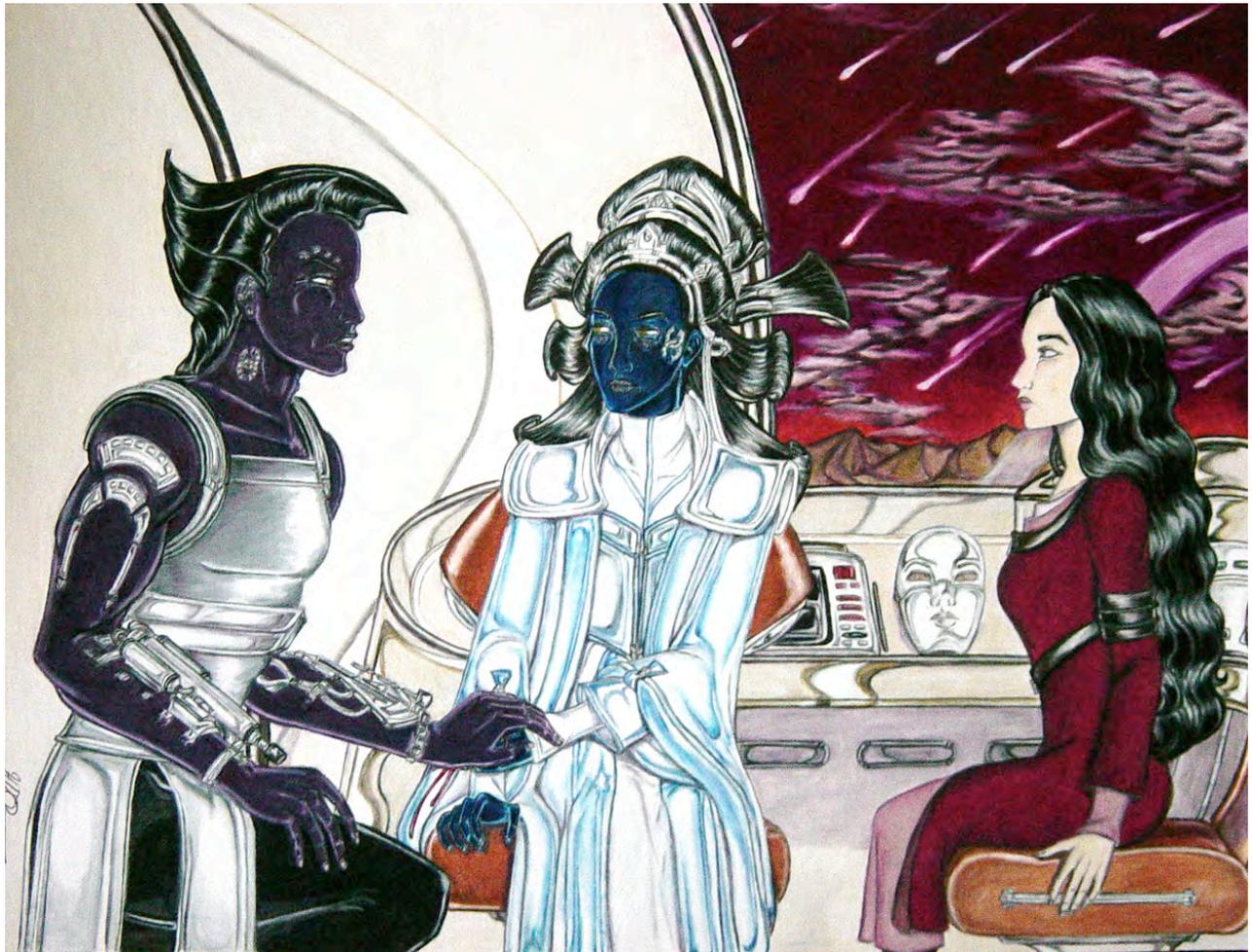


Driftwood and Sea Glass

Three stories and a vignette

by Athena Andreadis



The Gift of a Second Life

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Notes

Dry Rivers and Planetfall appeared in *Crossed Genres* in 2009; Planetfall was reprinted in *World SF* in 2012 and in *Apex World SF 3* in 2014. A slightly abridged version of The Wind Harp appeared in *Crossed Genres* in 2013.

The stories are linked and part of a very large universe, although not all the links are visible yet. Dry Rivers contains the story of Arwen (fleetinglly mentioned in the Falling Star section of Planetfall) and the provenance of the lay of Rodhánis (sung in Dagger Sheath, the core section of Planetfall). Antóa Tásri-e, the protagonist of The Wind Harp, is also the unnamed first-person narrator of Nightsongs (the last section of Planetfall) and of Amarén's Plea (the first part of Weaving New Braids). Antóa's premonitory vision at the closing of The Wind Harp is of her future consort, Arivén, glimpsed in Nightsongs.

Readers of Dry Rivers and Planetfall will also notice how names drift linguistically: Aethra/Ethiran/Yethirán (Clear Sky), Arwen/Ariven/Arivén (Evening Star), Keegan/Kighan (Lion), Rodhanthi/Rodhánis (Sea Rose), Ouranákis/Soranákis/Sóran-Kerís (Skystrider).

Dry Rivers

Aethra had been designated warrior maiden very young, younger than usual. The blank-faced priests had been making their culling rounds for six generations now. The time before lived only in faded stories, fading songs. Then, all had known how to dance, how to set sail, how to wield weapons, how to till the land.

But that had been when the nation had been rich and the enemies few, before the fire from the sea had desolated field and hearth, before the fleet had crumbled into kindling and the windows to the world had closed. Occasionally, people would unearth an exquisite vessel in their ash-clogged fields and look at it in wonder, unable to believe that their ancestors had produced such an apparition.

She went willingly enough. Better to be trained and able to sell your skills, than be bound to the unyielding soil, joylessly producing children in the hope that enough would survive to help with the soul-deadening labor. And she was too young to understand or care about the celibacy rules.

The first years went well. They were useful tools and treated as such – few beatings, good food, no excessive breaking of the spirit. Aethra was taught to fight with sword, spear, knife, bow and arrow, whip, bare hands. Lessons of tactics, strategy, frontal battle, irregular warfare followed. And when her age class finished training, they were gathered outside the shrine of the Goddess.

One of the Elders rose, body and face crisscrossed with scars. For the occasion, the large statue of the Goddess had been carried outside the shrine. The chaste, severe face gazed blindly, a quenched lamp.

"Young warriors, you are gathered here to be welcomed to the ranks of your peers. Much effort has been spent on your teaching. It is our hope that you will show yourselves worthy of such care. Do not forget, She watches, whose example we must follow – She who once was wanton, but now is pure."

Aethra remembered the vague tales. It was said that once the Goddess was not just a warrior, but that she took men to her bed – with no diminution of her powers! – that she was life and death and rebirth, all in one. Her likeness had been different then, but she had repented of her wild ways and had renounced pleasure, asking the same of her people.

###

It was soon after the induction ceremony that they were contracted for the war going on between the kingdoms of the East and the South. Now Aethra discovered what real war meant – the endless trudging, the mechanical fighting, till only weariness remained. Blind survival instinct alone overrode the desire to sit down in the middle of the battle and be mercifully sent below.

Two people propped up Aethra's sagging spirits. One was the titular leader of the band, a wily, accomplished old guerilla from the eastern shores, Tarik. The other was a fellow warrior, Rodhanthi.

Rodhanthi came from the eastern mountain regions. Her people had been nobly born but also poor and stubbornly self-sufficient, even before the Catastrophe. They kept strong memories of the old ways. She told Aethra tales her grandmother had told her – how there had been powerful witches on the island once, who could compel the elements to do their bidding. Or how the old rulers of the island, the anasses, were incarnations of the Goddess and hence always women, and had many consorts... and should any of those consorts lose prowess, the anassa could have him sacrificed to ensure the crops grew – but that she could also restore him to life, if she desired.

Aethra shook her head at the stories: No nation had women rulers. And only men were trained in the magic arts, because they alone had the strength to use power exclusively for good, it was said. Besides, the Goddess was a maiden and retained her power only by staying apart from men.

"Not so," said Rodhanthi. "When I came of age, my granddam took me to a cave in Dhikte, in the heart of the island... she said that was where the anasses went to talk to the Goddess. The cave was unattended, but my people would still go there to dream and pray, leaving flowers and offerings. She told me that a statue of the Goddess stood there that would keep shifting before your eyes, from maiden to lover to sybil. They called it the Bright Dreamer.

"After the Catastrophe, the statue disappeared and the priests announced that it was a sign – the Goddess had withdrawn in anger or defeat. No one knows where it is now. The people believed the story of the priests."

These were dark things for Aethra to ponder, but the fighting left her little time. Also, a young independent from an island beyond the Straits had been setting his heart upon her. The restrictions of her culture did not apply to him, and his copper hair and sky-blue eyes troubled her sorely. He was gentle and would often sing to her and tell tales of his own people. Unwittingly, he corroborated one of Rodhanthi's stories: One of his songs told of a sorceress from Kafthor, that had brightened his tuath after she had vanquished evil in her own land.

Aethra knew now that she had taken the chastity vows without realizing what burden that entailed. Her strength was ebbing fast.

One day, as she walked around the camp leaden-hearted, Tarik called her over. Well did the wise old rascal know what ailed her. He had not been made head of the band for nothing. First he jollied her down from the dark clouds, then pounced when she was basking in the sun and his good fellowship.

"It seems to me, lass, that someone's eyes have been following you." She turned crimson with embarrassment and annoyance. "Lass, warrior maiden or not, you cannot fight well with the need so relentlessly upon you. And there is young Arven, lovely as the dawn, come so far from his tuath, who would lay down his young life for a night with you."

"It would be sacrilege..." she whispered.

"Sacrilege? Surely, you credit the Goddess with more sense!"

"Don't blaspheme!" she flung at him.

"I am not criticizing Her, my maid, only those who purport to interpret Her wishes. Tomorrow you may die. Would She be so cruel as to let you go to the Dry Land with your lips unsweetened by kissing? This is the real world, we are at war. No one will notice or care if you take the boy to bed. So go unbraid your hair and his, and don't let me catch you brooding again."

###

It might be true that there were no professional spies in the camp. But among her own peers, some had absorbed the priestly teachings more than others. The leaders of her group were informed. For Arven, it was less an infraction of discipline than a breach of morality – a private crime, hence punishable according to the laws of the land they found themselves in.

They happened to be among people for whom pleasure in love was deemed unclean. When they pulled him out of her arms, she wailed... she who had never cried out when receiving a wound. But he only smiled at her. When they had gathered all the mercenaries in a barren field, he said clearly for all to hear:

"Mo chridh', I only regret having to leave you. Such songs of you they will hear in Tir-na-nOg!"

They stoned him to death in front of her eyes and used the blood-spattered stones for a cairn. Tarik had not dared interfere.

Aethra, by violating her vows, had committed a political crime. They had to make an example of her – and they took her back to Kafthor, where the entire population would witness what came of disobeying priestly rules.

It was late spring. The lilacs were aburst when, in front of all the warriors and most of the populace of Knossos, they nailed her on an ancient olive tree with barely any leaves on its gnarled branches.

The nails burned in her wrists and ankles, but more searing than the pain was the anger. The warriors knew now, from having gone outside the island, that the priests wasted resources on purpose. They were keeping the people hungry and fearful to perpetuate their own rule. They had used Arven, with his hands and mouth made for caressing, as a sacrificial beast to retain their hold... this, this was sin, not what she had done.

And in whose name did they make her people's life a joyless burden? Look at them, bowed and stooped, cowed into letting others do their thinking. Well, she would give them something to think about. Now, before she choked on her own blood, was her last opportunity to let her people know. Clenching her teeth, because the slightest movement made the nails tear more into her, she cried:

"Goddess of my ancestors! You put undeserved pain upon us! You are not worthy of worship, you abandoned your people!"

Just as she fell silent, the ground shook – only a little, but discernibly. With the tremor, the jewel-laden statue of the Goddess cracked in half like an eggshell. And underneath it, much weathered and scored, unadorned yet shining like silver through tin, stood another. This kept shifting and floating in the beholder's gaze – sometimes the stern Warrior, lover of the wind; sometimes the laughing Courtesan, lover of the sea; and sometimes the calm Sybil, lover of the starlight.

