining light. They danced as they laid down the grid, and they sang as they danced. I sang, too, louder, as loud as I could, my raucous cry overpowering the hold of the vision as I bore us away from there, from before-time, to a now.

Shaken, I forced myself to steer towards a place I knew well. There is an outcropping of deep red rock that stands out in the desert, and an ancient refuge of rooms carved into its stone and painted sky-blue. In the years I desired to dance at the Sandbird festival, I would go there to revel in the treasures I had hidden even from my own eyes, until it was time to prepare for the ritual again.

I gyred lower, troubled and dizzy with fatigue, until I touched my talons to the red, red rock of a small landing. The Raker jumped off my back, but I had no such elegance. I had nothing at all.

He made to catch me as I staggered down in birdshape, toppling him to the ground. I felt more than heard something crack. But he did not let go or cry out, and I was too far gone just then to see what transpired.

We lay there on the rock landing, his body pinned under mine, until I was well enough to shed my plumage and lie there in personshape, my eyes slowly clearing, his arms around my shoulders. He shifted my body away from his, one hand still clutching my shoulder. I felt his deepnames engage. He traced his right hand over the mess of his knee and lower leg, mirroring the structures I had made all these lifetimes ago when he'd thrown me against the wall.

Having undone the break, the Raker laughed, unsteady. "And now we are even." He waited then for my answer; but I did not have words yet.

He staggered up at last, one hand against the rock, and helped me up. I leaned against him, too exhausted to move or speak. We stumbled through the opening and into a small cavern. In the dim light trickling from outside, we saw thin clusters of honey crystal hanging from the ceiling, dripping slowly onto their bottom formations. I exhaled, and that was enough for the structures I'd laid here to become activated. Candlebulb lights filled the cavern, and with it the shimmer

and iridescence of unbroken honey crystal clusters, illuminating for us a path deeper into the rock.

I showed him the way, wordlessly, and he led me to where an ancient arch was carved with thorn and tumbleweed and the scorpions and sandbirds of my house. The next room was where we would stay. It was no cave but a small chamber, adorned with ancient mosaics of lapis and turquoise and painted in deep vermillion. An ancient Niyazi carpet was spread on the floor, exquisite in its faded madder and stylized Birds, those ancient harptails in their blue plumage.

The Raker helped me lie down on the carpet. My head was in his lap, his hands framing me with a feeling I had long forgotten, a feeling that maybe had never existed.

“I trust you,” he said. He meant this place, this room. My age and my fragility and all the secrets I held. I could not speak, and so I closed my eyes and I gave him my trust, and I slept.

The First Ones came before that first Birdcoming. I see them moving in the mist, people grand and plain and maybe not people at all, dreamway and siltway and my people the nameway, dancing their dances each to each as they create the foundation of the land, this shining grid. Later their descendants, the Guardians, would watch the first Birdcoming and catch the twelve great stars; they would

carry them to their homes and embed them in the grid, anchoring the land in this power. And between the anchors of the twelve stars and the lines of light which is the grid, the ancient guardians had planted their deepnames, so we could live, so we could thrive. Except, the First Ones now sang, except that of the twelve triumphant stars, some had gone out.

I opened my eyes. I lay still in the stronghold of his arms, the carpet rough under my naked calves. My ancient magics here had woken with my presence. We were surrounded by constructs, invisible beings that laid down low tables covered in embroideries and laden with vessels of sweetmeats and fruit, moist balls of sesame seed, and carafes of honey water and sherbet. I did not think he had touched them.

“Good waking to you,” he said. I stirred, pain returning into every bone and muscle of my body, the pain of my flight and before it, his fire, and now of lying so still. I groaned.

“Do you want me to try healing...?”

I waved a hand and summoned my deepnames to ease some of the pain. This would need more than his newly acquired knowledge. It would need more than magic—days and nights and months of rest without youths or secrets or assassins. I groaned again. “No. But thank you.”

I felt the reverberation of his shrug travel down his torso, and at the same time a growl of his stomach. I propped myself up to sit, so we could share the bounty my invisible servants had laid out for us. We sat side by side, not touching, to share a feast of flatbreads and figs, of honey and pungent goat cheeses. I was ravenous after so much effort and magic, and he seemed even more so, but at last the worst of the hunger subsided. My thoughts acquired again a semblance of clarity.

I spoke. "I apologize for injuring you."

He waved it off. "I am well. Eating helped." He popped a ball of spiced millet into his mouth and washed that down with honeyed water. "I learned much from you and in such a short time."

I smiled. "After I stopped trying to teach you."

"You taught me about the First Ones. About the grid."

Yes, I wanted to say. *But now I am worried by my vision, and I want—*

He continued, "It is a vision of Strong Building. Just as builders lay down a naming grid of a house, the First Ones laid down the land's very foundation, upon which the whole land could be built."

Yes. And should that foundation be damaged...

I sighed. "I wanted to share that vision with you as I have not shared it, since the dawn of time."

“Thank you,” he said. Mulling. Choosing what he would say next. I saw the effort of it move in his face, as if he had figured out a secret. We sat so close, and yet not touching, not quite facing each other either. So many secrets hanging unspoken between us. What would he ask about? The First Ones? The grid? Ranra?

Oh, I wanted him to ask. I wanted him to question me, and equally I wanted him to let it go. Whichever of my secrets it was that he had guessed, I wanted him to pass it by, pretend that he had learned nothing.

He turned his head towards me. Held my gaze, and I swallowed. I knew what he would ask then, if he asked, and he drew it out, every exquisite moment of that pain. When he spoke, his words dropped knifelike into my silence. “You never shared this vision. Not even with *him*?”

“No.” *I hid it, for like the desert wind I hide things, to reveal at a whim, or never. I’d never trusted him enough. He had no need of my sharing, because he had seen it, and more.*

He waited for the turmoil in my eyes to subside. Then he pierced me again. “Ladder.”

I wrapped my arms against my knees and drew them to my chest. Suddenly it was cold, and too much to be naked. Too much to face that gaze. I had not wanted him to guess that name, to have seen so deeply, to know that much about me.

The Raker said, “The assassin he sent was too easy of a slaying. He does not want your death.”

I rested my head on my knees, not looking at him. I drew on my power. I needed a gentleness my all-too-powerful configuration did not possess, and so I drew on my star, on the far-off slim outer tendrils of it, and covered myself in a shimmering garment of its magic.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I will say no more.”

I turned my head away from him. Spoke. “He often sends those who failed his tests, unfit to serve at his command. Still, three times in those years and lifetimes of mine, three times those assassins had succeeded.” And yet twice more I had been slain by his assassins sent by other rulers, but I did not mention that.

“He wishes to consume you, then.”

“Perhaps. I have no wish to be consumed. Or subsumed. Which is why I divest and give my memories to my star.”

He nodded, mulling on this. “Perhaps he wants your fear. But you do not like that. You do not like to be frightened.”

“No.” I sighed. “Whatever the outcome of his actions may be, he enjoys it.”

The Raker picked up a carafe of sherbet and poured, a long, languid motion. It would be hard for me to imagine him serving anyone, but he offered the cup to me now, his gaze

down. I received it as it has been offered, with an acknowledging nod he might or might not have recognized from the movement of air. I emptied the cup, my fingers gripping the etching in its brass—a bird. There is always a bird.

The Raker said, his gaze still down. “Perhaps he misses you.”

Of all the Bird-forsaken things to say—

I slammed the empty cup against my thigh, alarmed at my vehemence, too hurt to care. “*Misses me?* My *no* should have been enough. Once. Over the centuries my *no*, spoken over and over in every inflection and every living language of the desert, my *no* should have been enough!”

“Forgive me.” He extricated the cup from my hands, gently, and put it away. “Should I stop asking?”

I clenched my fists on my knees, the orange robe of power buzzing around me. “No need.” I should have told him to stop. The pain was no longer exquisite. It was ugly, that pain. And yet some part of me craved it, craved to unburden the weight of my secrets on the Raker, to push at him with that bitterness. “Ask on.”

He tucked his hands under his arms, as if to prevent himself from moving, from doing anything. He bit his lower lip. But in the end, he could not restrain himself. The question fell from his lips. “Is this why you do not submit?”

I propelled myself to my feet with my power in a way that I couldn't manage with my exhausted body. Towering over him. *I submitted to you. Just hours ago.* But of course, I had not. I did what he wanted because it pleased me, pleased us both, but I had not submitted. Perhaps he wanted my submission, wanted from me something greater than I would give, even though I had given him more than I had to any other lover in millenia. And that had scalded. Worse than I wanted. Worse than I would admit.

My words, when they fell, were no less scalding than his. "And is your hurt why *you* do not submit?"

He jumped up, too. We were facing each other now, fists clenched, our powers rearing, the impossibility of what we've both drawn upon pushing out the air. I am the most powerful named strong of my land, and he my equal, and this—this was too much for the land to hold for long. It would be much easier to unleash violence now than to safely release it. Nevertheless, over the centuries my people had attributed wisdom to me, and it wouldn't do to renege on that now.

I willed my fists to uncurl. "No." I exhaled. "It is not the reason."

After a silence, he unclenched his fists as well. The stronghold of his deepnames lost some of its sharpness. "No," he echoed. "Not for me, either."

I said, “I simply do not like it.”

He barked a laugh. “Me neither.”

“I have allowed you...”

“Yes.” He folded his stronghold. Stood there, facing me, his bare chest heaving with the exertion of his unspent power. He wore his sleeping pants still. Of course. He misinterpreted my frown now, for he said, “But you did not like it.”

Suddenly I raised my hand, as if to warn him. “Bide.” When I had drawn on my power to strike him, I had sensed something, and now I sensed it again. We were not alone.

“Bide,” I repeated, inhaling. Something familiar, but not wet spidersilk—a whiff of plums. I grunted my annoyance, then called, “Urwaru!”

She stepped in from the shadows, her long saffron gown trailing behind her. She averted her eyes from the Raker’s half-naked form and from my shining garment of magic.

“My teacher,” she said.

“Why are you here?” I asked with a frown.

She bowed. Mumbled, “Marvushi...”

“Yes?”

“He guarded your chambers in the palace, and I thought you should not be unguarded outside of it, now that Nihitu...” She bowed again. “Forgive me. It took me a while to follow you here.”

I was surprised, but perhaps I shouldn't have been, for it wasn't the first time my prized students competed against each other. And Urwaru was excellent, as powerful as Marvushi and subtle, and serious in her arts where Marvushi would all too often adopt a jocular manner.

Still, I felt impatience at her intrusion and annoyance of her error in reference to Marvushi's grammatical forms. I would want to discuss this with her, later. For now I simply said, "Fine. You can stand guard outside, in the cave of the honey crystal."

The Raker waited until the door closed behind her, then turned again to me. Not speaking. Same stance. As if the interruption had not happened.

I said, "You thought I did not like it."

He shrugged.

Oh, youth. Could he be insecure under his armor, or was it something subtler yet? "It is the second time you make this statement."

He turned his face away. Then back. His gaze locked on mine. "You matter to me. This matters. I have never allowed myself—"

He dug his fingers into his arm so hard I thought he would scream, but as before, he kept quiet. Very quiet. I heard his unspoken thoughts ring through the air like diamond bells.