There was absolute silence in the square. Then Rodhanthi, roused to seize the moment, cried:

"They have been lying to us, warriors! They want us to live in misery! They want to rule with fear and use us against our own people! The Goddess has replied – let us do away with them!"

###

Aethra limped into the courtyard of the shrine, one sunny autumn morning. She would never be as quick with her hands as before, but at least she still had use of her limbs. When they had cut

her down from the tree, no one had expected her to live. But she had clung on, because she could not bear to miss seeing the island recover.

The routing of the priesthood had been swift and complete. Some of the warriors elected to go back to their hearths. Others continued as mercenaries – the nation needed revenue until the harvests and trade stabilized. A few formed a loose and temporary governing body, augmented by farmers and merchants. The neighboring nations had reacted variously, but most waited neutrally: Kafthor would never be a serious threat. Even in its heyday, it had not been a conquering nation.

Aethra lay in the sunlight, to ease the pains of her scars. There Rodhanthi soon joined her.

"The harvest will be good this year, plentiful enough to export some. And we started removing the silt from the harbor. If the Goddess favors us, ships may be sheltering in it come next summer. There will be a fire leaping ceremony, I thought we should revive that, the people need to celebrate. What do you say? Are you listening?"

"Yes," murmured Aethra, feeling the sun warm against her eyelids. "But I have been spent, Rodhanthi. My active part is done, I am already a memory in the mind of the people."

They sat together in companionable silence. "I have a mind to travel, when things have righted themselves," added Aethra. "There is so much of the world that I have always wished to see. Perhaps go to his land, tell his tuath myself... find out if one of us indeed passed through there... see their version of the Goddess..."

"They sing of him, you know, those who were in our band," mentioned Rodhanthi hesitantly. Aethra nodded. She had heard the songs, too, though she never sang them herself. *My falling star, my sweetest spring, how has your beauty set...*

"If you go," continued Rodhanthi, "you will be an exile among strangers."

"And what am I now, but for you? I may eventually return – the call of home is hard to withstand. And if I return, I wonder what I will find..."

"I wonder, too," said Rodhanthi, and supported her friend as she made her way slowly back inside, to continue the backbreaking work of rebuilding the nation.

Planetfall



The Storm

Planetfall

I. In the Depths of the Sea

Nine generations past planetfall

Through the haze of her dark blue mane, the mershadown gazed sternly at her youngest. She had often warned her not to go near the shore. Afterwards, ever would she long for the hostile land, where her skin would crack and she would wither.

The youngster, eyes as smoky as her mother's, felt unrepentant. She already knew starfire — they spent many nights on the foam. She knew of the landers, too. They had not been here long, said the Elders. They could not understand the People's singing—yet they trod as lightly as the whisper of a calm sea. Many came to rest in her people's domain, bearing the gifts of their kin. She longed to catch more glimpses of them. She wanted to encompass the whole world, sea and land, for her lays.

It eased the elder's mind that, for a while, her child would have to stay near. Her turn had come to watch the Sea Rose.

The Sea Rose... the great burden and joy of the mershadowns. It bloomed unpredictably once every thirteen cycles of the wanderer that cast light on the night. Between dusk and dawn, a single blossom came alive. It granted to its watcher one wish, so the Elders sang. In exchange, for each cycle of the Wanderer, a vigilant mershadown guarded it and nourished it with her salty, greenish blood.

And so, as soon as the Wanderer started waxing, the youngster dutifully nested near the mound where the Sea Rose slumbered. It stood on a leafless stem, bluish-black like its guardian's hair, at the bottom of a deep crevasse filled with slate-green pebbles.

As the last night of her watch started to lighten into dawn, she sighed with regret and relief. The Sea Rose would not bloom in her turn. She was looking forward to recovering her strength and seeing the dry gardens once again, filled with all those blossoms that had no names in her tongue.

And just then, the water turned transparent, so transparent that she could see the pale sliver of the wanderer. She could distinctly hear the dream birds' trills, the mist cats' hunting calls, all the way from the distant hills of the dry lands. On the barren seafloor, the Sea Rose slowly unfurled. Its

angular petals glimmered blue-green, like the precious nodules that her people occasionally found on the ocean floor. The water around it broke into jeweled prisms.

The youngster knew what she wanted to ask of the Sea Rose—she would ask for songs that might help the landers understand her people. But just as she prepared to sing her plea, an intricate object slowly twirled from the waters above and came to rest gently upon the blossom.

Hesitantly, she touched it—and a storm of yearning broke in her mind. Endless striving, anxious love, fear, longing... Meanwhile, alerted to the unfolding of the Rose, the mer shadows began to congregate around the mound and its guardian.

“My child, what did you ask?” said her mother.

“I did not think to wish,” whispered the youngster. “The landers’ amulet—it spoke to me...”

And at that moment, they realized that the Sea Rose had not folded. For the first time, the only time, the sunrays touched it. It burned in colors of the fires that fuelled the star cores. Then it closed.

She became her people's greatest bard. And her lineage kept the amulet until they returned it to the landers, on the night that the two Peoples sang together—and understood each other's words.

II. The Sea of Stars

Four generations past planetfall

Four generations after planetfall, strife arose on Glorious Maiden. The planet, beautiful but stark, almost entirely ocean, sorely tested mettle and resources. Some hearths wanted to start ocean farming, despite the decision made even before planetfall to leave no footprint on the planet. The argument got bitter enough that several tanegíri withdrew from the council and armed their hearths.

So Sefanír, tanegír of the Sóran-Kerís hearth, first among equals, fitted herself into her kite, snapped the struts taut and flew to the storm-guarded southern archipelago, seeking to end the conflict.

“Why should we trust people who would separate us into powerful and powerless? Who no longer enter the Dreaming?” asked dark-voiced Sháíta, tanegír Dháiri. The Dreaming... as dangerous as following the songs of the dwellers of the deep. People were known to never emerge from it. They wandered inside it, eyes half-open, till they died.

“I will Dream,” replied Sefanír, drawing herself up to her considerable height. “But if I emerge from it,” she added, her blue eyes flashing, “will you agree to a truce and return to the council?”

Sháita chuckled, her long silver braids floating like cirrus clouds on her black tunic. “If you emerge,” she said, “you won’t need my agreement. The southern hearths will follow you without question or demur.”

Next dawn, Sháita led her to a tiny room facing the small inner courtyard. It was bare and windowless but for an opening high up that showed a patch of sky. She lowered the marís bowl on the stone floor, then put her hand on Sefanír’s shoulder.

“I would rather that our people were not divided and that we stayed true to our original resolution. But if we’re to unite them, I cannot be seen to let you bypass this test,” she said quietly. “Remember this, if you have forgotten it. If a man enters your vision whose hair is as pale as winter seagrass, come out of the vision in any way you can. Or you won’t come out at all.”

She waited until Sefanír had emptied the bowl, then left. Sefanír hummed a song to keep herself calm. *Show no fear, no hesitation... the people’s future depends on it... on me.* She felt little effect from the marís beyond its smoky aftertaste. Time went by. Consort in unclouded glory briefly appeared in her skylight, then passed. A bright dot of shimmering light hurried past—the *Reckless*, still in orbit, though now lost to her people. Finally, when the color leached from the patch of sky, she rose from the floor, determined to ask for another try on the morrow. She had given her word to her hearth that she would not return till she succeeded in healing the rift—or died in the attempt.

As she emerged into the larger outer courtyard, she saw a man seated by the murmuring fountain. He was muffled at dusk against the evening chill in garments the color of the evening sky.

“I am looking for Tanegír Sháita,” she said.

“I will take you to her,” he replied in a voice as soft as a mist cat’s pad. *They make beautiful men, the Dhairi, and they are said to bless their consorts with daughters, as well,* thought Sefanír, her gaze sliding over his fluid body lines. *If only we could get more living girl children... Madness to split into factions, when our need to keep all the lines is dire.*

Through narrow corridors they wended. *Strange,* mused Sefanír, *the dwelling seemed smaller from the outside.* He led her to a room lit by a small torch.

“We’ll await my kinswoman here,” he said and gracefully lowered himself on the thick carpet. Sefanír imitated him. After a brief interval, he reached over and idly trailed a fingertip along her collarbone. A feather would have been heavier than his touch. Waves of heat, then cold coursed through Sefanír.

“It may take her a long time to come,” he whispered. “I have pleased many. I could please you, too.”

If he is offering, he is not handfasted, thought Sefanír. *And it may help the truce take hold.*

As she leaned toward his scented warmth, he pressed her against him. She caught the spicy whiff of newly budded leaves. Sefanír's hands slid over the wild silk of his clothes. Then, under the thin fabric she felt scars embroidering his back. Disconcerted, she gripped his shoulder; and there she felt the raised edges of a handfasting brand.

Instantly sobered, she pulled at his sleeve and the fabric ripped with a long-drawn sigh. On his shoulder glared the divided circle of the Night. He laughed, and the room filled with the wingbeat of wheeling dream birds. Sefanír's abrupt movement had dislodged his headscarf. Now he discarded it, revealing hair as pale as the midwinter sun. His eyes became star-filled pools.

"You are strong-willed," he murmured. "Even my Tanegír gives in when I caress her. Why do you insult me? Shall I tell her you think her judgment in consorts is wanting? She is the only one allowed to criticize me."

"You tried to trick me," retorted Sefanír. "If I had given in, it would be an even worse trespass on her prerogatives. And all tales of the Night tell how easily she is aroused to anger."

"In that they are right," he conceded. "Those scars you felt are signs of her temper. But I suffer the fire gladly in exchange for the sweet moments. Besides, I lost fairly. Had I prevailed..." and he laughed again, the Morning Star, the First Consort of the Night. "We hunted the Two Sisters, I and all my brothers. The Elder sister had borne a child that one of us had fathered. We wanted it. Long they evaded us, but at last we overtook them, burdened as they were with the child.

"Yet the Younger would not surrender, nor leave her sister. When I saw her falter with fatigue, I grew careless and ventured close. She was prepared: her firewhip wrapped around my throat. So I bargained—in exchange for my life, I and all my brothers became her consorts. To prevent us from taking her sister's child, she sequestered herself and us in the darkside. Now the Two only touch palms at dusk and dawn. Let me please you, Tanegir. Then I can let you go without losing honor."

Sháita's warning rang in Sefanír's mind. Now she knew why so few survived the Dreaming. He, of course, guessed her thoughts.

"Perhaps my Tanegír will not notice. Perhaps I will not tell her. Who knows?"

"If each choice brings death," decided Sefanír, "I can at least take bliss as my last memory." She laughed and opened her arms. "Please me, then, First Consort. Should you not, I myself will complain to your Tanegír when she weaves me as another fireflitter in her dark braids."

“Bravery like yours deserves a gift,” he said. “You will see something few have seen and none has lived to tell.” Very gently, he eased Sefanír back into the pillows. And when he embraced her, his long hair gleaming in the torchlight, he unfurled over both of them a multihued pair of wings. Joined, they soared, their outlines bathed in his brothers’ dim radiance.

Sefanír returned north with the catamarans of the Southerners behind her like a flock of seabirds. But all across her body she also bore tracks of lightning, and for a long time her dreams were consumed by fire. For the Night valued courage but she was also exacting about her Consorts’ fidelity.

III. The Dagger Sheath

Nine generations past planetfall

My evening star, my sweetest spring,
How has your beauty set!

From the lay of Rodhánis the Storm

“Impaired, I say!” teased Kíghan. “Admit it, sister, your thinking grows less sharp if he’s involved.”

Rodhánis shook her head, exasperated. “I stand by my decision. He is the best navigator on this planet! Is it his fault that he is also beautiful?”

“Those golden eyes of his, who would not want a mist cat padding in their wake!” replied her brother, chuckling. “And you’re right, he seems to be as good among the stars as he is on the seas. But you cannot give him your brand and name him consort. You are tanegír Yehán – a son from every hearth is vying for...”