You matter now, and so you can hurt me. I will not allow myself to be hurt.

“It is as if you have already refused me.” His gaze, still locked on mine, both challenged and repelled, as if he did not believe for a moment that anything else could be possible.

I stood there, choosing with every breath what I would now allow to pass. What I most wanted to do. Even though I had slept, I was still fatigued, and I half-suspected that the Raker had simply assumed I possessed the stamina of youth, for all he had tried to be careful—but the rush of our powers had revived me. I felt fully myself now, my spirit stretching my skin, my blood aflame with the exhilaration of that danger. He did not know yet how to be safe. He would choose to be, for me, if he knew how. That I believed.

The power that clothed me dimmed to a gentle buzz, just enough to sustain me. I thought I would fold it away, but my star still clung, as if wanting to witness. I let that go till later.

I smiled at the Raker. “To your question—I loved every moment of it. I allowed you because it pleased me.”

In two steps he almost closed the distance between us. He was shorter, and his upturned face now shone in unrestrained, gleeful need. He had not touched me, but his heat scorched me.

“Yes?” he hissed, encompassing me, encompassing everything.

I locked my hands behind my back and bowed, so we were level. My smile, if anything, grew wilder.

“Now,” I said, “Now we will begin to negotiate.”

* * *

The oldest geometry

After a while we relocated deeper into the rock-carved rooms, where I revealed to him my treasures—emerald and pearl and endless changes of clothing in embroidery and brocade. And I gifted him cloth, the plain golden weave of the silkworm that lives in the sun, for palace tailors to make whatever he wished to replace his hopeless sleeping pants. I asked him to lounge with me on a low, carved settee, while my invisible servants brought us fresh carafes and cups.

He did not sit yet. Instead he went down on one knee to pour a cup for me, again with such beautiful precision that I had to wonder. It was a skill of an assassin, for Ladder’s students learn these arts in preparation for deeper mysteries that require even greater attention and precision. And these skills help them too to masquerade as retainers or servants, should the need arise—but certainly the Raker had assumed no such role.

“Where did you learn this skill?”

The Raker looked up at me, a small smile turning on his lips. “I learned it from a man called Ludin, a retainer in my parents’ home, after—”

He looked away, unwilling to elaborate on that *after*. “I was so alone. So angry.”

“How long ago was that?” I asked, careful. “If I can ask.”

“I was barely fourteen. Thirteen. I do not remember.”

He breathed with a steady and conscious effort now, exhaling his hurt. I leaned over to pour a cup for him, much more clumsily than he had, but no less sincere.

He turned the cup between the fingers, candlebulbs floating closer to illuminate the deep amber color of the drink it held. He took a sip then, rolled it around on his tongue to savor the deep, tangy sweetness. “Ludin—he gave me service, just endlessly, endlessly. In the smallest of things. He poured my cups and he held doors for me and he opened my books where I needed, and lit the candlebulbs, even though they were much weaker than mine. And all of this he did without asking, because he enjoyed it. I yelled at him a lot.” He spoke as if these memories brought him solace. “Nobody else talked to me.”

“He sounds like a good person,” I offered.

“I found out later that he was a Second School assassin. Trained and then hired by my father to accompany him in Katra. I have not seen him in years.”

“I am sorry.”

“I always wanted to visit Ladder’s court one day. Perhaps after I left here.”

“No!” I said, the pain of it sudden and stark. Then, “Forgive me. I will not tell you what to do.”

“It was before I learned how he hurt you.” He reached over and placed the palm of his hand on my chest. “And yet I am tempted. I want to know more about Bird. And how he enjoyed her pain. And how he still hurts from losing you, all those long centuries later.”

“I do not care how he hurts.” I swallowed, bitter, but I did not move his hand away.

“No. He should never pursue you in this fashion, never seek to harm you—and yet he does, and that, too, interests me.” He saw my face, and the corners of his mouth tilted down. “Forgive me.”

“You say that, and yet you keep talking of it.” I drew in a ragged breath, and he took his hand away from me without being asked, then clasped his hands behind his back, like I often do. It was not a gesture I’d seen from him before, and almost immediately he unclasped his hands and put them on his knees. “I do not like this.”

“What? You do not like to restrain yourself?”

He laughed. Then, “I will stop talking about this now. Except to say—I will never do this to you. I will hold your *no*, no matter how much I suffer.”

It was my turn to laugh. *Oh, youth. It has been but a short while since the last, and yet you suffer?* “It is not a ‘no’.”

He became serious again, the hands on his knees deceptively still. “I want to open your skin.”

I closed my eyes, just breathing. That I had experienced, a very long time ago. The last time truly together. It was then when I began to say no. Perhaps I needed to say it again now, to the Raker. I thought of how I had already divested, and how if he was an assassin after all, then those memories between the divestment and now would go straight to Ladder, for him to feast on against my will. But perhaps, in this moment, I could choose from something other than fear. I could choose not to be safe.

He waited for me, breathing with me, doing nothing, until I was ready to speak. “Not with knives.”

He laughed, as if in wonder. “Not with knives! I haven’t said anything about knives. No. With power.”

I contemplated this in turn. How it could go. Where it could lead us. Where it could lead me, in the trust I had already given. Finally I made my decision, and let my body relax into a kind of warmth. “Yes.”

I opened my eyes to see the stronghold of his deepnames flare to life, immense and steely. I had, long ago, perceived a great coldness in it, but it was warm now, deep and potent and shining with brilliant lights. He placed his hand again on my chest and began to speak, to say new deepnames as they were birthed from his mind and ran down his arms to settle under my skin. It was an act of Strong Building I recognized as something called imbuing, where a builder lets new deepnames settle protectively in the walls, upon the foundational grid. He used this technique now, subtly and with great skill, planting deepnames just under the surface of my skin, until I was abuzz with it, abuzz and floating. And I remembered, too, how my star had not removed its presence. I felt, deep inside me, a second layer of deepnames, a ball of light which was the Hillstar, dense and fascinated and waiting.

The Raker looked alight. Radiant. He tugged on the web of deepnames he planted, called them up to rise through the surface of my skin. The pain of it was immense, and it was joy, pure joy that suspended me between my star and his hand—and I screamed with it, and he stopped, motionless and waiting. “Continue,” I gasped. “Please.” He moved his hand, submerging his half-risen deepnames into my flesh once more. Nothing else existed. Nothing else, unless I made it be, and I would choose it so.

I lifted my hand, not touching. Struggling to speak. “Please. I, too, desire...”

His face went very still, and I waited, breathing with him, doing nothing, until he was ready to speak. “Carefully.”

“Always.”

“Yes.”

I stretched my hand and placed it on his chest, until again we were mirrored in each other, touching and touched, seeing and being seen. I breathed in my own deepnames, tethered to the deepnames of my star, and then reached under his skin with the barest pinpricks of light. I made the feeling subtle. Barely there. But it was there.

He closed his eyes, just getting used to that feeling, while his deepnames dug under my skin, harsher than before, then gentle again. He said, “More.”

I spoke then, making pinpricks into deepnames, a temporary working yet no less potent than his, and he did likewise, our voices ringing harsh against each other until we netted each other, held each other in a web of light and fierce joy. His deepnames expanded, moving deeper in me, brushing the surface of my star. In that moment, I knew, in that perfect moment of trust much deeper than anything I had allowed to Ladder, the Raker could have overpowered me if he wanted. I had not taught him expansion, but he seemed to learn from

observing—and so he could learn it now, take control of my star and of me.

I did not recoil.

He tugged on the brilliant net of his magic under my skin. Close. So close. I, too, pulled on the deepnames I planted in him, each bringing the other close to the surface, cresting and falling and cresting again until with a harsh cry he broke the surface of my skin, a hundred brilliant sparks of light that buzzed and melted in the air around us. Light welled out of my wounds, and I cried with the perfect feeling of it, a crown of that night and everything it offered. I made a fist and pulled likewise, breaking through the barrier of his flesh. As his scream crested and faded, the white brilliant pinpricks of deepnames I had made congealed into diamonds on his torso and arms. I spoke again, to make the lines of white gold run between these stones, to make for him a wearable net.

When he could move, he touched it, a puzzled look on his face. “What is this?”

“A gift. You can take it off or you can wear it. The stones will help you regulate the pull you exert on others, so it will not overwhelm if you do not choose. Until you learn to do this perfectly and unaided.” I leaned back against the cushions, dizzy and spent, floating.

He frowned. "I touched your star. In that moment you could have destroyed me."

"And you, me. And even my star."

"But you do not wish to be consumed," he said. "Or subsumed."

"And neither do you."

He smiled, floating with me. "This is better. This is good."

"Yes."

* * *

And now what is hidden becomes revealed

A lifetime later he lay in my arms, and a lazy smile flickered on and off his lips. I reclined on the settee, dressed in an opulent robe of crimson damask. I looked down on him. Oh, he was beautiful like this, the unbraided dark weave of his hair fanning out and down to the rug-strewn floor. His bare torso was embraced by a different weave, the net of white metal I had made for him, grid-bright and studded with diamonds as resolute as single-syllable deepnames. He had not taken it off.

I traced a hand over this net now, touching skin and precious stones where they sparkled in the shadows of his body. He stretched, content and relaxed, and I wondered if he was finally getting tired. For myself I had crested on my exhaustion like a sandbird lifted by the torrents of air, gliding

as if without effort. It was a dangerous illusion of vigor for me, but while it lasted, I was not about to push it away.

He smiled up to my face. "Can I ask..."

I laughed. "You have not had enough?"

He touched my lips, my chin. "Never."

Of course not. "Yes," I said, pretending exasperation. Indulging him. Indulging myself. "You can ask."

He leaned back again. "Your name. Whether given or taken."

"It has been a while," I said, evasive.

"They cannot all call you Old Royal," he said, "as they lie fatigued and full of wonder in your arms."

"Hah." I leaned back against the cushions on the settee and closed my eyes. What should I give him, then? Each new rebirth brought a name with it, discarded in early adolescence when my star would find me, fold me back into my own antiquity. Oh, certainly I could fool him with these half-truths, but I did not want to hide anymore. I would hide still, perhaps, but it had little meaning.

"At the dawn of time," I said, "They called me Angzariyad, rhayg nvera enghkordat."

"Hah." He desisted stating the obvious, that it was not a name born in the Burri desert, that I had not spoken Burrashti. "It is beautiful," he said. "As beautiful as you."

As ancient as me, I could say. Instead I simply smiled down at him, awaiting his own revelation.

He yawned. “You probably guessed mine.”

And in truth, I could have; the great families of the Coast were all accounted for in my books—for all it was a minor land, it was rich in named strong, and for that I had always kept records.

“I probably could have, if I wanted.”

“Were you waiting for me to consent?” One corner of his mouth lifted up, in a shadow of its former self—now more amusement than disdain. “I am Ranravan.”

I know that much. The seven great families of the Coast were all accounted for, and only one of them had been named after Ranra. So much for not guessing. But he did not look at me, and could not see my frown. “I see her sometimes in dreams. My foremother, Ranra. You know the story? Ranra’s Unbalancing?”