“Are you that eager to be pushed out of the hearth?” she interrupted him.

“I will remain as long as you need me but the Yeháni must have an heir, Storm, and I’m only a man.” He took her in his arms. “I know about the two miscarriages you tried to hide from the hearth members, my heart. The desolation on his face was clue enough, he is not schooled in deception. But at least it means you can conceive. They are circling you, if you don’t choose soon there will be slaughter. Seeing a wanderer in your bed is not improving their mood. And no matter how carefully you choose, they will still kill each other below your windows.”

“All these men, left to roam...” mused Rodhánis. “How did it come to this? It was not so when Captain Semira Soranakis and her Keegan arrived on the *Reckless*.”

“It has been so ever since planetfall,” he said quietly, “ever since Glorious Maiden chose to selectively harvest our women. We can barely keep our numbers steady, and neither the miscarriages nor the duels are helping. Perhaps you will know soon how family matters ran on the *Reckless*. Are you sure about the risks of this expedition? I should never have agreed...”

“And let Eridhén Kálan or one of his allies be the first to board the arcship?” burst out Rodhánis. “Not while I stand upright.”

“I cannot believe I’m recommending this, but take his eldest as your consort,” he said reluctantly. “Anáris is handsome, more even-tempered than his father—and he wants you. It may stop Eridhén from constantly raising the winds of discord.”

“Eridhén wants power too much to be deflected by kinship, and Anáris will heed him even as Yehán,” answered Rodhánis. “And with his tanegír ailing and no daughters yet, Eridhén will do anything short of declaring himself tanegír Kálan.”

“We would kill him if he did,” growled Kíghan. “At planetfall, the crew of the *Reckless* agreed that the hearths on Glorious Maiden would be headed by women. Their reasons were sound then, and even more so now. But Eridhén is too canny to make a mistake. He always hugs the shore, never ventures into blue water.”

###

The derelict arcship shone with reflected sunlight like Wanderer at his fullest. Images flashed across the console of the *Seastorm*. Rodhánis stopped the engines and went into freefall, using the thrusters to match the larger ship’s motion.

“The bubble must be the command center... that has to be the engine compartment, there on the tether...” She turned to her companion. “All frequencies open?”

He nodded, his golden eyes reflecting the vessel in the viewport. “Only background hiss. Amazing that the orbit-boosting mechanism still works. After all this time planetbound, to lift free of the atmosphere once again and board the ship that brought us here! Perhaps reclaim it...”

“Yes,” she said yearningly, putting her hand on his shoulder, “finally take to the stars, even find the first home in time...”

He turned, kissed her fingers. “Will I be your astrogator, my soul?”

She let her palm linger on his face. “When I bid for your contract, little did I know what seas we would cross, you and I. But I must choose a consort when we return, I promised my hearth.”

He half-smiled. “You promised Kíghan, who counts more than everyone else combined. Yet it seems to me that if you choose none of the mighty, it will be less likely to cause strife.”

“If I had a sister, I would let her have both the power and the burden. I would go back to exploring the wilds with you.” She exhaled as he left the seat and wrapped around her like a twining vine. “Or we could stay here, bring the *Reckless* back to life... Keep your mind on your task, cub!” she scolded him fondly as he began to plant kisses under her jawline.

“Just awaiting my tanegír’s orders...” he defended himself, hiding a smile against her neck. He glided back into the navigator’s seat, keeping a hand on her thigh. Deftly, he maneuvered the *Seastorm* next to the larger ship. Its hull was pitted and blistered, the plates unevenly hued, reflecting several rounds of replacements. “The blaze...” he pointed.

“The Sóran-Kerís starburst,” she marveled.

“Yes,” he whispered, averting his eyes. And suddenly in her mind’s eye she saw a spare woman with hazel eyes holding a boy with tousled auburn hair. *A wanderer’s child and a son at that... How can I acknowledge you as Captain Semira’s descendant, call you Sóran-Kerís? It might start another round of vendettas, the men have become so jealous of the lineages...*

“There’s a hatch,” he observed, his voice even once again, “let’s try to dock.” As gently as floating a toy catamaran on a glass-calm pond, he turned the *Seastorm*. He tucked it against the arcship’s hatch, forming a soft seal.

“Negligible radiation, no leakage from the engine,” she noted, looking at the gauges.

“Keep the comm open,” he said, attaching magnets to his boots. She began to object, but he silenced her with a gesture. “You are the foremost explorer of Glorious Maiden, but you are also tanegír Yehán. On this I agree with your brother, you put too much at risk.” He grinned. “If it hurts the vanity of the hearths, the records can show that you were the first to board.”

He pressed her hands against his lips, lingered a moment. Then he turned on the deep-sea breather they had hurriedly adapted. He went through the hatch and Rodhánis sealed it behind him. She leaned against the hull, the cold seeping into her. *We’re re-opening the gate to the stars after the long wait... and all I can think of is the danger of losing him.* She waited forever, or so it seemed, fingering the corroded pendant of Keegan Jehan, first science officer of the *Reckless* at planetfall, passed down the line to each tanegír Yehán.

“Can you hear me?” finally came his soft rasp through the comm.

“Yes!” she replied, letting out the breath she wasn’t aware she was holding. She felt the arcship starting to rotate, taking the *Seastorm* with it.

“The air is breathable, though there is an ozone smell... I managed to activate the gravity generators. I found the heat coils, too, but it will take a while for the temperature to rise.”

Dank chilly darkness awaited her on the other side of the hatch, but at least the gravity was nominal. She made her way carefully to where he was outlined against the blue runner lights that barely lit the corridors. He enfolded her hand in his own warm one, the one solid object in this domain of ghosts.

“Shall I light one of the flares?” he suggested.

“Keep them in reserve,” she decided, “let’s use them only if we must.”

After a few wrong turns they reached the bridge, a cavernous vault with a wraparound viewport, filled with navigation, engineering and communication banks. By trial and error, they found the controls for the starcharts and comms. They agreed not to disturb the other consoles. “This,” he said, touching a seat decorated with the starburst motif, “must be where Captain Semira Soranakis sat...”

“Want to try sending a signal?” she asked.

“We should be in range,” he replied, adjusting dials. She was surprised to find herself shivering, and not just from the chill. Only now did the enormity of it all fully register. Sensing her trembling, he embraced her. She tried to pull away, but he tightened his hold and she relaxed in his arms. “Nothing to be ashamed of, my light,” he murmured into her hair. “Not every day do we enter the starship that brought us here.” Still nestled within his arms, she turned towards the comm bank.

“Oránis, do you read?” she said into the primitive contraption. There was a burst of static, then a young man’s voice sprang from the receiver.

“Oránis port.”

“This is Rodhánis Yehán from...” and she took a deep breath, met his eyes. He gave his lopsided grin and nodded. “... from the *Reckless*... we boarded it successfully, I am calling from the bridge... Captain Semira’s bridge.”

A long silence followed her words. Then the receiver crackled again. “I will transmit your message to the entire network. This is a moment to remember, Tanegír!”

Then Kíghan’s voice emerged from the comm. “How long is it safe to stay there? Don’t get carried away, Storm!”

“We will be quick,” she replied. She heard him inhale anxiously. “We will return within the safety window!” she reassured him.

Her companion’s long-lashed eyes glinted with amusement. He laughed, filling the age-chilled bridge with the sound of swirling leaves. “I would give much to see the faces of your rivals... Shall we explore a bit? We can start here,” he said at her eager nod, steering them to a door on the side of the bridge.

They pressed a few buttons but the door remained stubbornly shut. Finally, he attached his magnets to it and winched it open. They gained entry into a narrow room containing a cot with a console next to it. The rest of the room was taken up by a large table buried under datapads. The viewport occupied an entire wall, now filled with blue Glorious Maiden and ivory Wanderer in jewel-like splendor, bathed in Consort’s golden-reddish light.

“The Captains’ ready-room,” said Rodhánis. “They dreamed the path from here...” He pressed a button on the console. A set of blue lights came on along the floorboards and next to the ceiling, turning the room into an underwater cavern. He pressed another button—and a husky, clipped voice rose amid crackles and hisses.

“Is étos ek fyghís pénte tekatón exínta trítion, égho Semíra Ouranákis, kyvernís astéron pliou...”

“Captain Semira,” breathed Rodhánis. “This must be the last log before the planetfall.”

“She sounds young,” he murmured. “I wonder what the words mean. Was she happy? Eager? Frightened?” Suddenly his eyes emptied out. She grasped his shoulder.

“What do you see?”

“I see... I see fire consuming this room...” He stopped, trembling. “What future did we bring with us through that hatch?”

“Surely you are not afraid, beautiful man?” she asked him softly, cradling him in her turn. “We faced near death in the Southern seas, our catamaran got smashed on the Fangs, we almost suffocated when we first launched the *Seastorm*...”

“That was different,” he said, sheltering against her. “That was just us. This, this may affect all the people...”

She started kissing him, counting on the distraction to calm him. *Rock-steady in danger, but often undone by his visions, my evening star!* And then, as he filled her senses, her caresses went from consoling to ravenous.

“Here?” he asked hesitantly, his hands embarking on their own exploration.

“Yes, here!” she replied, parting his clothes. “Where better than the Captain’s eyrie to dispel the ghosts, reclaim the *Reckless* for the living?”

“When you bestow your brand...” he said, his eyes darkening.

“I bestow to whom I choose!” she declared defiantly.

“Yes, as long as he is not a wanderer,” he corrected her gently. “Or a man who is unable to give you...” and he looked away, biting his lip.

“Look at me!” she said softly. “Here, now, no one can reach us, nothing can touch us.”

He subsided into the cot, taking her with him. Growing rough with the need, he clamped his mouth on her breast, his teeth grazing her nipple.

“Drift, wanderer!” she commanded. “Wander over me...”

“My sandy cove!” he sighed. And as he arched into her, a wisp of flame licked her mind. *Give the brand to whom you will—I am yours, yours as long as I draw breath...*

###

“This is the man who risked his life to board the *Reckless!*” said Rodhánis, her voice rising.

“I understand that you were the first to board the arcship, Yehán,” replied Eridhén Kálan, smiling lazily. “Even if what you say is true, it matters naught. I am within my rights to issue challenge on behalf of my hearth, my son is among those asking for the privilege of your brand.”

A low murmur of agreement accompanied his words. Rodhánis looked around. His allies were there in force, he knew when to strike. Teráni Sóran-Kerís was absent, the rest were neutral at best. And she was aware that her reluctance to choose a consort had rankled as much as her making history on the *Reckless*.

“Need we hew so closely to the customs?” she began again in a conciliatory tone. “I promised to decide upon my return. Does the opening of the star gates mean nothing, hearths?”

“Precisely because we can now take to the stars, we must not forget who we are,” said Eridhén.

“I will choose a consort now, if you leave him alone,” she countered.

“No,” answered Eridhén, his teeth glinting. “He has been clouding your mind, impeding your decisions. I stand by my challenge, he is a danger even if you refuse to see it. I am doing you a favor, Tanegír. Continue on your present destructive course, and I will call your brother and all the Yehán men to account.”

“No need to go that far, Kálan,” interposed Fáhri Haissé. She turned to Rodhánis. “Because of your gifts and your contributions, we gave you extraordinary leeway, Yehán, while the rest of us abided by the customs. Withdraw your protection from the wanderer and there will be no vendetta against your hearth. Shield him and we cannot prevent the issuing of challenges. Is one man, and a wanderer at that, worth so much?”

Rodhánis went through the permutations. If she complied, they would all duel him in turn, and her hearth would owe the winner a debt. If she refused their terms, the men of her hearth, Kíghan... no, not Kíghan. She was tanegír Yehán. She stood up.

“I will duel the wanderer, tanegíri.”

“No!” sprang from both Kíghan and Eridhén, but she cut them off with a glance.

“This takes precedence over all other challenges. He was contracted to my hearth.”

“What have you done?” asked Kíghan after the gathering. She rounded on him.

“The only thing I could do to protect the Yeháni.”

“At such reckless risk to yourself? Without you—ashes in the wind, the Yeháni!”

“After all that he did,” she whispered. “The best navigator in...”

“You don’t understand,” interrupted her brother heavily. “The more he accomplishes, the worse for him. The same goes for you, but the hearth name and being a woman stands between you and any harm. He, on the other hand...”

“He can go away until the storm subsides,” she said. “In time, they will forget.” She grasped her brother’s shoulder. “Send him a message. If anyone knows where to hide on this world, it’s him.”

That night, that short night, she paced the courtyard looking up at Wanderer’s pale disc, at the bright fast-moving star that was the *Reckless*. That they should be reduced to blood pride, when the stars were beckoning!

“My heart,” came a whisper from under the arch.

“Didn’t you get Kíghan’s message?” she hissed.

“Yes, Tanegír,” he replied and she could hear the smile in his voice. “But not to hold you in my arms? No navigator leaves his captain in such straits!” And he pressed her against him.

“Take the *Seastorm* and go!” she urged him, shaking with anxiety and need.

He did not reply, busy undoing the fastenings on her clothes. She sank into him, nails and teeth, not caring if she drew blood. When the first light pierced the darkness, she saw her marks on him. As she started touching them, aghast, he imprisoned her hand and kissed the knuckles.

“Calmer now, Storm?” he asked. “Ready to face the hearths?”

“Promise me you will be far away when I do!” she implored.

Before he could answer, Kíghan entered the courtyard carrying her weapons. “It’s time,” he said. His eyes burned on the other man. Then he lowered his eyes and bowed.

All the tanegiri of Oránis and their consorts stood watchfully silent around the stone beach by the shore. All but Teráni Sóran-Kerís. And then, Rodhánis’ heart became a stone in her breast. Appearing over the rise, he approached the throng in the meager finery that she had torn in her frenzy, defiantly flashing his lopsided grin. Her face draining of color, she went up to him.

“I told you to go!” she groaned in anguish under her breath.

“You will have multiple vendettas against your hearth,” he replied in a low voice. “They won’t let it rest, now that they have taken notice. And if I go into the wilds, they’ll hunt me down. Better like this.” Strands of his hair floated in front of his face. Reaching over, she tucked them behind his ear.

“You didn’t braid it,” she said. He smiled.

“Only you can do that properly, my life...”

Neither bothered with the preliminary feints. They had practiced together so often in the past that it had become a dance. He knew she was overquick with the dagger, just as she knew that he relied too much on his reflexes. They circled closer and closer. The pounding of her heart was deafening. Because of the wind, the firewhips would occasionally go astray, but rarely missed. Soon the ground was decorated with an intricate design of blood drops that marked their weaving.

The cold and wind started taking their toll. He slowed down; her wrists started aching. Her anger and self-disgust vanished—now she was filled only with the desire to be done, to sit down out of the bite of the wind. On one of the seemingly endless rounds, he passed very close. She stabbed at him, expecting his guard to come up, when she realized that he was no longer holding his dagger. Hers went into his side up to the hilt. He stumbled, then in slow motion went to his knees.

All the observers rushed towards them, but she slashed a circle around the two of them with her whip. “Away!” she snarled. They stopped in their tracks. She cradled him against her but before she could stop him, he extracted the dagger. His eyelids flickered as he tried to focus on her.

“You are so bright, my sun,” he whispered. Blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth. She held him tightly.

“Let a healer see to it,” she pleaded, “it does not look mortal!”

“You must end it,” he murmured. “They will never cease tormenting you otherwise.”

“No!” she uttered through gritted teeth, her fingers clenching around the dagger. He buried his face against her breast, gave a small sigh, as he always did before sailing into sleep. Then he wrapped his hand around her wrist and moved her hand, pressing the edge of the dagger against his throat.

“I’ll scout the twilight for you.” He opened his eyes, fastened them on hers. “Look at me...” Without warning his fingers suddenly tightened on her wrist, making her hand jerk. His grip slackened. A gush of blood poured over her hand and he grew inert in her embrace.

Wordlessly, everyone slowly left. For the entire length of the Consort’s crossing Rodhánis huddled, rocking her burden. At dusk, she began to scream. She wailed through the night, the seawaves her echo. Fine cracks started to vein windows in Oránis. The wind took her voice into the Yehán hearth where Kíghan wept, drawing fine lines across his arm with his own dagger. Into the Kálan hearth where Eridhén sat still, his nails digging into his palms. Into the other hearths of Oránis where everyone kept vigil, wondering what price the Storm would exact for her loss.

Wanderer had set and the sky was getting light when Rodhánis finally lost her voice. Kíghan went to the cove sheltering the Yehán fleet and chose a small, finely wrought catamaran, the vessel that the hearth children used to learn their deep sea skills. He sailed it to where Rodhánis was crouching, and beached it soundlessly. He approached her, gingerly enfolded her.

“Let us give him to the sea, sister...” She nodded numbly, her face raw from the rivers of salt water that had scraped and scored it.

It took a while to line the catamaran, there was not much driftwood on the shore. They placed him on top of the dry wood, laid his dagger next to him. Then Rodhánis removed Keegan Jehan’s pendant from her neck and lowered it across the red line on his throat. She pressed her cheek against his, now ice cold.

“From one star traveler to another,” she murmured hoarsely. “You wanderer, you drifted away from me, despite all your avowals. Who will be my astrogator now?”

As the tide turned, the undertow strengthened. The catamaran swayed, slowly started moving away from the shore. Kíghan lit a torch and flung it into the vessel. Eager flames sprang up in the freshening dawn breeze.

“Go,” cried Rodhánis, her voice cracking, “kiss the two tiny shades for me!”

When the vessel had become a dwindling star in the distance, Kíghan lifted her in his arms and started homeward. Three turns later, the Yeháni asked for a gathering. When Rodhánis entered

the council room, silence spread like an early snowfall. The men of her hearth followed, armed and braided for battle.

“There is no need for more fighting, Yehán,” said Vónis Táren. “Everyone is satisfied.”

“Everyone?” asked Rodhánis, her voice a hoarse whisper. “I am not satisfied.”

“Even had he borne your brand,” countered Eridhén Kálan, sounding much less assured than his wont, “he would not be recognized by the hearths as your consort. He was a wanderer, he had no standing.” A small sound escaped Teráni Sóran-Kerís, but she said nothing.

“That may be,” replied Rodhánis evenly, “but since I killed him at your behest, I can now make a claim on you, hearth Kálan. A favor as large as the one you received from me.” Eridhén went white.

“You wouldn’t...” he started.

“Am I within my rights?” asked Rodhánis quietly and winds swept the room. Teráni Sóran-Kerís raised her head.

“Yes,” she said clearly and steadily, her hazel eyes boring into Eridhén.

“You were eager to give me one of your sons, Eridhén,” said Rodhánis. “Which one will you give me now?” He started trembling. “You will not choose? Then I will take them both.”

He fell to his knees before her. “Have mercy, Storm!”

“Mercy?” she repeated, smiling bleakly. “Did you have mercy when you issued the challenge? He was worth more than both your sons.”

“Take me,” he pleaded abjectly, “take me, spare them! I beg you, spare my younger at least, this will kill their mother...!”

“I will take them both,” resumed Rodhánis, “into my hearth, into my bed, teach them not to thirst for power. And perhaps one night I will stop calling them by the name of the one whose face constantly rises before me.” Her voice filled the room. “We want to regain the sky, tanegíri. Will we take this senseless killing with us to the stars? These customs that condemn our men to loneliness, because there are not enough women? We cannot leave so many of them without caresses, angry and bereft. Don’t you wish to stop fearing for your brothers? For your sons? Use your power, unite behind me!” She paused, then resumed, her voice wavering. “If our men ask for the brand, let it be only for love.”

She sat still for a very long time. Then she raised her eyes. “The Night took all the Stars as her consorts, so the lays tell. Nothing in the customs forbids it. Aye or nay, hearths?”

Vónis Táren hung her head. “I offer you my Edánir, if you will have him,” she said.

“And I, my Keméni,” added Fáhri Haissé.

Teráni Sóran-Kerís remained silent. But as people were leaving, she came up to Rodhánis.

“I was a coward and a fool,” she said in a low, ragged voice. Her fingers dug into the younger woman’s arm. “I should have acknowledged that brightness. Captain Semira would deem me unworthy, and rightly so. I won’t ask you to forgive me, I only entreat you not to let this sunder our hearths.” She took her hand abruptly away. “I will make no claims. I forfeited that right.”

###

Within three generations, duels and vendettas ceased and wanderers became rare jewels, to be prized and cosseted. Eridhén’s tanegír died in her next childbirth, taking the child and the Kálan hearth with her. They found his cold body next to hers, his hair spread across her chest.

Kíghan never left the Yehán hearth, remaining at his sister’s side. Soon after Rodhánis handfasted her four husbands, she had a golden-eyed daughter, Semíra. After taking her daughter to the sea for her naming ceremony, Rodhánis went to the Sóran-Kerís dwelling and put her in Teráni’s arms. They say that Teráni wept when she held the child. Rodhánis did not quicken again, though her husbands did their utmost to make her smile. She organized all subsequent expeditions to the *Reckless*, but never returned there herself.

Rodhánis sang the story to her daughter even when the child was too young to understand the words. Nor have the people forgotten. They still sing it under Wanderer’s light, on the ships crossing the starry lanes. And the lay names him Consort of Rodhánis, the lost astrogator, her beautiful man.

IV. Falling Star

Planetfall

Traveler from afar who sailed to our shores—ask the Sea Rose for a gift...

In the year five hundred and sixty-three after the Launch, I, Semíra Ouranákis, captain of the starship *Reckless*, hereby enter the last log before planetfall.

It now fills our viewports, the world that pulled us by a thin thread of dreaming. When the *Reckless* lifted, all they knew was that the planet was earth-like, had oxygen in its atmosphere and

orbited a G-type primary. The world they left had been beautiful once, but was at the brink of destruction—drained resources, genocides driven by hot hatred or cold greed. Had they waited, the window would have closed forever. Flames fanned by ignorance and fear were already consuming starship launch pads and the people who built them. Still, they took a terrible chance, leapt into the dark trusting that a place waited to welcome them at the other end. They loved and raised children in this ship, lived and died without ever sleeping under open skies... though their views of the stars were glorious.

The planet's system is embedded in a nebula studded with young blue giants that swept away much of the gas and dust when they ignited, but its own yellow sun is stable. In the last four generations, as the *Reckless* got closer, they launched automated probes, then scoutships with exploration teams. Amazingly, the planet resembles the home we left, which I know only from wavering images: a world of seas and island chains, with a large moon, breathable air and a biochemistry compatible with ours.

The planet is bursting with life. In particular, there is an aquatic species that shows every sign of sentience, including communication through sound tones as well as rudimentary technology. I remember the long, heated discussions they held when I was a child, about what we should do upon arrival. In the end, they decided not to use the frozen stocks of plant and animal embryos in our cryoholds. Some were initially dubious about the wisdom of this, but eventually all agreed that we should not repay the bounty of a new home by destroying it, as we did to our birth planet.

Despite the planet's beauty, survival on it will be difficult, even with our technology. Its weather is violent and its oxygen content is at the low range for our lung function. But living in enclosed domes would make us prisoners, not explorers. So my parents' generation made an irreversible commitment. They studied the genetic material of the planet's sea dwellers, determined what sequences facilitated the processes unique to the planet. Then they spliced these into the chromosomes of children at the beginning of gestation, after testing them first on cells, then on smaller mammals in our laboratories.

As captain before me, my mother set the example. I was the first to receive tiny pieces of the new world. Her command crew followed suit with their children. And I, in my turn, had it done to the little sphere of cells that became my daughter Ethiran, even as my heart pounded fearfully in my chest.

Wonder of wonders, the material took hold, yet did not harm us. On the contrary, it has given rise to abilities that were considered the stuff of fantasy in the world that we left—telepathy,

precognition, even glimpses of clairvoyance and psychokinesis. Those who have been altered show increased mental and physical prowess, are unusually lovable and uncannily beautiful. The next generation is all modified, the boy growing in me among them. I wonder if we will ever be able to thank the native inhabitants for the gift they gave us, that has bound us to them as blood relatives.