“Yes,” I said, my heart suddenly heavy. “What does she tell you, in your dreams?”

“She does not speak. But I think she would have wanted me to come here.”

Oh, yes, she would have. The question, of course, is why.

I cleared my throat, about to speak, but something stopped me. I sighed, gathering my thoughts. “Is that the name by which you wish to be known to me? Given or taken?”

He smiled up at me, his brilliant dark eyes clouded with the onset of sleep. “You pretend to be patient, but you are as persistent as me.” His hand squeezed my arm. “It is Tazer.”

“Tah-zher,” I repeated. The syllables of it rolled off my tongue—not quite right and clothed in a subtle heat.

“I like how you say it.” He did not correct me, just nestled more comfortably in my arms. His eyes closed. “Perhaps I will dream of her tonight. Of her, and of you.”

Bird forfend. I shifted a cushion under his head, tasting his name on my tongue. *You are still so young.* I did not know why I thought this, why, watching him drift into sleep, his trust seemed unguarded to me like mine had not been. I had prepared to die. I had divested. He had not, for he was tethered to no star. He had named himself a scion of one of the most powerful families of his country, but he had no home and no retainers to guard him. His trust had grown like a stubborn young tree that clutches at a bare rock, its roots more powerful than the crown of its branches, its roots studded with deepnames that touch the foundation of the land.

I leaned back against the cushions, hoping to drift gently to sleep. When a subtle current touched my cheek, I kept my

eyes close for a moment, hoping that she would go away. But, like her great-great-grandchild, she was persistent. “I need to speak to you.”

I waved a hand in the air, my eyes still resolutely closed. “There must be a better time, Ranra.”

“I have not interrupted your tryst this time,” she snarled. “Though, believe me, I wanted to.”

“Why not then, if there’s an urgency?” In my arms, the Raker—Tajer—did not stir.

“Because he has much power, and that is why it can work, it can truly work this time.”

I opened my eyes. Ranra appeared floating in the air before me, her previously neat korob stained and tattered, as if singed by the flying soot and ash from an awakened volcano.

I shifted my lover’s sleeping form gently to lay on the cushions; the loss of his weight felt disorienting and wrong to me. But she demanded my attention, and it wouldn’t do to hide from her secrets much longer. “What are you saying?”

Ranra crossed her arms at her chest. “I am saying this: stars are people.”

The Raker stirred and settled again, one arm flung over my thigh. I sifted my fingers gently through his hair. “Yes, of course they are people, Ranra, though not all entirely human. My star, for example—”

“The twelve stars had once been people—whether human or not—persons with composite minds who expanded beyond the law of deepnames, who grew beyond the reckoning of our books, transcended what is possible for people. The stars were carried here by Bird from some other world to seed ours, just as the First Ones came here from elsewhere.”

“Yes, Ranra.” Almost two thousand years ago I had written a book about it. *The Accounts and Annals of the Twelve Stars*. Only three copies exist to my knowledge. One in my honeycomb library. One in the great mountain-library of Keshet. One stolen from me by the accursed Khana criminals Berutiah and Makiel. “Yes, Ranra. I know.” I did not want to lose my patience, but I felt it sifting through my fingers like sand. “So tell me something I don’t know. Tell me something new.”

“I will tell you something of the discipline of which you claim to be the preeminent living authority. I will tell you of starlore. For I thought you have seen it, when you looked at the grid in your wanderings across the great desert, but you have become drunk to obliviousness on this power of his and on sherbet, as many before you, though I assure you it is but a small solace.”

I ignored her jabs, for underneath her harshness she sounded as uneasy as I felt. “I have seen the grid,” I said.

“You have seen the north?”

“I have seen.” I swallowed, for truly I had seen and I had refused to see, in my eagerness to come here with the Raker on my wings, and he had asked no questions, simply accepting the glorious vision in all its splendor and not in its wrongness. “I have seen the vision of the grid, and it is changed from before.”

“Yes, it is changed from before. Because of the twelve stars that Bird had brought, my star was not the only one quenched.”

I sighed. “The Katran star is an old wound by now.”

“What you saw was not an old wound. There is new disturbance in the north. In Laina,” she said. “And maybe one more brewing, in the far northwest. I cannot see clearly.”

I nodded. Yes. It did feel true to the perturbation I had experienced in the vision of the First Ones. And yet, it also was true that nothing had been determined yet, no new star-deaths. Only fear.

She must have sensed my thoughts, for she said, “It will be too late when it happens. Even a single additional star-death will overwhelm the grid. Two would be a disaster.”

Nothing had happened yet. But these words rang hollow. Ranra of all people would know a disaster that brooded, unspeakable, for generations, before the cataclysm became unstoppable. “What do you propose then?” I said. *Why are you here?*

“If stars are people,” she said, “then it follows that people can become stars.”

“A person cannot hold more than three deepnames.” Yet the living proof of that possibility lay asleep in my arms.

She said. “There is a way to push beyond the law of deepnames by linking the minds of multiple named strong.”

Oh. Oh. “The new geometry you spoke of.” Realizations tumbled into my mind like pebbles before the avalanche. “And *that’s* what they call Ranra’s Unbalancing. You attempted to replace the Star of the Tides with a star of your own making, made from you and from the people you convinced to try this endeavor.”

“It would not work.”

“No.”

“...because my star was not dead yet, and I was still tethered to it. It fought back. In the end, everything ended.”

“I see.” How could she be so wise, and yet so oblivious? “There was a different reason why it did not work. It did not work because it is impossible. Your people were not of a single mind. They were not tools but people, people you sought to subjugate to your will.”

She raised her voice. “That’s why it did not work, because I did *not* subjugate them—I asked, they said yes, they said yes to this work—and I had hoped that we would act in harmony...”

“People do not work that way,” I said, “No, people rarely act in unison, rarely completely agree to something as tumultuous as this. Even if they do say yes, a commitment of this magnitude must be always and repeatedly made.”

“There is a better way. Not for many to come together, but for a single person to push beyond the law of deepnames, draw upon the living might of the land’s naming grid and the freely given souls of others, to expand—and then the new starmind will need to appease nobody other than itself.”

My stomach sank as I absorbed the meaning of her words. Beside me, the Raker—Tajer Ranravan—my lover—stirred and settled.

I crossed my arms at my chest. “You seek this fate for him. For his mind to be broken. To die.”

“He will not die. In fact, he will never die, will never know the end of days, just as your star does not know them. As for his mind, it is already broken.”

“No,” I said. “Only his trust.”

“You jest. Did you hear his story?”

“I have not. Not in full.”

“Then I will tell you of his crime against his own—”

“No!” I cried. “He will choose if to tell me. Of his own free will he will tell me or he will not, and it is not your place to betray that.”

“He bears four deepnames,” she hissed, spilling that secret, if not the others.

I sighed and said, “It seemed like more.”

“Yes. Yes, it seems like more. Because he can easily take so many more and it often seems like he’s already done it. Please, understand—”

Anger flooded me again, such anger as I had not experienced in centuries. “I understand. You seek to make of him a tool to fix the great harm you caused, and you will seek to justify it with his pain, with his *crime*, as you say, to shock me —”

“I should have come to you before you tangled with him, for it has clouded your judgment. In that, too, you are not alone. People flock to him. Fling themselves at him. Beg him for death, even.” She looked away, bitter. “He makes for a frightening person, but as a star—they will be of one mind in him, and quite content there, I assure you.”

“He does not frighten me.” From the very beginning he wanted my fear, but he had been content with my refusal. He had not pushed. And he remembered, later.

I turned away from Ranra’s apparition. “I will not have a part in this.” My lover stirred again, and the air above us acquired a purple haze.

“It seems like nothing to you, foolish Royal,” Ranra cried. “But the grid is worth more than your passion. The preservation of the land is a far greater task than our lives. You might refuse to hear me. Then go out. See again. Taste the metallic tang of disintegration under your tongue.”

And, I would judge, that was true, true even if that danger has not yet been born into the world. I had been agitated before, and yet now my limbs filled with heaviness, as if of sleep. Ranra’s form began to flicker.

“Teach him. I beg you. Teach him the lore of expansion which you know, even if you never used it—because of the twelve triumphant stars that Bird had brought, some had—”

“When the First Ones came,” I said, my lips barely moving with fatigue, “they sang. Song underlines the foundation of the land.”

As if through a haze, I could see Ranra’s agitated form dart to and fro in the air, and the flashes of purple became more pronounced. The Raker stirred and grunted in his sleep, and I touched his shoulder, as if to assure myself that the world still existed. My tongue felt wooden in my mouth. “They sang—because it is joy—not betrayal—”

The doors to my chamber opened. My student, Urwaru, stood there, a candlebulb in her outstretched hand. Invisible

smoke oozed from it, as if from a brazier. “Forgive me for interrupting, my sovereign—”

Joy, not betrayal, underlies the foundation of the land.

The truest and most advanced thing I teach. The closing lines of the *Accounts and Annals of the Twelve Stars*.

A white-robed figure stepped behind Urwaru, around her, gliding through the air with the perfect precision of one fully trained, one who had never failed any test.

Joy is the oldest geometry.

The Raker’s arms flailed, as if he was fighting something in his sleep. I could not move. By the doors, Urwaru’s three-deepname stronghold flared to light, burning as if with torches, exuding even greater clouds of smoke. The assassin who came with Urwaru moved forward, stepping around Ranra’s agitated form, as if they did not see but sensed her in the turmoil. Slowly, as if through a thickness of air, their hand extended to strike.

I summoned the last of my strength and in a single vehement motion shoved my lover off the settee. His body hit the floor by the assassin’s feet, and with a cry, Ranra’s ghost dissipated into the air. The assassin lunged toward me over Tاجر’s tumbling body, crashing headlong into a great fiery shape of a lion that leaped between me and them, leaped out of thin air in a great exultation of purple. The heat of Nihitu’s

congealing form scorched me, jolting me out of the smoke-induced reverie. With a mighty shove of her paw, she flung the assassin away and pounced upon Tاجر's rising form.

“No!!!” I shouted, my arms suddenly free, for in my desperation I broke through whatever bindings Urwaru and the assassin had imposed on me. The assassin twisted in the air—no longer in unsullied white, but no less potent. A person at the height of their power, skilled and armed and bound to one of the great rulers who hated me. And there had been only a few. One. The springflower city of Niyaz had a new ruler.

Just two days ago I would have died for Ladder, died casually as I have died before, in weariness and great age, offering little resistance except to conceal myself in my star, so that my erstwhile lover would possess nothing of me but char. But today I did not intend to die of fatigue, for the Raker's power had upheld me, and I had no intention of seeing him die.

In this world, it is not possible to transcend the law of deepnames. Three is the limit of the deepnames a single person's mind can hold, and I held such a configuration, the Royal House, a powerful but finite structure of one, one, and two syllables—rare and belonging to rulers, lending them power, stability, wisdom, and, in a fullness of time, a death in Bird's embrace. Yet, for starkeepers and for them alone, there was a way to transcend all that.

I lifted my arms and plunged them into the Hillstar, not the soft outer tendrils but the blazing core dense with thousands and thousands of single-syllable deepnames borne in a different world, before Bird had brought us the stars.