I long to see the new home with my own eyes, but the captain should never leave her ship until it reaches harbor. I have steeled myself to wait until we settle the *Reckless* into circumpolar orbit. I will take the voice-activated command crystal with me when we go downplanet. It is gene-keyed to me and Keegan Jehan, to make sure the starship is never inadvertently activated.

There are moments when I think of all the danger and labor ahead... and my head swims. Then only Keegan's arms feel safe—Keegan, who laughs at obstacles and burns my fears away with his kisses, Keegan who perfected the chimeric chromosomes and the augmented mitochondria that will allow us to breathe unaided on the planet's surface.

I did not name the new world, though it was my prerogative as commander of this mission. Because of the breathtaking nebula around the system, my girl began calling it Kore Dhoxas—Glorious Maiden—and the moniker stuck. She also named its sun and moon, Maiden's Consort and Wanderer. A crack linguist already, she speaks all the mother languages of our crew.

And what of her brother? Will he come intact through the pregnancy? Will he survive on this new world with all its unknowns? Ariven I will name him, from the old scroll. Perhaps he will sing lays as haunting as those of the long-lost sweet-blooded Celt boy, who gave his life for a single night with one of my ancestors.

Ethiran and others in her generation have persistent visions, and I cannot tell if they are dreams or premonitions. They hear songs in a language that whispers and caresses, they see women as radiant and merciless as the dawn, and bewitching men with shimmering lights in their streaming hair...

Will they bless or curse us? Will they even remember us, who came as reckless and as jaunty as the hope that launched us? And what will they become, now that we started them on this path? All I can do is take Ethiran and Keegan's hands, step outside, and make a wish—that this place becomes a haven and a starship for our children... that they root and blossom here.

We will stride in the sky, or die trying. We have no need of small lives.

V. Nightsongs

Nineteen generations past planetfall

The darklit voice of my wanderer falls silent when he finishes translating Captain Semíra's words, and I lay back into the bower of my consort's arms. As Adhísa puts down the crystal that holds our past and our future, the scent of juniper from his braids fills the night air. A mershadown's long moan wafts in, like mist from the bay, letting us know they're starting their migration south on the morrow. "They wished well, they who sailed on the *Reckless* across the ocean of stars," he murmurs.

"They did more than wish. They wrought tirelessly to make it come true," whispers Arivén and his embrace tightens, "as you did, my soul..."

I pick up the command crystal, feeling the mild sting of its protective field. My two bright stars close their hands over mine, homage and blessing.

"The gift of Semíra, of Rodhánis, of the mershadowns that gave us back the *Reckless* and all its glories," I say. "The records, the logs, the activation command sequences... Had I wished upon the Sea Rose, I could not have asked for more."

And now... what is your wish now... heavenly fire...? My breath catches in my throat as they nestle closer, start to caress me like warm breezes with lips and fingertips.

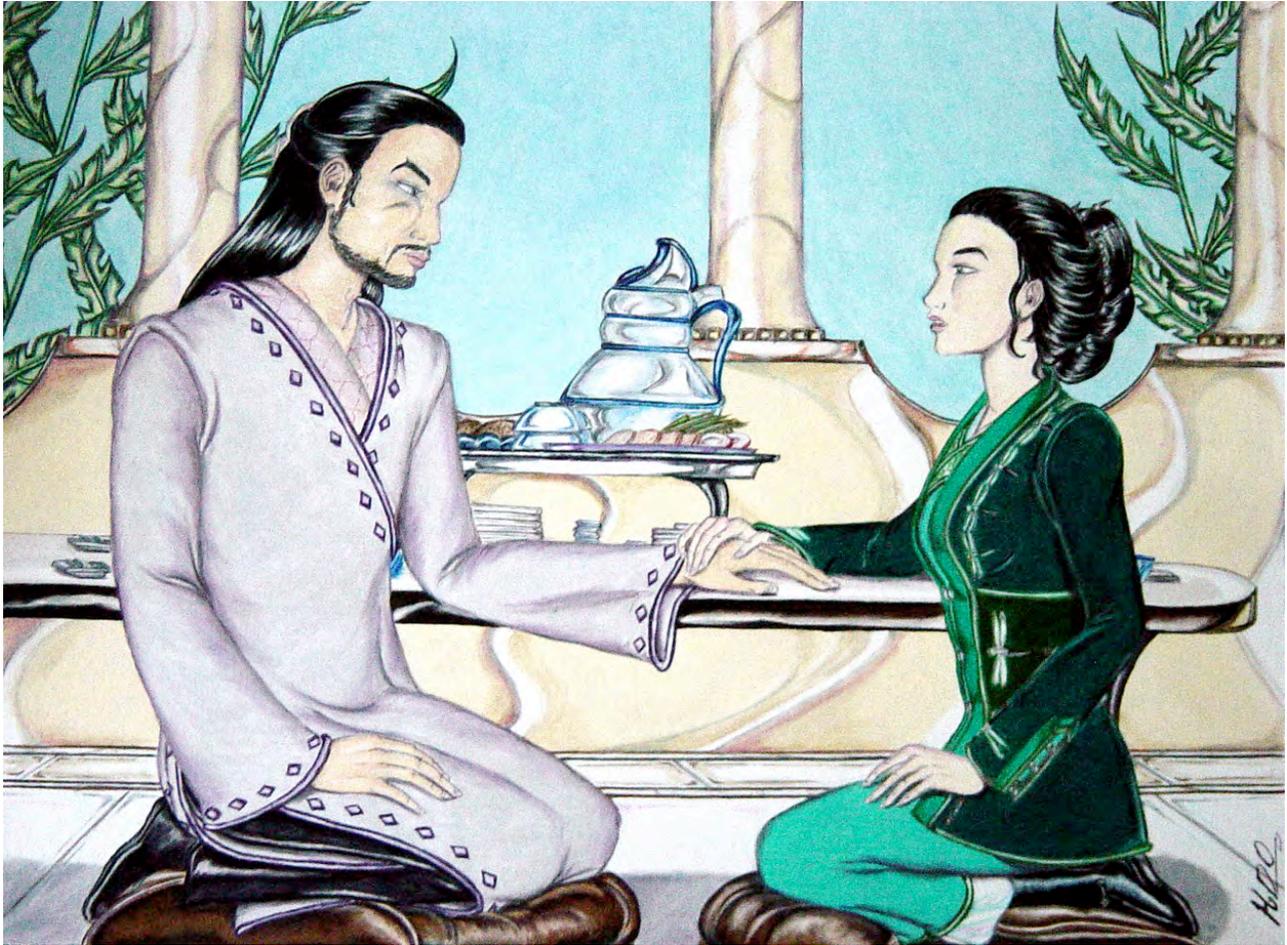
Beloved...

They flow over me as gently and irresistibly as the rising tide. I float into their minds, into their hearts, the yearning, dazzling men of Captain Semira's line with their scarred breasts, their roughened hands. Changelings, shapeshifters—falling stars, ships with fragments of sky as their sails, that have come home from long journeys to rest in me at last.



Nightsongs (Rest at Journey's End)

The Wind Harp



Entrusted

The Wind Harp

When Némi Ferái Kámi-o sent me a formal summons, I took more than usual care with my appearance. Not that it would matter to him – his retainers, conscious of the length and renown of the Kámi-o lineage, constantly complained about his informality. Besides, he had seen me in all states of dishevelment ever since he had taken me as his fosterling, after my parents...

I walked down the flagstone colonnade, forcing myself into calm by watching the ketúo fronds sway and murmur their pleasing harmonies. It would not do to arrive early. The late morning bells began chiming when I entered the pavilion whose opalescent roof refracted Kánri's light.

Ferái smiled at me as I bowed. The low oval table by his side was covered with datacrystals, tablets and commlinks. A light robe and loose trousers billowed around his neat frame and his gleaming black hair was held back by two combs of polished shell. Despite a smudge of ink on one high cheekbone, he still looked the epitome of elegance. I felt distinctly overdressed.

"What does Némi Ferái Kámi-o wish to share?" I asked, using formal address.

"Food, to begin with," he answered in affectionate mode, gesturing towards the breakfast tray. I took a few bites but I might as well be chewing pebbles. And between his Talent and his training, little escaped the founder of the Confederation's diplomatic corps.

"I will be plain with you," he said softly. "You are the best Sensor yet born on Ténli and your intelligence matches your Talent. No, no false modesty," he forestalled me. "The other members of the Circle think you are too young but I would like to entrust you with a mission. A difficult and dangerous one." He placed his hand lightly on mine. "Please refuse if you think it is beyond you, Antóa."

Refuse? I'd rather die than disappoint him. Nor would he have asked this of me if he thought I had no chance of success.

"The Kem-Fir tower has a new ruler," he continued, absently rubbing his close-cropped beard.

"I thought Dor-Nys Nir-Vad was at her prime."

"We all did," he agreed ruefully. "The official word from Behtalka is that she fell unexpectedly ill – and refused to let any Confederation healers see her."

"After all the Confederation efforts to create stable links with the Gan-Tem towers..."

"A loss for her people, first and foremost," he said gently. "But Serkadren cares little what happens on Gan-Tem as long as their weapons flow smoothly in his direction." His eyes turned as

hard as the agates they resembled. "I am not endangering your life to further the ambitions of the Melhuat of Behtalka. As is common with the Gan-Tem, the neighboring towers attacked Kem-Fir during the transition. Kem-Fir prevailed, but its water reservoir was damaged."

"And I assume that Melhuat Serkadren dispatched a starship to the jump point, with instructions to supply Kem-Fir with water but only if the new Dor-Nys asks. And since such an action would fatally undermine her authority and the tower's autonomy..." He gave me a long glance.

"Indeed, she has not asked. To our knowledge, Kem-Fir has only two small starships. Neither is equipped to fetch water from the system's asteroids, even if they could evade Serkadren's patrolling fortress. They are feverishly trying to reconstitute the ducts connecting the reservoir to the aquifer. They may get attacked again. In the meantime –"

A Whittling... I guessed, letting the thought float unguarded. Ferái nodded.

"Officially you are there as an observer. Your true mission is to persuade the new Dor-Nys to stay her hand. If we can turn a Gan-Tem tower into an ally for Ténli..." He hesitated but I heard his thought clearly enough. Now it was my turn to touch his hand.

"I know you want Ténlin influence to be as great as possible in the Confederation, Némi Ferái."

"To the Behtalkat, the Talent is a weapon. But Serkadren is gentler than his sire. If we can guide him, the complexion of the Confederation may change." He stood, raising me along with him, and formally pressed my hands between his. "Pronounce, Antóa Tásri, Erúe's hope, Kandéi's joy."

For the mission, Ferái gave me the access codes to his own starship, the *Sedói*. After stuttering my thanks for the extravagant gift, I suggested it would be best if I went alone. He disagreed. Reaching accord on all other aspects of the mission, we argued calmly but stubbornly over this point till Kánri dipped below the horizon, leaving the sky awash in lavender and gold.

"All the risk and all the glory?" he finally asked. I felt my cheeks grow warm. He smiled, the amusement laced with sorrow. *The image of Erúe – her calm bravery, her love of strange skies... but the slate-green eyes and the ability to gaze deeply into people, those are Kandéi's.* Then he turned as smoothly opaque as his hair combs.

"You will be on your own. We cannot override the Behtalkat jamming devices without triggering alerts. Only Kem-Fir's Dor-Nys knows the full writ of your mission. We will decide

what to disclose when you return." I smiled at the *when*. He smiled, too, and brushed the back of his hand fleetingly on my cheek, releasing me to my task.

###

To go from Ténli to Gan-Tem required three jumps. The *Sedói* negotiated the journey effortlessly. It might look like a snowflake, but its engines would serve a *parméi* warship.

Half-listening to the ship's chirps and hums, I went over the Gan-Tem greetings, berating myself for not having mastered the glottal stops of the Nim-Zad and Tel-Kir castes. The male Tel-Kir were the face of Gan-Tem to the outside world, but it was the Nim-Zad, the female law enforcers within the towers, that I feared.

The ship Melhuat Serkadren had dispatched loomed over the final jump point. The size of a Behtalkat city, its entire arsenal was trained at the maelstrom of the wormhole entry. I ran a discreet scan – its scoutships were gone beyond sensor range. All but one, which approached me peremptorily demanding entry. Given their scanning hardware, sending someone physically seemed oddly inefficient. But when the long-legged scoutship pilot sauntered through the docking bay iris, I knew the ostentatious visit had little to do with vetting the *Sedói*.

"Antóa Tásri, conscientious like all the Kámi-o acolytes," he drawled in Dominant Mode Behtalkat. The leakage of his thoughts was like a muddy pond churned by wind. "Not using a *parméi*? Why are the Ténli-e so chary of committing their resources for the good of the Confederation?" He prowled restlessly around my control console, the third-rank nostril gem of the Tohduat Order casting yellow reflections on the elaborate misedraht handle tucked in his armband.

"A *parméi* is too large and fragile to enter atmosphere, Nimbredaht Talsekrit," I pointed out. I gave him the honorific of mentor he did not deserve, while using Dominant Mode myself. "Also, a small vessel shows good faith and I'm here only as an invited observer, after all."

"The Gan-Tem are only impressed by brute strength!" he exclaimed, running his fingers through his spiky dark-blond hair, cropped closer than required. "My brother – the Melhuat –" he corrected himself quickly, "would make short work of their pretensions."

"I feel quite safe, knowing a Tohduat warrior is nearby..." I said with a smile that I didn't try too hard to make warm.

Talsekrit glared at me. Most would consider him handsome and he was reasonably intelligent – no offspring of the Melhuat that was subpar in any way lived beyond Selection, nor did the hapless pardaht that birthed it. Yet his presence in my mind was flaccid, drab.

The Tohduat had wanted Serkadren. But their unlamented sire would not give away his most promising seedling. He had given them Talsekrit instead. The Tohduat had to take him and be properly grateful with little to show for it: rumors said that Talsekrit's Talent was level three, the lowest possible for entry into the Order. Whereas Serkadren had proved his Talent unequivocally by not only killing his sire, but by doing so with the tacit approval – and, some said, the covert aid – of the Tohduat.

"Where are your scoutships?" I asked Talsekrit.

"Monitoring the situation on Gan-Tem," he replied. Ensuring that no one smuggled water to Kem-Fir, unless it agreed to Behtalka's terms. No wonder the Gan-Tem distrusted all Confederation envoys. The only question was exactly how hostile my reception would be.

"I will be doing some reconnaissance myself," he added, practically puffing out his chest.

"Is that wise?" I said. "The Gan-Tem –"

"– won't be so foolish as to interfere with official Behtalkat representatives," he interrupted, putting emphasis on *official*. *The Ténli-e think they can still act on their own*, I heard, despite the thought-shields. His Talent was low, all right. *And to send her... she's so young... though good-looking in that sinuous way of theirs, if you look past the angular body, the slanted eyes... Clever, a man would be wasted on a Dor-Nys. Even so, Kámi-o is taking a huge risk. I wonder what he's after, he's not to be trusted. Still, I assume my brother and the Order know of his plans.*

"You and the pretty toy have leave to go through," he said with a negligent wave of his hand. Leave... we did not need anyone's permission to sail amid the stars, once. But that was before Behtalka engulfed the entire quadrant.

###

As soon as I emerged from the last jump point, I activated the magnetic deflectors. Less than a heartbeat later, a powerful energy discharge jolted the *Sedói*. I recognized the jagged burr design of the ship that filled my viewport – a Gan-Tem marauder three times my size. On its underside were two interlocked ovals, one orange, one dark red: the device of Kem-Fir Tower.

"Ténli-e witch," came a hoarse voice through the comm, its tonal pitches more complex than those I had been taught. "My Dor-Nys doesn't waste her time with Confederation spies." And a second discharge slammed into the *Sedói*, rocking it like a seed pod borne on a turbulent creek.

The Tel-Kir warriors that crewed the Gan-Tem starships were not known to bargain much. I could outrun them, but I doubted they would listen to anyone they could herd like prey. I aimed the *Sedói* straight below the turret stalks and wedged it between a hatch and a launching vent. Besides magnets, I also used the gravity holds we had recently installed on the *Sedói*, hoping that the Gan-Tem had not yet perfected countermeasures.

"Stand and fight!" challenged my adversary, while he and his crew tried various ways to pry me off their hull, none gentle. "Or I release piercer motes on you!" I took a deep breath.

"Don't deprive your Dor-Nys of her invited guest," I said in a conversational tone, tamping down my fear – their hull piercers made short work of all metal. "It won't compensate for being unable to evade the Behtalkat cordon. And hyperventilating will just make you thirstier." At this, I heard a cough that could equally well be amusement or indignation... and he appeared on my communication viewscreen.

Though still rippling with muscle, his contours were starting to soften – the oldest Tel-Kir I had ever seen. He might be tipping thirty local cycles. Almost none of his caste lived that long. When they were not fighting for their towers, they faced off in the underground arenas. His hair was shaped like a rock formation sculpted by wind. The Kem-Fir interlocking circles had been cut into the side of his neck, the grooves inlaid with colored metal chips. Intricate studs decorated his nostrils, ears and eyebrows, their silvery sheen contrasting with his skin.

Cunningly shaped and fitted, a darter jutted from his left wrist, a flame thrower protruded from his right forearm. The links to his nerve endings were defiantly visible, at once decoration and bravado. His studs and prosthetics were kel-in, the sole item that his planet possessed in abundance. Light, malleable yet unbreakable once forged, it had made it possible for Gan-tem engineers to create weapons irresistible to Behtalka.

The engineers of Kem-Fir tower were unparalleled. Their weapons responded directly to neuronal impulses. For the sake of such weapons Gan-Tem had been brought into the Confederation – despite the systematic killing of their Talented whom they considered possessed, despite the Whittlings whenever a Dor-Nys deemed that the population of her tower strained its resources.

"I heard nothing from my Dor-Nys that would make it worthwhile to spare you," said the Tel-Kir, gazing at me with eyes as bright yellow as autumn grass on the plains of Nireg.

"Perhaps your Dor-Nys doesn't tell you everything," I replied.

"This is a feeble ploy to save your life."

"Kill me and find out."

His eyes narrowed. Then, with a snort, he snapped his visual display off. They stopped trying to dislodge me, though I kept a close watch on my sensors as we neared Gan-Tem, trailing its skeins of moonlets. At the edge of its atmosphere, I detached from my reluctant hosts. I kept the deflectors at maximum until the destroyer dwindled to a bright point in my rear viewports.

Under a turbulent sky pierced by meteors, I set course for Kem-Fir. Gan-Tem was tidally locked. All the towers huddled in the narrow band between the day and night side, each perched on top of a water reservoir that also nourished their plant and animal food supply. The twilight zone was raked by hurricane-force gusts rising from the extreme temperature differentials. These now buffeted the *Sedói*, forcing me to constantly fire my corrective thrusters.

Kem-Fir was a hill-sized trapezoid that glowed a dull brown-red in the eternal gloaming. It rose steeply from a basin sparsely strewn with plants armored against the radiation from Gid-En's flares. A few slit openings and dim green lights at irregular intervals broke the sheer, pitted face but I knew that the towers had hidden entrances – though none at the four lower levels.

My instructions were to maintain silence until hailed, so I landed on the flat top of the tower expecting a long wait. But I had barely anchored and powered down the *Sedói* when I saw a portion of the roof lift. Outlined against the dark gap I saw the silvery silhouettes of four Nim-Zad. Gid-En's light reddened their studs and the tips of their plasma javelins.

###

My Nim-Zad escorts whisked me around so fast that my sense of the tower remained hazy. It was filled with twisty corridors and irregular side openings, built for the inevitable moment when another tower would attempt to overcome it. Through the openings I caught glimpses of Kem-Fir's inhabitants, their caste identifiable by their decorative scars and hair patterns. I saw a few sucking thirstily on the finger-sized dewgatherers that fluttered over tower reservoirs before my guards tightened their knot around me, blocking my view.

Eventually we reached a room whose sole furniture was a long, bare bench. Several more Nim-Zad stood around it, their clothes ranging from dark to light blue to match their status. Weapons were seamlessly embedded in their arms, mostly darters and tasers. They surged towards me in a single motion, although I noticed the younger ones could barely keep up. A not unpleasant musky scent permeated the room – the entire tower, I now realized, though here it was stronger.

"You can keep your innermost garment," decided the senior Nim-Zad after they had searched me as gently as their destroyer had probed the *Sedói*. "All else remains here – these, too," she gestured at my hairpins. "We know of your dealings with the Idriem."

I wouldn't look very imposing wearing just a bodyform and waist-length hair, but she had a point. Hair ornaments, poisoned or otherwise, had been assassination tools on Ténli for generations before our starships alit on Idre and sampled its settlers' exquisite biotech. And according to my sources, the Nim-Zad used similar means to settle matters of internal hierarchy.

"Is this another sign of witchery?" asked a junior Nim-Zad, grasping a fistful of my loosened hair. My retinal microdots were still adjusting to the dim light, so I could barely distinguish the dark silver strands from the black. Their eyes, of course, suffered from no such handicap.

"Many Ténli-e have multicolored hair," I replied, gently sliding my hair out of her fingers.

"We should never have allowed a Possessed to enter Kem-Fir." She grazed my breast with her kel-in tipped fingertips, leaving a dull burning sensation behind. An inkblot of blood bloomed on my tunic. I was glad Ferái had insisted I take a hefty dose of immunohunters.

"Enough," intervened the senior. She motioned me towards a rectangular opening covered by a semi-transparent membrane. As I crossed it, my skin prickled and a sharp taste flooded my mouth. Why and how did a Gan-Tem tower come to possess an Idri dampener?

On the other side was a high-ceilinged room that grew wider as you went further from the entrance. Directly below it was the tower's reservoir. I shivered before I could control myself. All those layers of earth and stone above me... The musky smell grew deeper – but there was something else, as well. As soon as I crossed the barrier, pressure built up behind my eyes. I made a mental note to sort this out later and concentrated on the task before me.

"I wish I could say welcome to Kem-Fir," said a voice that vibrated like a crystal blade.

I edged cautiously forward. As my retinal microdots finally compensated fully, I saw a dais against the far wall. It was bordered with sconces whose cold fire rose vertically, undisturbed by any air currents I created by moving. Upon the dais a figure sat cross-legged. Her clothes, the same metallic bluish-white as that of the sconce lights, shimmered and threw refractions at her slightest

move. Her hair fanned stiffly behind her like a great tree, laden with intricate metal adornments. A beautifully wrought kel-in mask covered her face. The expression on it was of calm detachment, but bright orange eyes gleamed through the eyeholes.

"Dor-Nys Teg-Rav," I greeted her, "may wind never touch your face." She extended her hand towards me. A small rectangle nestled in her palm, filled with clear liquid. I bowed. "I am deeply honored. But please give all available water to your people, they need it more than I."

"A gracious Confederation envoy... who bothered to learn Gan-Tem caste dialects." She let the silence lengthen, but Ferái had taught me well – I didn't let it push me into nervous chatter. "You are not nobility. Should I consider this an insult?"

"You turned down several other candidates who outranked me," I replied, willing my voice to stay steady. "I am fully empowered to negotiate –"

"Your finessing of my Tel-Kir, impressive," she interrupted me. "But we don't need any help."

"If so, why did you consent to see me?" At that moment, I heard a distant sonic boom.

"I want you to see that Kem-Fir is strong and will get stronger. And I want you to tell your Behtalkat masters that we do things solely on our terms."

"And their terms?" I asked, ignoring both the insult and the threat.

"He's canny, Serkadren." She shrugged. "He offered to help us rebuild our reservoir. In return, Kem-Fir was to give him any Possessed born or found while his engineers were here – the girls to become his pardaht, the boys to become Tohduat. He sent the offer unencrypted, on the merchants' frequency." The merchants, the only caste untouched by tower enmities, the glue of Gan-Tem society. The mask could not change its expression. Her hands, though, dug into her knees before she could still them. And my eyes had adjusted well enough to see that her nails, bare of augmentation, were bitten to the quick.