As the assassin leapt, twin dirks spinning, I seized a shining net of deepnames and wrapped that around the white figure. The fire scorched, and every moment of it sent shivers down my arms, triumph beyond pleasure, a roar of joy beyond the measures of the world. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Urwaru and Nihitu both attacking the Raker, who fended them off, wrapped in a structure so steely, so immense that neither of them could have withstood him alone. I brought my arms closer, tighter, wrapping the assassin's figure in a net of flame, tighter and tighter in my arms.

"No!" I shouted. "No!" To the assassin, to Ladder, to every ruler of Niyaz who had chosen to celebrate the inception of his rule in this fashion, to Urwaru, who was just earlier today my best and trusted student, to Nihitu who was supposed to protect me but now sought to harm the only person in the room to whom I was not tempted to shout the word. "No!!"

I shook my hands. Between them, nothing but flakes of floating ash.

I felt immense. Still roaring with the power of my star.

I clapped my hands together, and a net of fire wrapped around Urwaru. Nihitu's paw glanced against the Raker's chest, but the net of diamonds I had given him deflected the worst, and he twisted away from the killing blow. I lifted Urwaru up and flung her to the wall, then aside. The net I spun became a cage of fire.

I shook my hands again, not ready yet to kill her. The cage I constructed would hold her as long as I needed.

I turned my attention to Nihitu. And raised my arms. They were fire. All fire.

If I killed her now, war would break out between my people and the Loroli, no excuses, swallowing the desert in a disaster far worse than anything inflicted upon me by the ruler of Niyaz.

The Raker reformed his stronghold, no longer defensive—a fire of blue-black steel and stars that sped towards Nihitu with the intent to kill—averted only by a river of fire I unleashed between them, magic speeding out of the very heart of my star.

“Desist!” I screamed. “Both of you! Desist!”

* * *

Move the seventh: a fire to circumnavigate

They stepped back from the river of my magic, each snarling, as if ready to spring. At last Nihitu-lion shook her mane. I did not look away this time, watching the purple haze

stream down from the dreaming wilds until she acquired the shape of a person.

I screamed at Nihitu, hoarse now from the effort. “You trust a faked note and run away, then despite your professed duties you ignore an assassin about to slay me and instead attack my lover—explain yourself!”

“Explain myself? You explain yourself, how, in defiance of laws of guardianship and siblinghood you tangled yourself with a menace from the dreaming wilds, from the entangled beyond!”

The Raker shouted, “You’ve hated me from the moment you saw me, but I am no menace!”

“*You* are not a menace? The ruckus of your thrashing in dreaming wilds alerted me even halfway across the desert!”

“Something kept preventing me from waking,” he said, “or I kept falling asleep at odd times. I thought it was you at first—it wasn’t—but what would you want me to do? Run away like you did? Allow the Old Royal to be slain? No, I pulled on the power of true dreaming and I broke through it to defend them, and Bird peck your opinion of me.”

She recoiled, as if slapped. Spoke slower. “You are a nameway, and yet you pulled on the power of the dreaming wilds. By what law? How, if not through a crime—?”

“Of all that happened you would latch onto this, that I have a sliver of ability in the dreaming wilds? Fine. If you’re so curious I will tell you this tale and you will have to hear it.” He was not shouting now, but his voice filled the room, vast and seemingly uncaring. “Listen, then. It is like this. My sister had a friend.”

I knew where this was going. And, over the shining might of my star, it would not go there tonight. I spoke with a finite firmness. “No. You do not owe anybody anything. You do not owe this story. Not everything must always be revealed.”

“Something is owed,” Nihitu protested.

“Nothing is owed by him.” I let my voice fill with the might of my rule. “I would go to war with the Great Lion before I had this story forced from his mouth for your titillation.”

She stepped back, aghast. “How, titillation!”

“For what other reason do you demand his story now?”

“Not for titillation,” she said. “For law.”

“He sought to protect me. You attacked him. I had to fight off both the assassin and his accomplice, her betrayal still fresh in the air. Many laws were broken here tonight, and yet you speak only of this.”

Nihitu shook her head, as obstinate as the rest of us. “He has a power in the dreaming wilds, and they belong to my people.”

I nodded. “Much of the wilds belong to the dreamway, but others can come that high, and acquire some power there. In that he is hardly unprecedented.”

“As a menace—”

“If he is so powerful in the dreaming wilds,” I snapped, “then how come he has no idea that he is accompanied, shepherded even, by one of his own ancestors, and who, while he sleeps, seeks to turn him into her tool?”

Both Nihitu and the Raker gaped at me. Nihitu said, “What do you mean?”

“I’ve had enough of this.” I sang, “Behold!” I drew upon the power of my star still coursing through me and opened my eyes to a level of perception only afforded by such an immense might. A tether of golden light stretched between the Raker’s mind and beyond, looping into the thin air. I stretched out my arm and grasped that. And tugged.

Summoned by my expanded power, Ranra’s form flickered in the air between us. I expected her to look even more disheveled than the last time, but she looked composed. Resolved. The tattered garment was whole again.

“Ranra Kekeru,” I said.

The Raker stared at her, for once lost for words.

“I wanted to avoid this,” she said quietly.

“You followed me against my knowledge,” he whispered.

“Not to make you a tool,” she continued, in the same quiet voice. “Never that.”

“You wrestled me for waking time, so you could do your will while I slept.”

“I wanted you to become something greater than you are.”

“Against my will.”

“No. Never that. You would make that decision. To become a star like one of the stars brought by Bird, endless and vast, having absorbed the power of the earth’s naming grid and the willingly offered souls of people—”

Nihitu stared at her, her mouth agape. The Raker looked simply exhausted. He waved his hand, gesturing the shining bond away. As Ranra’s form thinned out into the air, he looked at me. “Forgive me. I have no ability to tackle this now.”

“Of course. Forgive me.”

“Forgive me,” Nihitu said to him. “I misjudged.” And to me, “Forgive me.”

“Of you, too, I beg forgiveness,” I said to her. “I should have told you that I grieved for my guardian, I should have allowed myself to grieve for her. I should have spoken with you when I felt disrespected by your words and your actions, instead of pushing you away.”

“Forgive me.” She shook her head. “The ruler of Niyaz...”

“Later,” I said, echoing his words. “I have no ability to tackle this now.”

He said, “I wish to rest. Alone. If it is possible.”

There were plenty of spare rooms still untouched in the treasury of the rock-carved chambers. “I will show you the way.”

“I will endeavor to stand guard for both of you,” said Nihitu.

If that was an offer of reconciliation, I would accept it from her. Bird knew, we both had behaved badly. “You have my gratitude.”

“It is my duty.” She spoke this without her past indignation but also without her past conviction.

I said wearily, “It is your duty only if you choose it.” Behind me, the Raker shuffled on his feet.

She made to say more, but then reconsidered. “Until later, then. When I have had time to think.”

I brought the two of them to the doors of a small chamber with walls carved roughly out of the dun mass of sandstone. I wanted to make it comfortable for him, but my invisible servants had already done this work, laying out precious textiles for bedding, carafes of honeyed water and trays of sweetmeats, and wild crystal for adornment.

I stood with him at the entrance, while Nihitu hovered just out of earshot. He looked listless and drained, as if a very great storm had broken in him without spilling a drop on the ground. He had not spoken or shown reaction for a while, and he did not speak now.

I made the attempt, even though I thought little would come of it. “I would offer you my presence and my company. Not to speak. Or as you will.”

He looked away, into some distance. Then he said, “Remember how you asked me—if I ever said no?”

His tone was flat, emotionless, but everything just turned inside me. A lurching feeling. I did not expect him to ever say no. That question too, had been a lesson. Years ago, it now seemed.

I gathered myself together, bowed, and left him, and did not protest. Perhaps one day he would allow that pain of his to be held.

* * *

A place where all the sandbirds fall

Nihitu waited for me outside and accompanied me just a little ways to the room where I, too, would rest. She watched the Raker’s door with some deep feeling I could not recognize. She turned to me and said, in Old Loroli, as if she feared that

someone—maybe Ranra—could still overhear. “I figured it out and I was wrong.”

“How so?” I asked quietly in the same language.

“He learned from you, just by watching. So I guess he acquired some dreaming power from observing someone. His—his assailant.”

I nodded.

Nihitu continued. “But he does not really use it. It just hovers there. Powerful, but clumsy. That is what I felt that first time in the sands, when I told you that it was no menace. But I changed my mind because, I thought, what else it could be?”

I shrugged. “His so-called crimes are those of defense. But you cannot simply dismiss them, either, because he is too vehement. Yet he restrains himself. Barely. He will need to learn better, going forward.”

She nodded. “I will need to learn better as well. My wounded pride was not worth your endangerment.”

“I am glad you stayed close,” I said.

“Close?” She bared her teeth in a self-deprecating grimace. “I went all the way back to the Great Lion.”

Oh.

“They told me to figure it out. They asked me who would stand to benefit the most from a conflict between your people and mine.”

I sighed. “The ruler of Niyaz. Should such a war break out and I become distracted to the east, his line of attack would be open.” It pained me to think of Urwaru now, and how of all Niyazi women who had suffered nameless, she was allowed to keep hers—I guessed now, at a price of becoming a spy. She had been an eager and brilliant student, and her loss would haunt me.

“I was on my way back to the capital when I heard the commotion in the dreaming wilds. And yes, I thought about it. I would do my duty to you not because I have been dispatched, but because I want to.” She crossed her arms, as if expecting me to rebuke her. “Though I do wonder why you need it. You burned the assassin to cinders with your bare hands and imprisoned the traitor in moments.”

You unraveled my secret. I do not need anyone. I can teach my classes and take them, too. I can protect my realm and inhabit it on my own. I shrugged, swallowing the retort. “I also eat and sleep and I instruct students and I become listless and brooding, or I fall ill; or, indeed, I take lovers.” I sighed. “I would be glad to accept your guardianship. And your counsel, should you choose to give it.”

“I don’t have any counsel right now.” She shuffled one foot on the ground. “But maybe in time. And maybe in time I could become your friend.”

Like your old guardian had been, and many before her, but she did not speak it, and I was glad.

“I think we will both enjoy that.” For now, what I would most enjoy was rest.

In the morning sand-sleighs and people arrived to take us back to the palace and to transport my prisoner as well. My joints gave me some pain, but I felt invigorated after sleep, rested in a way I had not felt in a while.

I found the Raker by one of the covered sand-sleighs, a sleek lacquered construction powered by three named strong. He looked refreshed but still as if at a distance. The diamond edge of my net glinted at the opening of his tunic. “They tell me I get a carriage all to myself.”

“If you wish.”

He nodded. I watched for a shadow of that smile crease a corner of his mouth, but he was serious when he said, “I wish to ride with you. If you wish.”

And so the two of us shared a covered red lacquered sleigh steered by Marvushi and accompanied by Nihitu in lion’s form, and for once the desert wind was mild. We rode in silence for a while, side by side, but not touching. I hoped that he would speak, but he did not.