Three gifts in one, I mused, Serkadren wanted to show her and everyone in Behtalka's orbit how easy it is for him. He will instruct his engineers to choose the best apprentice weaponeers as well, Kem-Fir will lose its knowledge monopoly in one fell swoop. An uprising or a Whittling now if she refuses, annihilation of the tower by starvation or takeover later if she accepts.

Just then, I heard a low hum behind me. Through the barrier came the Tel-Kir who had harassed the *Sedói*. A whiff of barely suppressed triumph hovered around him. He went to the dais, touched the edge of Teg-Rav's over-robe. A discharge ran through his fingers and the musk in the room got overlaid with the acrid scent of burnt flesh. When he withdrew his hand, I saw spots of

blood glisten on the garment. The dull throb behind my eyes sharpened to a fiery spike. I felt such spikes whenever I faced a Tohduat who could not – or would not – control his Talent.

"Please greet our guest," Teg-Rav told him. He stood stock-still, looking down at me from his great height. "Properly this time, Tan-Rys." The scent in the room turned slightly bitter and his yellow eyes flickered like brush fires. He ostentatiously went on one knee, touched my ankle.

Unlike her, he was easy prey, I sensed him think. We'll demand his ship's weight in water.

"Do you wish to best your adversaries?" I challenged him as he snapped upright.

"With your puny help?" he jeered.

I inhaled and spoke as fast as I could, switching to the tonals forbidden to all but the Dor-Nys. "I brought a drug that can put some of your people into temporary suspended animation. This will let you repair the reservoir ducts without a Whittling." I kept addressing her but pinned my gaze on him. "Do you want to protect your people as you have vowed to do? Or do you seriously think that capturing the Melhuat's low-Talented brother will be your salvation?"

"I should have pulverized you when I had the chance!" he growled. I dove for the floor. A needle from his arm darter flew through where I had just stood and buried itself in the wall.

"Pause!" I heard Teg-Rav shout, an arena fight command. When I looked up, she was standing at the edge of the dais, the sconce lights swirling restlessly in her wake.

"Who else knows you're Talented? And that Tan-Rys is an Amplifier?" I asked her as soon as I was reasonably sure he would obey her. "How long before the resonance between you grows so strong that the dampener fails? And what will happen when the Nim-Zad realize you let the Idriem test you so that they could customize the dampener?"

Slowly she removed her mask. Her fine-hewn face bore no decorative scars, except for the two interlocking circles inlaid on her left temple and cheekbone. She was young, younger than I, but the skin around her eyes was as discolored and cracked as her lips.

"My people must not find out," she said, her tonals shifting to equal address. "At least not before Kem-Fir has fully recovered. We will exchange Serkadren's brother for water – or for Behtalkat engineers without tithes of people or skills from us. I thank Ténli for its offer, but my people would never accept it. Even if it works as you say, it will make us dependent on you."

"Besides, why should we trust you?" added Tan-Rys. "What is Ténli's gain in this?"

"The motives of Ténli I will discuss with your Dor-Nys," I said. To my surprise he gave me a genuine smile. *What a Tel-Kir you would make...* I turned to Teg-Rav. "Serkadren will not ransom Talsekrit. Talsekrit is still alive, alone of the Melhuat's half-brothers, only because he is a Tohduat."

But even if Serkadren valued him, the Melhuat of Behtalka can never appear weak to the other Confederation members."

Teg-Rav stumbled. Tan-Rys stiffened but she raised her hand and he went instantly still. Slowly, she sat down at the edge of her dais. *Then it is well that I told the Nim-Zad to start the Whittling as soon as you walked into this room, Antóa Tásri.*

"I'm too thirsty to continue blocking you," she murmured. She rubbed her eyes tiredly. "The first of many such decisions. Now you know why a Dor-Nys always wears a mask."

Perhaps I could still retrieve something from the ruin, if I acted fast enough. In measured steps, I went to her and gathered a fistful of her robe, ignoring the jabs of electricity that racked my arm. "If you grant me a few kos-it of time, I will go into suspension with Tan-Rys to show your people it can be done. We will endure the black sleep together, he and I, and awaken together – or not at all. If not for this time, then for the future, so that you have choices."

###

We underwent the ordeal in Tan-Rys' starship, anchored next to mine on the rooftop of Kem-Fir. It was a compromise: they would not allow me to bring anything inside the tower, I deemed it foolhardy to give them access to the *Sedói*. Besides, they might be more convinced if they used their own instruments.

I persuaded Tan-Rys to consume several dewgatherers before we lay down on the hard platforms in the crew quarters. He was already parched, and the black sleep would dehydrate him further. A watchful ring formed around us, bristling with biometric testers. I proffered him the two identical plungers. They contained a dose calibrated to hit hard but wear out fast. After he had chosen one, he watched me discharge mine before following suit. A few heartbeats later, darkness pulled me under like a cold seawave.

When I surfaced, I tried to stand up but my legs kept folding under me. The Idriem had warned us about the nausea and disorientation. They hadn't discussed the sleep itself, though I knew what to expect by now. I had faintly felt Tan-Rys at the edge of my awareness but his presence had been oddly reassuring, a whiff of warm wind. It was the rest that had been disquieting. As I continued the contest with my limbs, he glared at me from the floor.

"Done this before?" he rasped.

"Once," I answered. I didn't think it was a good time to tell him I had emerged with a tiny cardiac arrhythmia – and that the damage had defied the repair efforts of Ténli's best healers.

"You're braver than I thought." Gritting his teeth, he managed to get up. I noticed that nobody presumed to offer him aid. I consulted my time keeper – the people of Kem-Fir out in the wilderness might still be alive. At that point, silence swept the room and the circle around us opened to let Teg-Rav through.

"What did the instruments show?" she asked.

"The Ténli-e spoke truth, Dor-Nys," said a woman whose studs and inlays indicated she was an engineer. "The instruments showed them close to death across all metrics – heartbeat, temperature, oxygen consumption, brain activity."

"And you, Tel-Kir, how do you fare?" she asked Tan-Rys. He flexed his hands, making the links to his weapons thrum.

"Well enough to resume protecting Kem-Fir, Dor-Nys."

"Now that I'm here, I would like to see the Ténlin vessel," said Teg-Rav.

"It is reckless enough to come outside – but enter the witch ship? This is improper, Dor-Nys," said the senior Nim-Zad. Everyone's gaze swiveled to Teg-Rav.

"You also felt that Nir-Vad's choice of successor and her last wish were improper," replied Teg-Rav. The hush deepened and the air in the room turned sour with electricity. "It is good to speak your mind. But don't make it a habit to constantly question the decisions of your Dor-Nys."

###

"May I offer you some water?" I asked as soon as we were in the *Sedói*. Two Nim-Zad were stationed outside, weapons readied, but Tan-Rys had entered the ship behind Teg-Rav.

"Not while my people thirst," she replied removing her mask as slowly as an aged woman. "However, I think my Tel-Kir needs it." Tan-Rys scowled but emptied the bowl I handed him, though he stopped drinking every now and then to glance at her. "Now tell me why you shouldn't meet with an accident when you take off in this plaything."

"You would have ordered that done during the black sleep," I said. "And if you had, Tan-Rys would never find out what Ténli wants." Her eyes burned at me. "Many in the Confederation would like to see Behtalkat rule moderated. For that to happen, the rest of us must band together and give them no excuse for intervening. Is the Melhuat's brother still alive?"

"He is," she admitted after a tiny hesitation. "Of course, the Nim-Zad had to examine him thoroughly. But I won't let the Tel-Kir exert themselves until our aquifer is repaired."

"Afterwards, he's ours," rumbled Tan-Rys, eyes and teeth glinting. "A Tohduat in the arena – that will be rare entertainment!"

"It's true that Serkadren cannot show weakness by offering ransom. But the Tohduat leave none of theirs unavenged. Not a surprising policy, when they glean Talented children from all members of the Confederation. If you kill Talsekrit, you hand Behtalka the perfect reason to obliterate Kem-Fir." I sensed Teg-Rav parsing the permutations. Then she subsided into the astrogator's chair.

"If you return Talsekrit, Behtalka will be in your debt, rather than the other way around," I pointed out. I took a deep breath. "And if you allow the people now wandering outside to return, it will signal to the other towers and the rest of the Confederation that Kem-Fir's Dor-Nys is confident in her rule."

"I cannot do that," she said quietly. "Once chosen for Whittling, they receive the outcast caste mark. If a merchant convoy is nearby sometimes they collect survivors, especially if they're young. But none can ever enter a tower again, theirs or any other."

"Then let me take them. I can be considered a merchant of sorts."

"In this?" she asked, gesturing at the *Sedói*.

I had been feeling cold ever since the black sleep, but now I grew colder. "How many went outside?" The *Sedói* could hold about twelve people. Seventeen, if I removed everything but the engines and the control console – but that would take time...

"One hundred eighty-three," she replied. Now it was my turn to sink into a seat.

Suddenly Tan-Rys put his hand on her robe and kept it there. The low sizzle was clearly audible. "Let me take them, Dor-Nys," he said so low I could barely hear him. "My marauder is almost big enough." She looked at the thin rills of blood seeping from under his hand. Carefully, she interposed her own hand between his and her garment.

"Where do you propose to take them? Such an act will make you an outcast as well."

"I'm already spending the gift of a second life," he replied. "I will take them to our merchant outpost on Regadif. It is a free zone, nobody will interfere with us there. It won't be easy living without the scent of a Dor-Nys, in a place where castes shift and mingle – but it's our old home." He touched the two circles on his neck. "We of Kem-Fir still have its two suns as our device."

"When Rovbehim and Tuvrehad shifted orbits and boiled Regadif's seas away, the Ténli-e helped build the ships that brought the Gan-Tem here," I added. "Perhaps our peoples can fly together again?"

"I wish I could fly between the stars," she said longingly. "The only time a Dor-Nys goes outside is when she takes over another tower. And when she lies on her death platform, surrounded by her companions." She pulled one of the adornments from her halo of hair and held it out to Tan-Rys. Then she handed me Talsekrit's *misedraht*. "Tell Serkadren of Behtalka that this and the Tohduat who carries it are gifts from the Dor-Nys of Kem-Fir." Then she took off her two over-robos and dropped them on the floor.

###

Tan-Rys and I hurriedly strung a web between our two ships made of ribbons from Teg-Rav's robes stretched on kel-in wires. As we flew around Kem-Fir, the winds that raked the twilight plucked the web. And the banished came – they came to the call of the windsong and Teg-Rav's scent. They staggered and crawled into the docking bay of the marauder, skins blistered and peeling. We didn't get them all. Some had impaled themselves on thorns, walked into the path of kel-dif lizards. Others had vanished past our ken. I helped them lie down wherever I could find a spot and I pressed plungers, calculating and recalculating the doses and hoping I had enough. Even so, I knew that some would not awaken when we reached Regadif.

The Nim-Zad flung Talsekrit at me when I was attaching the net to the *Sedói*. He was clothed in bruises, gashes and crusted blood. I cared for him as best I could and put a force field across the entrance to the sleep cubicle of the *Sedói*. He was furious with shame and fear and both peaked when he saw his *misedraht* handle peeking from my armband. But he did not bluster, he locked himself in silence. I didn't envy him – Serkadren was known for finesse, but not for gentleness. The Tohduat were not known for either.

"Care to cajole the Behtalkat at the jump point?" asked Tan-Rys as we sped to our destination. He had agreed to let me attach the *Sedói* to his marauder and act as his astrogator 'this once'. "You'll be better at it than I."

"Anyone would be better at it than you," I teased him. He let out his harsh cough of amusement. "But our best safeguard is Talsekrit."

When we emerged from the jump point, the Behtalkat ship's weapons strafed the space around us. But it was only a gesture, their missiles went ostentatiously wide. I had beamed an unencrypted message at maximum boost as soon as we had left Gan-Tem.

"I will not be able to contact you openly, but the merchants always leak information," Teg-Rav said, filling the viewscreen. "You will be welcome in Kem-Fir as long as I am its Dor-Nys. Longer, if I'm successful." Her eyes flickered to Tan-Rys. "May you never be bested, Tel-Kir." And the viewscreen went dark. He leaned over and touched it.

"May wind never touch your face, Dor-Nys," he whispered.

We got little sleep between flying, monitoring our sleepers, and the damage to our bodies from windblown grit and Gid-En's radiation. The pain was fierce – I heard stifled moans escape Tan-Rys when he thought I was dozing – and we lacked regenerating stem cultures. As Regadif's two suns grew in our screens, he kept rubbing the kel-in ornament Teg-Rav had given him. In my fatigue I must have slipped, because he answered my unspoken question.

"Each ornament on a Dor-Nys' hair comes from a past Dor-Nys. This was Nir-Vad's. Do you know what signals the succession?"

"The Dor-Nys takes a lover openly," I replied.

"I'm past my prime, though Nim-Zad still ask me to sire more for their caste and mine. Yet Nir-Vad chose me. When she removed her mask, I thought I would be consumed. But she smiled, and said, 'I am too ill to be pleased, Tel-Kir. Just keep me warm.' When the time came for me to be staked down next to her platform along with her other companions, she used her last wish to give me my life. The senior Nim-Zad were furious at the custom breach. She made me swear I would never let harm come to her successor. I think she knew Teg-Rav and I were Possessed." His eyes filled and he must have been worn out, because he let them overflow. "I keep wondering if I kept my promise."

And as the full repercussions of my actions sank in, I wept with him.

###

"You exceeded your brief by far," Némi Ferái Kámi-o remarked, as quietly as was ever his wont. "You went to Kem-Fir to prevent a Whittling, not to bring a starship's worth of outcasts to Regadif."

"The group will be a refuge for Talented Gan-Tem," I argued, determined to remain calm. "Serkadren and the Tohduat are now in Teg-Rav's debt. Serkadren cannot attack Kem-Fir or Regadif without harming his own standing."

"The Circle met yestereve," he said. My heart sank below the garden flagstones. He put his hand on my wrist – gently, though the regenerating skin stung even at the lightest touch – and I girded myself to hear the rest. "Your name will henceforth be Tásri-e." And he let his happiness flood my mind. My mouth fell open before I managed to take hold of myself. "Do not be so overwhelmed, nobility of merit is not hereditary," he reminded me, his smile broadening.

At that moment, one of the Kámi-o retainers glided through the translucent pavilion curtains holding a message tablet. "Némi Ferái, Némi Antóa," he greeted us, bowing. *Némi Antóa... Had the Behtalkat not destroyed our orbiting science stations, my parents might have lived to see this day.* Collecting myself, I focused on the tablet which Ferái had activated.

"Antóa Tásri-e," said the man on the screen in Dominant Mode Behtalkat. Dressed in a opulent ivory suit that outlined his body, Serkadren was as handsome as an ice crystal lit by the noonday sun, his closely cropped hair lighter than davói fields in summer. "The Tohduat tell me my brother will mend fully. I also understand that Kem-Fir can once again meet its obligations to the Confederation. I am delighted to be so deeply in debt to someone of such intelligence and courage. If you and your guardian would accept my hospitality, I would like to thank you in person." The warmth in his beautifully modulated voice didn't quite reach his cloud-grey eyes.

"Is it true that he plans to change Behtalkat law?" I asked Ferái, whose mien had darkened.

"It is true," he admitted. "Besides pardaht, he also wants to have an official consort."

"Preferably a Ténli-e noble, to burnish his rule."

Ferái cast me a long, troubled glance. "I could wish you less astute. We Ténli-e never contract loveless unions, yet I cannot deny how much such a connection would help our cause. He might even abide by Ténlin custom and leave his consort free to take lovers. But I never thought to sacrifice you on this altar. Nor had he reason to cast his attention on you – till now."

"I will do whatever I must to protect our people on Ténli, on Regadif, on Gan-Tem –"

Ferái stood up abruptly. Putting his hands carefully around mine, he bowed deeply over them and held the bow – he, the first among equals of the Ténli Circle!

"Ténli is honored that you walk on it, Erúe's pride, Kandéi's joy... Ferái's hope." Still holding my hands, he blinked, then frowned with concern. "You had a vision during the black sleep."

"I was on a stony plateau, fighting a constant onslaught of foes. Some were Tohduat, I could see the flaming arcs of their misedrahten. Someone was standing back to back with me. I turned around during a momentary lull. I saw a tall youth bleeding from several wounds. He had a Niregan's darkleaf hue – but he bore no talorn marks to indicate his tegri lineages, his hair was a crackling fire and his eyes were as blue as Idre's ocean. He grabbed my hand, pressed his lips on my knuckles, then the fighting was once again upon us. He smiled as he let go. It was like a sunburst... and my heart flowed out to him through my fingertips."

"If your vision comes to pass," Ferái said softly, "Serkadren's plans and wishes will mean less than wisps of morning fog. Mine, too, for that matter." He stroked my hair. "I think you will write new histories, you and the one you choose as your beloved."

Weaving New Braids

An Erotic Vignette

Note: Recall from Planetfall that the scarcity of women and the frequency of miscarriages on Koredhán have led to polyandry and the custom of wanderers to ensure social cohesion and hybrid vigor. Their current tech enables fetus transfer to artificial wombs after the third month, when the future child “rises from the mists” and all the parents see its face. The first excerpt occurs after a failed attempt by other planetary systems to turn Koredhán into ashes. Its narrator is Antóa Tásri-e, the hero of The Wind Harp and the narrator of the Nightsongs section in Planetfall; she is not from Koredhán, but is the tanegír (leader) of its first-among-equals Sóran-Kerís hearth. The narrator of the second excerpt is Amarén, once a wanderer but now first-husband to Sháita, tanegír Dháiri. “Keténi” means night – a woman with co-husbands (“stars”, as told in The Sea of Stars section of Planetfall). “Dehán” (called dreambird in Planetfall) is a bird native to Koredhán. From reading Planetfall, you can tell that Kíghan is a Yehán lineage name, as is Sháita for the Dháiri.

Amarén’s Plea, from Spider Silk

When we emerge from the Táren hearth, Meráni Yehán strokes my consort’s arm. “My boy,” she says, “can I borrow your tanegír? Amarén Dháiri arrived yestereve. I think I know what he wants and if I’m right, I will need her presence.”

The Yehán courtyard throbs with Amarén’s anxiety. He tries to smile when he kisses our hands, but his distress leaks out like air from a damaged starship. Meráni settles him by her, passes her hand over his night-black hair.

“What burdens your heart, dehán?”

“Tanegír, my keténi...” he brings out so low that I can barely hear him. “She bled out a child after the battle, but this is not the first time. Three miscarriages before this one, all too early for the transfer.” He clenches his teeth as tears start shivering at the tips of his long eyelashes. “She loves me too anxiously, she needs to be amused and delighted, held more gently than I can hold her.”

He floats off the seat, buries his face in Meráni’s lap. “Your grandson – he spent most nights with her when you were there, the first time that she took someone else to her bed since she

handfasted me. He left her a flowering branch every morning, whether he had been with her or not.”

“Does Sháita know why you are here?” asks Meráni. He shakes his head.

“I couldn’t tell her. And she doesn’t know – I can still raise a wanderer’s shields, if I must. I am aware of the audacity of my request. I know he is very young. If you say nay...”

“It is not my decision to make,” she says quietly. “True, Kíghan is young. But he is of age, and children have grown fast in the gale that shook this world. If he can die, he can certainly choose whom to love.” She glances towards the hearth door. “How much did you hear, darling?”

“Most of it,” answers Kíghan calmly. Barely two turns since I first set eyes on him – yet he has grown into a man, the gentle boy who asked about the Tohduat. Amarén touches Kíghan’s cheekbone.

“What say you, my brother?” he whispers. “I see your face in her dreams, like the Wanderer caught in winter branches.” Kíghan’s eyes deepen.

“My heart also got caught in those branches,” he replies and there is no hesitation in him. “Up there, while we were killing and dying, I was thinking how she brushed her hair across me like a silken waterfall. Had you not come, I would have found a reason to return, no matter how flimsy.” Then he grins, becomes a young boy again. “Will you teach me to fly on a kite?” Amarén’s enormous black eyes glisten, then his smile emerges like a sunrise.

“In your presence, tanegír,” Meráni states formally, turning to me. “I release my grandson to the Dhaíri.” Then the corner of her mouth quirks. “Lethal, the women of that hearth!”

“If only your namesake were here to feast his eyes on you!” I tell Kíghan. He blushes, then turns very pale. And when he presses my hands against his lips... I see a child with his bright copper locks and the almond eyes of the Dhaíri.

Let This One Abide

Beloveds... In the waning of the night, her kisses arouse us before we are fully awake. I kiss the underside of her breasts, lick her nipples into rounded spear points. As he caresses her throat, she circles him with her lips. She arches against my palm with the rhythm of his thrusts and I stroke

her silken folds until her kernel fully unsheathes. *My starry pond...* Cupping her face, he disengages, then lowers his mouth on hers.

Lifting her on my lap, I part her with my knees. She leans back against me with a sigh, drowning me in her dark waterfall of hair. I caress my way into her... never will this pale for me! He kneels before her and traces her with his tongue while she moans. *My porcelain chime...* She undulates, molten heat around me, her fingers intertwined in our braids. When his lips tighten on her kernel, she thrashes against us. Her moan spirals into a throaty shriek, my pubic bone tingles and the taste of fresh seaweed and white pepper root explodes in my mouth.

Withdrawing, she lays back on the covers. *My heart's blood...* She glides her legs over the crook of his elbows and he grips her hips, caresses her with his tip. Her arms travel on me, she draws me close, kisses me hungrily as I pass over her, fiery sigils on my chest, my stomach, my tip. I taste the peaks of her nipples, the valleys of her thighs. The scent of sunlit sand blossoms on my tongue. When I look up, he smiles, the beloved companion that I pleaded for in my despair, against custom. I stroke the feathery curls of the hillock with its little moon glimmering under me and a sob escapes me. If she – if we – I rest my cheek on her mound, my lips on his crown. I must get hold of myself, I was a wanderer once!

Drawing a quick breath, he brushes the tears away, caresses my hair... *shh... my brother...* Grown calmer by his touch, I cage her with my arms, pull her softly into my mouth. *My echoing seashell...* Eighteen turns together and my heart still stutters when she unfurls like a searose! Our taut lengths part her pliant lips and she rises to meet us. Stroke by slow stroke, we sheathe ourselves to the hilt in her... *my goblet of fire...* Under the cover of my hair, her hands meander across my back, down my sides, along his arms, leaving shivering eddies in their wake.

As we thrust harder and faster and I feast thirstily on her, she buckles. She swells in my mouth, her taste turns sharp, metallic... then she lets out a long, sobbing moan that travels up to my plexus... a spiral galaxy swirls in my head... *my swift kite...* Losing all control, I plunge deeply and spend myself in her throat, at the same moment that he cries out and surges in shuddering ripples beneath my lips. And then I'm in the undertow of her mind... my nipples and kernel pulse and throb with the corded lightning of release... seawater floods my mouth, bathes my womb... and I see... a little face with his bright hair. Let this one rise from the mists, let it abide...

She is still heaving and moaning hoarsely when I return to myself, her nipples stiff against my abdomen, her drenched folds tight around us. He lightly lays his body over mine, rests his cheek on me for a moment, then gently leaves her. I shift to my side, taking her with me and he wraps

around her, caresses her sides, her breasts. Pillowing her cheek on my thigh, I cradle her between my lips again till she lets out a keening wail that pierces me to my core. I soften my thrusts, slow them... *gently, my glory...* She gradually quiets, finally grows still and lets me go.

I fold her in my arms, kiss her eyelids, her mouth... *my wine-dark sea...* He lays a lingering kiss on the lips of her cleft, another on my tip. She caresses our faces with her fingertips. *Deháni...* We tuck her between us, hold her close and she drifts, taking us with her on the starry lanes. *My joy, life of the Dháiri... will I ever have my fill of you?*



Three Hearts Entwined