I began to sense my star more strongly as we neared Che Mazri, the tendrils of it stirring the hairs on my arms. I broke my silence at last. “Can I touch you?”

He seemed startled by that, and I was not quite sure why. But he nodded.

I took his hand in mine and brought it to my lips. He snatched it back from me, as if scalded. “What do you think you are doing?” But he did not lash out. His deepnames flickered only momentarily.

“I did things with you I have not done with anyone for over a millennium. Or, ever with anyone, really. Not even with Ladder.”

“But you are not beholden to me. You do not submit. You are a sovereign in your land and the strongest of its personages of power.”

“Is that what bothered you? That I kissed your hand? I did it because I wanted.”

I took a deep breath. Because I knew myself and I did not want to be safe, I would bare my desire for him. One more time.

“Tajer, if I can call you that still—Tajer.” His name rolled off my tongue, the Coastal sounds transmuted in my mouth into heat. “I want more.”

He threw his head back, as if in pain, and closed his eyes.

I continued. “And I understand— I understand if it was just the one night for you. The longest night.”

He said, his eyes still closed, “I believe there were two nights and a day in there. Not counting what we did before.”

“I will not pursue you beyond this. But I wanted...”

“You judge me too lightly,” he suddenly said, pain surging in his voice. “It is an alluring difference, for sure, between those who wanted to cage me and you, but this is too easy. Everything else, perhaps. But I have harmed my sister. I would not have that discarded.”

I nodded, attending to him, waiting.

“I know this now, that your pull reveals secrets. Surely I wanted to spill mine. Even though it was wrong. But now—if you even want to hear—I will tell you something. I would choose to tell it. But I do not know if you want to hear.”

“I would hear it.” The enormity of that trust he had just given me filled me like hot liquid. “And I will do my best to hold it.”

“Thank you for stopping me last night.” He reached out and took my hand in his, his touch clammy and hard. “I do not want any of this known.” He did not look at me.

“My star knows what I know. I may be able to conceal your secret from it, but I am not sure.”

He nodded. “I understand.”

He sat in silence for a while, still squeezing my hand, as the carriage entered Che Mazri and began its ascent towards Starhill. He said, quietly, “After... after. I went to my sister. I should have waited. But I hurt, and I wanted to warn her, and my judgment was clouded.”

Oh, youth. The blazing nighttime sun. “You said you were thirteen. Thirteen—”

“Listen,” he said. “Listen.”

I sat still for a moment while he gathered his thoughts, his deepnames tight and cold around his head, an iron crown. “She did not want to listen. Said she would not hear his name maligned. She thought I hated him for other reasons. I was— I was awkward. And I hated her friends. She said I was jealous.”

The sleigh stopped. We must have reached the palace. Some misguided retainer began to draw open the door.

I squeezed his hand and leaned over to speak to that person. “You will keep distance until I am finished here. Then I will call you.” Not waiting for a reply I locked the door behind me again, then drew on my deepnames and warded us for good measure, so that those outside would not be able to overhear. “I should have done this earlier. Forgive me.”

He nodded. “There is not much more.” He did not look shaken, just deeply in pain, but he spoke quietly. “She said I was a monster. She drew on her deepnames to strike me.”

“And you overreacted.”

“She’d always been so much stronger. Older. But on that day, after what happened, she was not. I should have realized that.” He took his hand out again and wrapped his arms around his torso. “My blow—my defense, if you will—it destroyed her deepnames. That’s it. That is my crime.”

It was my turn to lean back and close my eyes. Deepnames were usually taken in adolescence, often at a time of great emotional turmoil. He must have just acquired his. “I am so sorry.”

“And everything just... ended. Her heirship. My parents divorced. The Coastal Alliance broke down. My sister—she left him, later. I do not know what happened. Nobody talked to me.”

“How is she doing now?” I asked.

“She is a professor at the Mainland Katra University.”

This did not answer my question. “The university that expelled you?”

“They knew I injured Ulín. And then, my preferences in pleasure—I was too dangerous.”

I shook my head in denial. *You made yourself safe for me.*

“I want to reconcile. It is not possible. She does not want to talk, and if I insisted—if I insisted, I would end up like Ladder sending his failed assassins to your court.”

Now it was my turn to look away. “What happened—the politics, your parents—what happened is not your fault. It is *his* fault.”

“I could have controlled my reaction better. Maybe.” He looked dubious, and I was not sure at thirteen any person, a child, in sudden possession of such great might and such great hurt, would have been able to do so. But I saw that he judged himself, and that others had judged him as harshly.

He said, “Every day I wish to undo it and every day I cannot.” And then, “I heard this, that Ladder’s students are often would-be suicides, or those whom Bird disdained for crimes both inadvertent and terrible—and I am one of those.”

“Tajer. Please.”

“When I fought the first assassin, I heard a melody,” he said. “It haunts me. Calls me to his court.”

Oh yes. The pain of that was sudden and deep. *He made music, a song he had denied to Bird, for those to follow in his steps.* “You can resist it,” I said. “Your choices are your own.”

He looked away. “I think your people are waiting.”

“Thank you,” I whispered. Hoarse.

He pushed at the door, then stopped, for I had not unlocked the magic that held it. Turned to me, as if weighing something. “It is hard to imagine you would want more now, but if you do—I will wait. Tonight.”

I swallowed, then pulled down my wards and let myself be shepherded out of the carriage. Marvushi grinned at me, but then her face fell, seeing mine. I gave orders for both my comfort and his, then retired to take ablutions, to rest, and to think.

* * *

A treasury of trust

When evening fell, I donned plain linen robes, the kind I wore that morning when I stood on the tiles, and I called for Marvushi to attend me. “I bid you go to him and bring him to my rooms,” I said. “Discreetly. Do whatever you need to do to persuade him.” Then I sent my other retainers away. Nihitu stood guard outside.

I opened the chests I had prepared earlier in the day and laid what I needed on a low table. Then I dimmed all candlebulbs except a few and reclined on the bed to compose myself and to wait.

Marvushi did not let me down, for soon I felt the Raker’s footsteps in the corridor, and the carved doors of my chambers were opened to admit him. He wore pants of bone-colored linen and an open vest of the same material, and the diamond net shone at his chest. His lip curled when he looked at me, desire mixed with a darker feeling. “I told you to come to me.”

“My rooms are better equipped.” I gestured at the table. “I think I am ready for the knife.”

His eyes devoured the feast I laid out for him, blades with bejeweled handles in the likeness of lions, dirks of dry ironthorn, plain but exquisite blades forged of finest steel by Stromha artisans, bone daggers with deepname-honed edges.

He said, “I still did not say anything about knives.” But in his voice, I heard that hunger, the hunger that had made me fear, all those long centuries ago.

He turned to contemplate me now, the air gone scorching and still. He frowned, one corner of his lip still tilted up, in a strange rictus of need and doubt. “But you said...”

I did say. *Not with knives.* And he attended.

I wondered whether to speak. Of broken things, and trust, of all my histories of blood that was scattered like rubies across the desert. Instead I said, simply, “Yes.”

His right hand curled around the hilt of a short blade with the hand of bird’s eye maple, Stromha-made, impeccable in its balance and as simple as breath. He weighed it in his hand. Need and memory shook me as I forced myself to be calm.

“You would give this to me,” he said.

“Yes.”

“You would trust me.”

“Please.” I said. *Hurry*. I would not be able to wait still for much longer.

He sat on the bed and pushed me down on the cushions in one smooth motion. Then he straddled me. His left hand on my chest. My eyes followed the knife, the glint and shine of it, and suddenly I did not know if I would be able to do it, after all.

“This is not about fear,” he said. “I do not need or want your fear.”

I swallowed. “I do not know.”

His hair, unbraided, cascaded over me, cocooned both of us in darkness. “We can stop now. Do something else. Do nothing. As you want.”

I leaned back to contemplate him, the dark need boiling in him now, the effort of restraint, his vulnerability and mine. And then I breathed. For a long time. Until I was ready.

I said, “I want you to open my skin.”

His deepnames flared to life, a steely crown no longer cold but pinpricked in warmth, and he cut me down the chest, precisely and shallowly. It was no great wound, but blood welled from it, and he touched his thumb to that wound and brought it to his lips, and I savored it with him, this moment in which trust was the greatest need, this moment in which we were melded.

He smiled then, a slow and secret smile, and brought his hand down. Power flared along his fingers, shaping itself into a structure I had shown him, all those days ago, in the honeycomb library. He healed the bleeding gash on my chest. Then he let me lie there, and breathe with it, as the enormity of what had just happened passed through me. My lips moved, but I could not quite speak.

“Yes?” He said, the blade glinting in his hand as the candlebulbs I had not extinguished swam closer, giving us both the light.

“Yes,” I croaked. “More.”

The need in his eyes turned dark as he cut me and healed me again. Again. My body was the land and his cuts the naming grid, and the joy of it was the only geometry that existed. I do not know what I thought. *You are nothing like Ladder. Yes. Like this.* I devoured him with my gaze as he kept working, and the last vestiges of fear melted into a kind of heat that spread my power around him, like wings. An enormous, peaceful feeling that held us both suspended beyond the world.

In the end he brought the bloody blade to his lips and kissed it, then said, “This is beautiful. You are beautiful. Though I confess that am not much for knives. I prefer to use power.”

He put the knife down, cocking an eyebrow at me. But I was content. “Next time, my friend.” I pulled him down to lie by me, and he did not protest, the light we had made banishing for that moment our shadows.

* * *

Move the eighth: *and make a beacon of my pain*

A few days after that, Marvushi, who went by neutral language again, came to inform me about a delegation that had arrived from Niyaz to see me.

“From Niyaz?” I frowned. What would anyone from Niyaz possibly want of me now, after the failed plot and the pain of my very own so-called student’s betrayal? But after a while I ordered myself dressed in the azure robes, I donned numerous long strings of diamond and carved opal and proceeded to the audience chambers. There I sat on the tumbleweed throne, Nihitu on my right side and Marvushi on the left, to await what the Ruler of Niyaz could possibly say to me. Surely it would be misguided to expect an apology, or even an offer of truce. More likely I would hear from him bluster well-decorated in flowery sentences. Just a week ago I had felt too tired for any of this, all too ready for the respite of my star before I passed into my next body; but now I waited without fatigue, my mind and senses alert. Upon my order, servants opened the pale limewood doors to admit the emissary.

Emissaries. Nine people walked in, some in their thirties and forties, one startlingly young; all dressed in women's garments. The leader was middle-aged and stout of body. Their dress of dark blue with a design of enormous roses was of a fine yet practical cut. Their hair, long and wavy, was pinned up in a golden lizard-shaped hairstick. Others wore their hair braided and over the left shoulder, which had long been the mark of women rebels, of Laaguti Birdwing, and of Urwaru, when she first came to me. I squinted my eyes, expecting every single one of them to shine with exceptional power. In that I was mistaken. Some did not even have deepnames. Others had long names, a single three-syllable, even a single five-syllable. Only the very young person, short and dressed in plain gray and hiding behind the leader, had three deepnames.

I motioned them to kneel on a new reception carpet traded from beyond the Mountain Veils to the east and thus immune, I hoped, from even a hint of politics.

They bowed to me again and sat in a triangular formation of one, three, and five in a row, the person with three deepnames hidden firmly behind the leader's broad back.

The leader said, "Greetings and gratitude, Sovereign of the Sands, for agreeing to see us without violence. I am Laaguti, and these are my companions, these named strong women of Niyaz."

“Laaguti,” I said. “An ancient name.” A name with a long history here in Che Mazri, a history of being refused admittance, for offering this admittance once had caused a war. And how much more so now, after that failed assassination? “What do you seek here, knowing the history of that name and of my realm?”

The leader grimaced. “All of us had been imprisoned under the previous ruler, and all of us sought to escape. Many of us suffered nameloss or partial nameloss, and violence beyond nameloss. A new ruler arises in Niyaz, and no sovereign in the land would offer us shelter. But it is more than shelter we seek. We beg now to be admitted to the University on the Tiles, to learn what has long been denied to women in the springflower city of Niyaz.”

Again they bowed to me.

I said, though I already knew the answer, “I would have your name. Not the one you have taken, but the one you gave to the ruler of Niyaz as he had imprisoned you.” *When he so handily interrogated you for your customs, your desires, your words, to pass on to his agent.*

She looked at me, this stout woman with no adornment save a hairstick and a trace of kohl at her eyes, this woman who, I believed, had traversed the desert in an arduous and

perilous journey to come to me after she managed—in how many unsuccessful attempts?—to escape her imprisonment.

I held her gaze. And into that gaze she said, “I am Nadda Urwaru Rihzal.”

“Of course you are.” Of course she would be. She would probably be genuine, and some of her companions would be genuine, and some of them would be spies. Perhaps even an assassin. If I sent her away, she would be killed by that assassin, and I would have done the work of eliminating a thorn in my enemy’s side. The killing would surely be blamed on me, to scare other powerful women who wished to come to my school. If I accepted her, it would yield more betrayal, and, in due time, when the new Niyazi ruler was ready, perhaps a pretext for war.

I looked around and held the gaze of every woman there. “Every ruler of Niyaz feels himself cunning. Feels like he is inventing something.” I turned to the leader again. “Nadda Urwaru Rihzal, in this you are only a pawn.”

She nodded. “To the ruler of Niyaz, I have always and ever been a pawn. You will decide what I could become for you, Sovereign of the Sands.”

I leaned back against the cushions and steeped my hands. Certainly in the land, mistrust had grown like weeds between

the shining lines of the grid—and I did not need this trouble, especially now, or ever.

Marvushi leaned over to whisper in my ear. “My teacher, a third solution presents itself.”

I raised an eyebrow, urging them on.

“You could send them to another school. All of them are far enough from here. Those desperate for knowledge will persevere, while the spies will despair.”

I grunted. Certainly a solution, with more privation for those who had suffered, and still discouraging to any of my would-be Niyazi students. And who was to say that in another land these refugees would be accepted? Certainly Mainland Katra University imposed strict rules, and so did the Lainish Royal Academy, and the Great Mountain University of Keshet... all of them too grand to live without rules, unlike my University on the Tiles, where the only requirement for learning was desire.

“Thank you for your counsel,” I said to Marvushi. I had already chosen to risk a conflict with Niyaz when I began admitting these students. After Urwaru’s betrayal, I doubted the new ruler of Niyaz expected me to continue doing so. And if I did, this new Urwaru would, perhaps, betray me again. Or she could be earnest, a woman of great power and determination

and of great hurt, who sought to study with me, like so many named strong before her.

I let the corner of my mouth curve up in a copy of the Raker's smile. "Nadda Urwaru Rihzal, a spy of that name has been recently apprehended in the palace. If you are genuine, then I would let you choose some among your people to deliver the spy back to Niyaz, along with my letter."

She closed her eyes, absorbing the meaning of my words, how she had been used, an offer to rid her of spies. The other women sat still. Some too still. "And the rest of us?"

"The rest of you will have gained admission. Provisional admission. If you are a pawn, then it is now your choice whether to remain so, Nadda Urwaru Rihzal." After my time with the Raker, I felt more reluctant than ever to banish students, however much I might distrust them. And I admit I was curious to learn more about nameless, if these women would be willing to share their past.

Urwaru bowed to me, and her companions as well. After they filed out under the watchful eyes of Nihitu, Marvushi leaned over again. "It's too bad about the other schools. I was going to offer to accompany them. I admit I am curious about the academies in other lands, what one can study there..."

I felt a pang in my stomach. To lose Marvushi so soon after Urwaru's betrayal would hurt me. Yet, it was also a nature of

students to leave—sometimes forever, sometimes only to assuage their need for knowledge and yet more growth, and I, having no desire to stifle or overpower my students, had learned to trust that need.

I smiled at them. “If you wish to travel, then I might have a mission for you.”

“My teacher?” Curiosity mingled in Marvushi’s voice with a kind of glee.

“Not so speedily. Do you know about the First Ones, and the naming grid of the land, and how it may be maintained?”

Marvushi nodded. “I do.”

I got to my feet and motioned them to follow, away from the audience chambers and towards the underground spaces of my library. “Then let me teach you of star-death, and in particular, that of the Katran Mouse-star, of which detailed records are kept only at the Mainland Katra University...”

They followed in my footsteps, grinning all the way.

* * *

All the missing miscounted stars

Days extended into weeks. In waking hours I sat in counsel with my people while the Raker attended classes or pored over the books in my library. At night we made fire and light.

As the time progressed he read more and more about Ladder and his court. He had heard that melody and it haunted him, just as I had, those long centuries ago.

I asked him about it at last, and he said, “It calls me to traverse the desert until I come to the court of sandstone terraces, to gaze upon his students wearing white and test the might of the Orphan.”

“You can resist that call,” I said again, uneasy and in pain. “Like you resisted Ranra.” Of her, no shadow had been seen. I suspected that Tاجر knew something of her fate, but he would not say.

“You knew that she accompanied me,” he said. “Yet you kept silent. Why is that?”

I swallowed. “I knew. And yet I urged her to reveal it to you herself. I hoped she would change her path and make a better decision.”

“I, too, will make my own decision.”

I inclined my head to him. “Of course. It is your choice. Yet, I would rather not see you forced into a shape not your choosing. That is why I revealed her presence to you in the end.”

He nodded. “I can resist. And yet I wish to know more. To walk that path. To look upon the Orphan.” I saw a hunger in his

face, deeper than the words he had spoken to me. “I hear the song. When I look to the east I also see a light.”

“The Headmaster holds a candle to light the way.”

“Its color is that of your star.” He turned back to the books, not waiting for my reply.

I did not try to dissuade him when he made his mind to go.

“I bid you at least to stay until the Sandbird Festival,” I said. It was a time for me to help those who wished to transform their body, or to simply be seen in the shifting and in-between spaces between the words *woman* and *man*.

He shook his head. “I would want to, one day. But some things I do not yet wish to reveal of myself.”

I bowed in acceptance of all that this implied, a hint of admission that Tاجر, too, had something to reveal at the Festival, a shifter’s heart held tightly by the tenets of his pain; and that he was not yet ready to speak of it. Nihitu, who had become my near-constant companion, stood near enough to hear these words. Later she said, rather shyly, “I am looking forward to the festival, myself.”

“Oh?” It was traditionally considered undignified for a firstway to shift their gender, but the Great Lion had attended a Sandbird Festival not so long ago, with a few of their closest counselors, so perhaps things were changing. “Do you desire to shift?”

“Not this time. Perhaps never.” Nihitu shuffled her foot in the ground. “But I am, I think I am ready for neutral grammatical forms.”

I beamed at them. Of course, the Great Lion would send them to me, like many others who come or are sent to me from across the Burri desert. And I thought how after the festival I would want to visit the Great Lion with gifts of fine weavings and jewels, for it was high time we renewed our friendship.

Two weeks later, I went to bid my lover farewell by the Tumbleweed Gate, the one that looked to the east. He stood there in traveling clothes, a long tunic of plain weave over a pair of golden sunsilk pants in a cut too closely resembling his unfortunate sleeping pants. I resisted pointing that out. He stood on the faded small carpet of roses I remembered from his arrival, but it did not yet stir with his power.

Nihitu came at my heels. The peace they had made with the Raker would never be anything but grudging, but they kept silent and unobtrusive for my sake.

I brought my palms together and bowed formally to him. “I cannot dissuade you from this path, but I would beg you to reconsider.”

“When I left Katra, I told myself that I would walk, unaided, fearing nothing. I would follow only my own desire, to test the tenets of the land’s building lore and the laws of my

own power, and take strength in my will, wherever it will lead me.”

I nodded.

“And now I desire I will follow this song. I will cast my gaze upon the Orphan, the star that calls to hold all pain.”

“If it will hold your pain, it will desire to hold the rest of you as well. You cannot separate these two.”

“Nobody can hold me against my will,” he said.

I sighed. “Not Ranra. Certainly not me. But Ladder is mightier. His star is fed on the despair of many, and it far outweighs mine.”

He crossed the distance between us and took my hand in his without asking. No asking was needed. “Please. Do not talk yourself down. In the library, among your books, I learned the truth of it. If I can speak it?”

I nodded.

“We tell of the Starcounter of Keshet, who went north to search for the missing stars. And we speak of the twelve guardians, who stretched their hands towards the shining stars Bird brought us, so we could live, so we could thrive.”

I squeezed his hands. *Oh, youth. Certainly you are the brightest of any who had ever learned from me. Or had refused to learn from me, and learned from themselves instead.*

“But we do not speak of this: where did the Starcounter of Keshet go?”

“They stayed right here,” I whispered.

“They stayed right here. Because they, too, caught a star. Did you not, Angzariyad?”

I swallowed tears. Denying nothing. What was there to say? Ladder alone knew this truth. And now he did as well.

“Every step I take now will be different because of you. It is because you do not wish to hold me that I have let you hold me.”

“I have not had enough.” It was brash to admit this, to let my pain speak now, but I was too old to care.

In a sudden motion he brought my hands to his lips. “My teacher.”

“You jest,” I said, the pain of it too sharp to contain, and it was not the pain of pleasure.

He smiled. “As you wish, then. I, too, did not have enough.”

He handed me a scroll tied with a piece of red leather. “It is a custom of my land, for all I am exiled from it. A bit of poetry. It is slight, but perhaps it would ease the passage of time.”

I bowed, accepting it. “I thank you. And if you can, write more.”

“I have no need to write more, because I will return. I will always want to return.”

He engaged his deepnames and made the carpet float, not as high as my gyring sandbird but high enough, out of the Tumbleweed Gate and into the reddening afternoon sky. I watched its receding shadow, and then just the memory of it, drunk on my yearning and on light. Soon I would return to the palace, to prepare for the Sandbird festival. But not yet. Not yet.

“Do you think he will come back?” Nihitu said.

I sighed. *Today I cannot make joy my geometry, but I will hold on to hope.*

My hands fidgeted with the knot on leather string of the scroll. “If anyone can journey to that court and reemerge still as themselves, it is the Raker. So yes. He will return.”

It would be some time before I was proven right.

* * *

“The stars we still remember them, but some no longer shine. What knowledge do you seek of me, if not to fall like they had fallen?”

*“A new geometry of light to issue forth from hollow bone,
A fire to circumnavigate and make a beacon of my pain.”*

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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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RIVERS RUN FREE

by Charles Payseur

Where Viora Falls used to leap four thousand feet into Lake Aerik, her every pounding breath a climax, a triumph, there is now a citadel. It is the great accomplishment of the Lutean Empire—Viora dammed, chained, all her rage and love harnessed now to power their wheels, their cogs and dials and machines.

“They know we’re here,” Sainet says, voice soft as if unused to speaking. I’m not sure he had ever taken solid form before I found him in a cave system and brought him out into the light. Some say his past makes him cold, but that’s not the sense I get from him.

“We have time,” I say, more hope than fact. The Dowsers are doubtless on their way, but they haven’t learned to fly. And we need to see this. Or I want to see this. To remember this. Whatever happens next.

“Is it true what they say?” Verdan asks. She’s the youngest, used to be a branch of the Burgora before the Dowsers diverted the river, cut daughter from mother. “Can they really kill us?”

“As much as they can stop the rain,” Mor says, his voice like iron. Mor, the most faithful to the old songs. The cycles. Change without death, waters without end.

“They can do bad enough,” I say, looking down at Aerik, who is nearly dry, alive only by the gentle touch of Viora’s waters, not strong enough even to take solid form. He’s just a trickle, our reminder and our warning—see what happens when you go against the Luteans. See what happens when river pits itself against human. Everywhere east, where Aerik used to birth a dozen strong rivers that radiated out, bringing life to the valley, there is only the Dust now. See what happens when you resist, when you defy. We’ve seen what we needed to see. We all turn toward that bleak horizon across the Dust, where far beyond the sea might reside, must reside. We move.

* * *

A truth about rivers: we have always been able to draw our water together into solid bodies, to walk on two legs. But it is not without risk, and not without cost. We lose much of ourselves in the transformation, and if there’s not enough of us to start with, well...

* * *

We ride stolen horses over the choked earth.

“It’s not working,” Sainet says.

They've had our trail since the citadel, and there's been nothing since to help us lose them. Sometimes the Dowsers get confused when waters cross, and using the dry riverbed as a road had seemed nearly safe. But nothing is—safe, that is. Not since the Luteans discovered what a resource we are.

“We have to turn and face them,” Mor says.

I'm tired of fighting. Tired of losing battle after battle. Friend after friend. I'm tired of running because if I don't a Dowsers will track me down, put me in irons, force me to push a wheel that will only make them stronger and me weaker, weaker, gone. I want to win for once.

I close my eyes. The Dust is full of ghosts these days, and some of them speak. The riverbed we urge our horses faster over was once the Malbrush. I can feel his confusion when the waters stopped flowing. When the sun slowly ate him away, drew him into the sky until nothing remained. Except his memory. I ask to see through his eyes, and his ghost grants me, reveals the miles he used to run. And I see a way.

“We keep going,” I shout over the sound of the horses' hooves pounding the dry earth.

“We have to—” Mor starts to say, but I cut em off.

“We'll make our stand up ahead. There's an old waterfall.”

Mor smiles as if reading my mind. If there is a hell like the humans claim then we're all going to it anyway. But they have to kill us, first.

* * *

A truth about rivers: there used to be laws that kept the peace between human and river. Or, if not laws, an understanding. We liked company, and they liked the food and relief we offered. It worked for everyone until it didn't, until it only worked for them, and they never looked back.

* * *

I stand with the horses by the edge of the dry waterfall. Not as tall as Viora, but tall enough for what I intend. I face away from the dead drop just feet behind me. A cliff, I guess people call it now. Like this was all natural. I stand with the horses because the Dowzers will know something's wrong if they don't see them. They're merciless bastards but they know how to track, so it's me and four horses all standing there, waiting, when they arrive.

"What took you so long?" I ask as two of the four dismount. They all draw weapons, but shooting from the back of a horse is bad business, all noise and smoke and panic. So two remain seated, probably in case I decide to run for it, and two walk slowly forward, silent. Why are they always silent? Why does that make it worse?

I tried to convince Mor to take the others and run, just run regardless of how this goes. Chances are that I can handle myself—I have before. I could catch up. But ey just looked at me and I could feel the hollowness of my words. Of course they can't run. Isn't this entire trip, our whole mission, about not having to fight alone anymore. About being stronger together. We're done leaving people behind. So I stand there smiling like an idiot, and the Dowsers draw forward while Mor feels their footsteps though the sand.

They keep their weapons trained on me, all iron and salt and fire, the tools they use to bind us, to track us. That and some innate talent that Dowsers have for finding water. Sometimes I wonder that if we had a way to find them as easily as they can find us, how we'd use the knowledge. If we'd find them as they slept secure in their beds, if people would find them dead the next morning, drowned without an inch of standing water to be found. I don't think it would be more than they deserve.

One of the two approaching me pulls out a pair of iron manacles. I smile. Mor acts. Ey rises. From behind their horses a wall of water jumps to life, splashing from the sands, a sudden torrent that rolls like an avalanche. The riders have no time at all to react. In a second they are swept by the wave, pushed forward. I stand still, which is what dooms the other

two, who if they reacted immediately could have run to the side, escaped the wave. But they pivot, eyes on the wave and then on me, and it's as if they can smell there's some trick to this, that if they watch me I'll give away how I plan to survive and they can do likewise.

I sink into the sand. Do they think to try that before the wave catches them as well? If they do, it doesn't work. They are swept along. As are our horses. And they all go over the cliff. I don't watch, don't want to see the terror in the horses eyes, don't want to face that we're all merciless bastards.

I rise, see Mor kneeling in the sand right at the edge watching them fall, eir body heaving from the effort that must have taken, from the water ey has lost. But it worked. And from the falls we can look out at the Dust and see it spread to the horizon like a gray blanket. Huge. Desolate. Nearly featureless except, far in the distance, a collection of buildings betrays what must have been a town, once. What it is now, we'll just have to see.

* * *

A truth about rivers: all waters are alive to some degree, though not all can stand and talk. It takes volume and movement and force to birth a river, to bring water to full awareness, but the potential is always there. In our oldest stories, it was water that gave soul to humans, falling on their

*clay bodies and infusing them with some touch of the divine.
In our new stories, that was a mistake.*

* * *

The town is like most things in the Dust—a ghost of what it used to be. Malbrush used to flow down through two dozen farms and near the thriving town center, but now only a handful of the buildings remain, the rest claimed by what looks like fire. A common occurrence where wood used to be the primary building material.

“This is—” Mor’s words are eaten by a fit of coughing that wracks eir body, but I know what ey mean.

“A mistake,” I finish for em. Perhaps it is. But losing our horses means we’ll be easier to Dowse, and most places in the Dust hate the Luteans as much as we do. It wasn’t just the rivers to have suffered when the citadel was erected. Viora wasn’t the only one damned by that treachery.

“I just need—” ey starts to say but can’t finish. Time? Rest? Rain? All rather impossible at the moment. But the town is here and might have rain stores they’d be willing to share. So we limp into town and aren’t surprised to find a woman wearing a star on her chest and resting a Lutean rifle against her shoulder.

“We’re not looking for trouble,” she says, which is its own sort of hello out here.

I nod. “We’re not bringing it,” I lie.

Her eyes narrow as she studies us. Like most people in the Dust, her skin is a pale tan, not the slightly blue tinge of our own. She knows what we are, and must know that the rifle she carries offers her some protection. And she’s careful. I can feel at least five other people hidden in the mostly-deserted town.

“Traveling on foot?” she asks. I have questions of my own, like where she got the rifle. The Luteans don’t just hand those out, so it means she’s either working for them or took it off the dead. I’m betting it’s the second of those, but can’t be sure.

“We lost our horses at the falls,” I say.

“That’s a shame,” she says.

“Well, we lost a team of Dowsers, too, so it sort of evened out,” I say.

She nods, then lowers the rifle so it’s pointing at the ground and walks forward.

“Then you have my thanks.” She extends her hand and I take it, feel her firm grip. Her eyes don’t leave mine and I can tell she’s weighing me. Testing me. I hold her gaze until she smiles and gives a sharp whistle. The five people hiding all step into the street, weapons lowered. We pass the test, I guess.

“I’m Sheriff Arleth Yates,” she says. “Welcome to Abbotsville.”

* * *

A truth about rivers: I do not know the first river the Luteans managed to chain. The notion was so foreign a concept we didn't even know to fear it. Like an infant whose first experience with water is to be completely submerged, it took us too long to realize the rules of our world had changed, and that we were in great danger.

* * *

I sit at the table the sheriff has set for us. The food is more than I would have expected from a place like this.

“Where are you headed?” Deputy Owens asks. He’s a large man with light eyes that seem always squinting. I catch the sheriff shooting him a warning look, but I shrug. There’s no real harm in telling them. After the falls, after everything, maybe it will help them all to hear it out loud.

“To the sea,” I say. The word is like a cold draft through the room, and all of us straighten in our seats.

“Sounds like a long way to go,” the sheriff says, studying my face like she’s reading a map. “I’ve only heard stories, and none that I could really credit. Doesn’t hardly seem possible, all that water in one place.”

“It’s real,” I say. I can feel Sainet’s eyes on me. Verdan’s. Mor’s.

“I suppose it makes sense, looking to run away,” the sheriff says. “What with those Lutean bastards. Some things, there’s no real fighting.”

“We’re not running away,” I say. We’re not. What would that do? The Luteans won’t be content with just the rivers in what’s now the Dust. Their citadel will grow taller, their wheels larger, until the whole world is empty of free waters.

“Didn’t mean anything by it,” Sheriff Yates says, raising her hands.

“We’re going to bring it back,” I say.

The sheriff’s eyes widen. Sainet sucks in a ragged breath.

“Beyond the Dust,” I say, “and beyond the mountains and beyond the forests and farther still, there’s the sea. So vast and so powerful that the waters of it know no fear. And we’ll tell the sea of what’s happening here, and it will feel the pain of its children and it will rise and flow across the land. Over the forests and the mountains and the Dust and it will tear down the dams and the dikes and the locks and the citadel. And the Dust will be green again, and the Luteans will drown and...”

I realize that I’m breathing heavy, that I’m leaning over the table toward the sheriff, that there’s a storm inside me. It’s my prayer, my hope. I look up, see Sainet staring at me. He’s breathing hard too, pupils large.

“Excuse me, I think I need to lie down,” I say. I stand, flee the table and the pounding in my veins and the ghosts of the dead and the hope of the sea. I find the room the sheriff has left us and fall inside, everything in me shaking. I sink to my knees, feel part of myself leaking away. I’m crying.

I feel a presence behind me, turn to see Sainet standing there, his face a mask of hunger and despair. He closes the door. I rise to meet him.

What ever made me think I could forget this? Sainet’s mouth on mine, his hands tearing at clothing. What made me think this was something I had forgotten how to do? Was it the running? The death? Was all I needed this short respite without Dowzers on our heels to remember? This refuge in Abbotsville?

I react, curving myself against his body, fitting myself to him. Mouth, neck, chest, stomach, hips—we’re touching at every point, our bodies liquid and solid and pulling. Somewhere else Mor is sitting with Sheriff Yates and Deputy Owens, and ey has to know what is happening. We aren’t human, can’t ignore the signs, the way the earth seems to hold its breath, the way the dry night air is suddenly humid, hot.

There is a creak of the door opening, and I know it’s Verdán without having to look to see. Peeking at the doorway. I don’t stop. She’s old enough to know, and I’m not sure I could

stop now anyway. Not with the way Sainet's hands are sliding over my ass, working at the pull of my belt.

I think of our last time. How long ago now? I remember darkness, meeting in a rush. Like this. Always like this, hidden from the sun and the Dowers and any chance of discovery. How long since I have met with another without fear? But they are all unfair questions with Sainet tugging down my pants, pushing me to the bed, onto my back.

I don't cry out as he enters me. I don't whimper or moan. What releases from my lips is a sigh, short and soft, and then I'm pulling him down to kiss me again. It makes the movements awkward, inelegant, but at this moment I need the taste of him, crisp and cool and clear. He is stone and mineral and a hint of salt and perfect, like how the sea must taste. I let him go and we find our rhythm, our flow, his hand around me and him inside me, and my mind is finally free of questions.

And then I feel the rising deep within me, a well that is suddenly overflowing, moving up and up and we do cry out then, voices twined and reaching. Toward each other and toward something else, somewhere else that we're not even sure of except in the hope that lives and dies in the pleasure spreading through us, our skins disappearing and reappearing in a thunderclap of climax. And slowly we come back to each

other. To the bed, the room. To Verdan breathing heavy at the door and Mor sitting flushed talking to the sheriff and deputy.

And, somewhere beyond that, another presence as well, an echo of someone we hadn't noticed before. And they're crying for our help.

* * *

A truth about rivers: There's water nearly everywhere. In the air and in the ground and in the morning songs of the birds who no longer fly here. Too small, too diffused to speak on its own, we can still use it to speak to each other, and to see what humans hope is concealed.

* * *

It's early when we slide from the old inn and make our way across town. The sheriff is hopefully still sleeping, but even if she's not, we can't put this off. The call is clearer now, and only we can hear it. The town is silent as we follow the voice to its source. Of course it's the well. Was there any doubt it would be? I look at Sainet, but he won't meet my gaze, keeps his head on a pivot, watching for signs the town knows what we're up to.

"What is it?" Verdan asks, but even she knows the answer. None of us speak, and she doesn't ask again as we examine the well, a shaft of stone piercing the earth. Ever since the Dust has been the Dust, the wells have been dry, but we can all feel the water below.

“Look around for some gear box,” I say. The well has been modified since its original construction, augmented with gears and piping, a faint clicking that belies Lutean technology. It feels like there’s a storm inside me, a tempest. I clench my jaw and Mor grunts as ey pulls up a wooden board covered by the sand. Underneath, the clicking intensifies.

“So they’re working for the Empire, then?” Sainet asks.

I shake my head, examining the materials used. It’s Lutean made, definitely, but it’s cobbled together from bits and pieces. Probably the town had managed to ambush a patrol or a caravan. Or maybe raid one of the small Lutean outposts that separate the Dust from the Empire. Probably the sheriff had been telling the truth about just how much they hated the Luteans. This was...

“We need to break it,” I say. There’s a wrench left next to the gear box, no doubt in case they need to make repairs. I pick it up and bring it down as hard as I can against the metal case. Once, twice, each strike a bell letting the town know what we’re doing. But it needs to be done. After three strikes something clangs inside, and the clicking stops.

“Get them up,” I say, and instantly Sainet and Mor are sliding down the well, bodies liquifying. I’m almost afraid to see who they bring up.

“Why did they do it?” Verdan asks from beside me. The wrench feels hot in my hand. I can’t answer. Only the sheriff will be able to answer for this.

When Mar and Sainet return they’re pulling another with them. Verdan and I step forward, place our hands upon them, and share what water we can spare. The moment our waters mingle we know them. Druun. From the borders of the Dust. I see their journey, their flight from the Dowsers. I see them walk into Abbotsville and see Sheriff Yates welcome them with open arms.

A bell begins to ring. A warning. A promise.

“We’re getting out of here,” I say.

Sheriff Yates is waiting for us in the street.

“You should of just left well enough alone,” she shouts as we keep to the shadows. I can feel more people around us. More than the five from before. Did she call them as soon as she knew what we were? Had she been hoping to profit from our visit in more ways than just sending riders out to loot the Dowsers’ bodies? Druun doesn’t look so good, though they seem much better now that they’re out under the open sky. What they’ve been through—I shudder. It’s no worse than the Luteans and so much worse.

“We’re not looking for trouble,” I shout back, knowing that it’s too late for that. Too late for so much. I adjust my grip on the wrench in my hand.

I motion to Sainet to separate, enter the dilapidated buildings. The dark is his home, and I know no one is a match for him there. What to do about the sheriff is another matter entirely. I look at Mor, who is helping Druun but is hardly recovered emself. Which leaves me and Verdán.

“Well I’m bringing it,” Sheriff Yates says, taking aim at us with her rifle. “You put them back in the well or this is going to end in blood.”

“I thought you were better than this,” I say. “Better than the Luteans.”

“I am better than the Luteans!” she nearly screams at me, the barrel of her rifle wavering. “You think we want it this way? We’re just making the best of a bad situation, and not one that we caused. What were we supposed to do? Die? Wait for you to show up with your magic sea and save us? What good would that have done anyone? With the power that river gives us, at least we can fight. We can fight to keep the Lutean bastards from taking anything more.”

“The citadel’s a long way from here,” I say. “And it’s not a Lutean you’ve been torturing.” My fingernails dig into my palms from where my fists are clenching. I look at Verdán. Her

face is set, her body rigid. I can hear something in her, the rage of rapids pounding over rock. She's old enough for this, too.

"What do you expect?" Yates calls. "Their power, their weapons...how are we supposed to fight them without using what they use? It's not like you lot were out here volunteering to help."

"So this is our fault?" I ask. I nod to Verdun, who starts inching forward along the side of the building. We need to separate, to give the sheriff multiple targets, to draw her attention away from Mor and Druun.

"I don't care whose fault it is," the sheriff says, "as long as me and mine survive it."

"Then you're no better than the Luteans," I say. "Only different."

And then I charge her.

I feel the shot but it doesn't stop me. In the shadows Sainet is killing and in the light I am swinging the wrench in my hand. It's fitting, the sharp shock of impact, the wet thud. The wrench isn't mine and it's not theirs, but it has doomed us both. I keep hitting until my arm is numb and the wrench slips free into the sand. I'm on my knees again, leaking.

No. No, this is not how it ends. I push myself to my feet. This is not the end. Around me there is a new chaos, and I can smell something burning. Abbotsville. The town is burning.

Good. I put one foot in front of the other, and then Sainet is there, face spotted with ash.

“We have to go,” he says, and there’s something in his voice, a ragged hurt and desperation. Not cold at all.

Pain causes me to groan, nearly collapse, but I manage a nod. We’ll run, run until we are free.

* * *

A truth about rivers: There’s so much gone now. Not just our dead but all that we held. The fish and the plants—the life. What remains is only dry earth and memories, and maybe there will come a day when not even those are left.

* * *

I keep my mind on Sainet’s voice and the feeling of putting one foot in front of the other. I’m leaking. Fucking sea I’m leaking, ripe wet droplets of me sinking into the sand. Gut shot. That’s what I am. That’s what— I stumble and cry out and Sainet’s arms catch me, keep me from falling.

Everything’s jumbled. I can’t keep it straight.

“Wasn’t supposed to be like this,” I say. It was supposed to be...

“It’s nothing,” Sainet says. “You’re going to be fine.” He calls for Mor and Verdan, but they have their hands full with Druun.

A merry bunch we all make. Each step I take wets the sands, causes my feet to stick in earth that's ravenous for moisture. I would kill for a horse, but I'm afraid I've killed for far less, far more, far far away where rivers run free. There is blood on my hands and mingled with the water spilling from me with each step. Whatever the bullet is, inside me, I can feel it doing its work.

"Have you ever been to the sea?" I ask. To Sainet, or maybe to Druun. To anyone. What does it matter anyway?

"The sea is a myth," Sainet says. Of course he doesn't believe. I want to ask him why he came then, but I'm afraid of the answer. Even now.

I take another step, another. I will not die here. I will not die here. Behind me I feel the heat of the flames. It's almost inviting. I don't look back.

"One day the sky will take us up one final time." It's Mor. Ey are suddenly standing there, one of Druun's arms draped over eir shoulder. Ey seems mostly recovered now, but there's a slight quaver in eir voice. "And the wind will take us out to sea, and we will fall as rain into the endless waters."

"I'd like to see it," I say. I falter again. More hands steady me. There's Verdán, eyes still wide. Why is it they have to learn so young to be hated?

“I’m sure you will,” she says. “Just like you said. We’ll find the sea and we’ll bring it back with us, to tear down the dams and the dikes and the locks. Just like you said.”

I smile. Just like I said.

* * *

A truth about rivers: sometimes we lie. And sometimes we tell the truth. And sometimes we hope so hard we can’t tell where one ends and the other begins.

* * *

I’m on the beach, reclined, my head in Sainet’s lap, my eyes closed. He runs a hand through my hair. If I open my eyes I will see it, the endless expanse of the sea. I will hear the countless voices speaking as one and they will tell me it will be all right.

“I’m tired,” I say, and realize just how true it is. How did I ever get this tired?

“Don’t quit on me now,” Sainet says.

I smile. I’m not quitting, I want to say. Just taking a rest. A little rest. Haven’t I earned that? But words won’t rise in my throat.

“Open your eyes,” Sainet says. I hear other voices, too. Of course. Mor is here, and Verdan, and Druun too. All here. “Open your eyes.”

There's an edge to Sainet's voice. I want to tell him to relax. We've come so far. We've come so far. But Sainet's right. We're not done yet. I move my hand over the fine sand of the beach. It almost feels like dust.

I open my eyes. The sea is so very far away.

"Take me there," I say, though it hurts to say anything. Soon I'll be gone into the Dust, but right now I can hold together long enough to... "Take me to the sea."

They crowd around me. Mor and Verdan each take one of my hands in theirs and Druun touches my shoulder. I will make it to the sea, even if I never see it.

"Thank you," I say, and close my eyes. I let go. I let it all go, and I think of Viora and freedom. I am a waterfall bound for the thirsty sand, nearly gone, nearly gone.

Until they catch me.

Through them all, I am. I give, like we gave to Druun after we pulled them from the well, and all that I am they catch, my hopes and my dreams—my waters, until I am just a wave passing through them, soon to crash and fade but for this moment alive in them all, connecting them.

They—now we—all look down at the dry earth, vacant now but for my empty clothes. We stretch, bodies suddenly refreshed, wounds gone as if washed clean. We stand and look back at Abbotsville burning.

“Let’s go,” Mor says, and we turn toward the horizon, and the mountains beyond that, and the forest beyond that, and the sea beyond that, and start walking.

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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.

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